

**HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT: PERCEPTIONS AND VOICES OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN AND HISPANIC STUDENTS**

A Record of Study

by

WANDA L. BAKER

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2011

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee, Gwendolyn Webb-Hasan

Committee Members, Virginia Collier

Jim Scheurich

Chance Lewis

Head of Department, Fredrick Nafukho

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Major Subject: Educational Administration

ABSTRACT

High School Dropout: Perceptions and Voices of African American and Hispanic
Students. (May 2011)

Wanda L. Baker, B.A., Interamerican University of Puerto Rico;
M.S., Sam Houston State University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Hasan

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of African American and Hispanic students who dropped out of school while exploring their schooling experiences and the factors they believe contributed to their decision to drop out. The case study approach was used in an effort to capture the informants' voices and the meanings they hold as students of color about the experience of dropping out. The findings from this study will contribute to the existing body of literature by contextualizing a student of color's choice to dropout of school. The informants in this study were members of a large, diverse suburban high school, in a large school district in Southeast Texas.

The 12 informants were purposefully selected resulting in seven Hispanic, five African American, seven female, and five male dropout students. A one-on-one interview with the informants generated data for this study. Additional data consisted of observations made by the researcher as a school administrator at the last school the informants attended and by prior knowledge about some of the informants from school records. The interpretational analysis process selected was based on Glaser and Strauss'

constant comparative approach to analysis. The constant comparative data analysis generated three major themes of the factors that informants attributed to dropping out of school: (1) challenging home situations, (2) personal realities, and (3) school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems.

The theoretical framework that grounded this study was based on Mehan's Contextual Factors Surrounding Hispanic Dropouts. His construct suggested that for students of color dropping out was a function of social reproduction and deficit thinking. He further asserted that such outcomes were a result of school factors controlled and institutionalized by schools. However, contrary to Mahen's theory, my informants noted challenging home situations as the primary consideration in their decision to drop out. My findings, based on the context of the Horizon High School, suggest that while the school as an institution is not responsible or accountable for the family factors that contribute to students' decision to drop out, it can provide systems of support for students to assist them in overcoming the causes outside of the school walls that contribute to their decision to leave.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my loving mother, Antonia Martínez Baker, for her love and support. She has always encouraged me to believe that everything is possible with faith and perseverance. She inspires me to find the best in others and in myself. She has taught me to find a silver lining in every cloud. An eternal educator, my mother was my first teacher by modeling servant leadership and loyalty, and by living with courage and integrity even in the face of adversity.

I also dedicate this work to my husband, Robert Lemaire, he endured the difficult times with me and understood my challenges and priorities during this academic journey. His patience gave me strength to carry on. He encouraged me to continue and gave me hope at times when the finish line seemed far away.

Finally, I also dedicate my work to my son, Alex, for his support, his words of encouragement, and his faith in me. His love and support have sustained me through the difficult times. I could have never done it without his love. He is my true inspiration.

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I also want to acknowledge my other three dissertation committee members; Dr. Virginia Collier, Dr. James Scheurich, and Dr. Chance Lewis. They have modeled excellence, commitment, and professionalism in their communication, their feedback, their flexibility, and their support. Dr. Collier extended her stay at Texas A & M and remained in my committee beyond the required time. Dr. Scheurich has facilitated meetings and scheduling arrangements and provided great insight into my study. Dr. Lewis took me as another doctoral student when it seemed he could not possibly accommodate anyone else. I thank them for transforming this project into an enjoyable learning experience. Your expertise and your willingness to share it made all the difference.

As a doctoral student and a school administrator I found myself being pulled in many directions most of the time. Claudio García, my school principal, and Stephanie Meshell, my associate principal, were always supportive and understanding. Claudio and Stephanie model the kind of leadership needed to reform our schools and ensure

excellence in academic achievement for all learners. They understand the importance of professional growth and they embrace and facilitate the opportunities for development of their team members and staff.

I would also like to acknowledge the help and support of my dear friend Michael Maxwell. He led the way for me by starting his journey a year before and by sharing with me the lessons he learned. He also took time to read and edit my work. His words of encouragement and his positive feedback nourished my spirit and inspired me to carry on.

My three best friends, Norma Muñiz, Vicky Partridge, and Karim Seminario understood my time limitations and were willing to put our friendship and plans on hold. They waited patiently for my life to resume, and they have been a never-ending source of love, encouragement, and motivation. These three women give a new meaning to the word friendship.

I acknowledge the help and support I received from Delta Kappa Gama Society International and from the Texas State Organization. I was the recipient of three scholarships that lessened the financial burdens associated with tuition and books. These three scholarships supported the Delta Kappa Gamma's mission statement of promoting professional and personal growth of women educators and excellence in education. I am proud of being part of this outstanding organization and look forward to paying it forward by sharing my time, knowledge, and leadership with my chapter and with the organization.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In spite of the agenda of recent school reform efforts to narrow or eradicate the achievement gap, ensure equity and social justice, raise achievement, and increase school completion rates, the school dropout problem continues to haunt educators and policy makers. More than 20 years ago President George H.W. Bush and the nation's governors set national goals for the year 2000 that included a 90% high school completion rate. However, improvement in this area is still far from that goal (Barton, 2005). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007), across the United States, every school day, almost 7,000 students become dropouts. This represents nearly one-third of all public high school students, and almost one-half of all students of color, not graduating with their class (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant, 2010). This figure translates to 1,230,000 students nationwide for the class of 2008 who did not graduate high school (Education Week, 2008). In Texas, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) reported that only 79.1% of high school students completed high school in 2008 (Texas Education Agency, 2009a).

Some researchers argue that the dropout problem is even worse than it seems. Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) stated that dropout statistics neither accurately count nor report the vast numbers of students who do not graduate from high

This record of study follows the style of *Educational Administration Quarterly*.

school. They maintained that the figures are misleading due to the inconsistency in calculation and reporting from states. For example, an increase in the number of students opting for a General Education Development (GED) certificate tends to mask the reality of lower graduation rates, especially since the GED is not a complete equivalent to high school graduation nor does it yield the same benefits to its holders (Barton, 2002; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Some researchers and educational reform advocates have considered these issues significant enough to call the dropout problem an educational and civil rights crisis (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Others have called it a silent crisis and a silent epidemic (Oguntoyinbo, 2009; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Burke Morison, 2006).

In recent years, some dropout trends have also shifted in the wrong direction. For example, much of the dropping out of school has transferred from grades 11th and 12th to a higher number of students now dropping out of grades 9th and 10th (Barton, 2005). Furthermore, in many states, a substantial number of GED certificates are currently being earned by 16 year-olds, thereby making dropouts younger and less educated than in the past (Barton, 2005).

The dropout figures, however, are even more alarming as they are examined in light of an ethnic and racial distribution, especially as it relates to African American and Hispanic students. The literature and the data revealed higher numbers of minority students dropping out of high school. On a national scale, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 2009 report, while the graduation rate for White students is 80.3%, the rate for Hispanic students is 62%, and 60.3% for African

American students (Stillwell, 2009). Gándara and Contreras (2009) pointed out how analyses reported by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University and the Urban Institute call into question what they label as more generous graduation estimates. According to the authors, and based on what they referred to as superior data collection, 68% of all students who begin high school in the ninth grade in the United States graduate with a regular diploma four years later. For White students the rate is 75%, but for Hispanics, it is only about 53%. Additionally, and consistent with other studies, they find that the African American dropout rate to be almost the same as that for Latinos (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). These findings revealed alarming and disproportionate graduating rates between White students and students of color.

The dropout rate among Hispanic students is just one of the indicators that the fastest growing ethnic group in U.S. public schools is not experiencing improvements in educational outcomes, especially as Hispanics represent the nation's largest minority group (Hernandez & Nesman, 2004, Vélez & Saenz, 2001). These findings revealed how the ultimate achievement gap of dropping out of school perpetuates the under achievement of Hispanic and African American students and brings to light the disparities in academic success between White students and students of color.

The dropout crisis has captured the attention of federal, state, and local policy makers. At the federal level, legislation now requires states to report dropout rates. Furthermore, new regulations aim to increase transparency in the dropout reporting area by requiring all states to use a single, reliable graduation rate calculation and asking schools to meet graduation goals for specific groups of students (The Education Trust,

2008). Moreover, local dropout and graduation rates have become part of the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation's formula for determining adequate yearly progress (AYP). Schools and districts must meet AYP as part of the federal accountability system in order to receive federal funding (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010). At state and local levels, educators and policymakers find it necessary to comply with federal mandates and to include dropouts as a component of their accountability systems in order to benefit from the much needed federal funding. In Texas, current statute requires that the accountability system performance indicators include dropout rates (Texas Education Code §39.051, 2007). Additionally, the Texas Education Agency is required to report detailed information about dropouts in the comprehensive biennial and interim reports to the Texas Legislature and in 2001 these reports were combined into the Comprehensive Annual Report on Texas Public Schools (Texas Education Agency, 2009a)

Context of the Study

The school that provided the context for this study is a suburban high school of approximately 3,000 students in a large Southeast Texas school district. The actual name of the school will not be used in this study and I will refer to it as Horizon High School. The school has experienced an increase in diversity in its student population since it opened in 2002. The ethnic distribution of the student population in 2002 was 16% African American, 39% Hispanic, 35% White, 10% Asian, and 0.1% Native American (Texas Education Agency, 2008-09b). The current student population is composed of 18% African American, 47% Hispanic, 23% White, 12% Asian, 0.4% Native American.

Additionally, the composition of the school is 8% limited English proficient, 51% at-risk, and 47% of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch (Texas Education Agency, 2008-09b). This shift in student demographics is significant to this study because, as it will be discussed in further details in this chapter, as the representation of students of color increases, the number of dropout students among students of color also increases.

The data from the Texas Education Agency's Pocket Edition (Texas Education Agency, 2010) report revealed that over the past five years the student population of Hispanic students in the state has increased, the population African American students has not had significant changes, and the population of White students has decreased (see Appendix A). Overall, in the State, the percentage of African American students has fluctuated from 14.2% in 2004-05, to 14.7% in 2005-06, and from 14.4% in 2006-07 to 14.3% in 2007. The figure from 2008-09 reflects a 14.2% representation of African American students in the state of Texas.

The percentage of Hispanic students has increased from 44.7 % in 2004-05 to 47.9 % in 2008-09 (Texas Education Agency, 2010). The percentage reflect a yearly increase in the Hispanic population with 44.7% in 2004-05, 45.3% in 2005-06, 46.3% in 2006-07, 47.2% in 2007-08, and 47.9% in 2008-09 (Texas Education Agency, 2010) (See Appendix A).

In the school district, where Horizon High School is located, the African American student representation increased from 11.7% in 2004-05 to 13.6% in 2005-06 and from 14.6% in 2006-07 to 15.2% in 2007-08. The representation of African American students in the district in 2008-09 was 15.7%. The growth in representation of

Hispanic students followed a similar trend with 31% in 2004-05, 32.9% in 2005-06, 35.2% in 2006-07, 37.1% in 2007-08, and 38.1% in 2008-09 (see Appendix B). At the state level the representation of African American students did not change significantly between 2005 and 2009 (see Appendix A). The number of Hispanic students increased from 47.2% in 2007-08 to 47.9% in 2008-09. This data is relevant to this study because as the combined number of students of color increases in the state, the district, and at Horizon school, it becomes more important to try to eliminate the dropout gap between them and their White peers.

The percentage of African American students at this high school is higher than the district and state percentages. While the school has a 17.9% population of African American students, the district has 15.7% and the state has 14 %. The number of Hispanic students at Horizon High School is also higher than in the school district. While the average percentage of Hispanic students in the district is 38.1%, at this high school the representation is 46.7%. Analysis of the data reveals this is a high school with a diverse student population in which the combination of students of color represents the majority of the student population. It is, therefore, important to the school administration of Horizon High School to understand the reasons why a higher percentage of students of color dropout and to explore possible solutions to this phenomenon.

School Background

Horizon High School opened in 2002; therefore, student dropout data is only available after the school year 2005-2006. The data is based on the first graduating cohort; consequently, there is no graduation data for the school years prior to 2005.

The school has experienced a growth in the representation of students of color over the past five years. The representation of African American students increased from 16.1% in 2004-05 to 17.8% in 2005-06. The percentage decreased in 2006-7 to 16.4% and increased again in 2007-08 to 17.5% and again in 2008-09 to 17.9%. The Hispanic population increased from 45.3% in 2004-05 to 41.0 in 2005-06. In 2007-08 the percentage decreased to 36.5%. In 2007-08 the population of Hispanic students again increased from 36.5% to 45.9% and increased again in 2008-09 to 46.7% (Texas Education Agency, 2009b) (See Appendix C).

While there are multiple dropout prevention programs nationally, statewide, and at the district level, this study will focus specifically on the context of this high school since it is neither an urban nor an inner city school. This suburban school has a diverse student population with 49% of students considered from low socio economic status based on their eligibility for free or reduced lunch. This study will examine the issues that, according to students that have dropped out, are significant at this specific school. Based on the findings from conversations with students who have dropped out, this study will attempt to examine which factors contribute to the dropout of students of color on this campus.

There are currently no specific programs or initiatives in place officially labeled as dropout prevention nor are there special programs, facilities, and interventions for recovery of dropout students at this campus. The district offers one “high school of choice” with a non-traditional environment which allows 11th and 12th graders flexibility to complete high school graduation requirements. Enrollment in the “high school of

choice” is limited and students must meet eligibility based on a list of academic, attendance, and behavioral requirements. Moreover, there are no specific dropout prevention or recovery programs specifically targeting students of color at the district or at the school level.

Statement of the Problem

The data for the years 2006 through 2009 (Texas Education Agency, 2009b) revealed an increased percentage of dropouts among students of color at this school. Among African American students the numbers increased from 4.1% in 2006 to 4.2% in 2007 and to 8.8% in 2008. This figure represents roughly 270 African American students who did not graduate in 2008. The percentages increased among Hispanic students from 4.6% in 2006 to 7.3% in 2007. In other words, 210 Hispanic students did not graduate with their peers. The Hispanic population experienced a decrease in 2006 with a 6.2% dropout rate, however, this number is still higher than the 4.6% of 2006 (Texas Education Agency, 2009b) (see Appendix D). The data also reveal that over the last three years, the combined percentages of African American and Hispanic dropouts at Horizon High School exceed the percentages of dropouts for both groups at the district (see Appendix E) and at the state levels (see Appendix F).

Since students of color represent a larger percentage of the student population in Texas, the state is considered a majority minority state (Swanson 2006). That is, non-white students make up more than half of student enrollment in the state’s public school system. Between 1994 and 2003, minority enrollment increased from 53% to 61% (Swanson, 2006). Therefore, with an increasing trend in the representation of students of

color and an increase in dropout rates for both subgroups, the results could potentially translate into an even greater dropout rate of students of color at this school based on this trend. This trend is especially troublesome in light of the high representation of African Americans at Horizon High School in comparison to the state and the district. Additionally, there is a higher representation of Hispanic students at this campus compared to the total representation of Hispanic students at the district level. Consequently, these two combined trends may result in an even greater number of students dropping out at this school for each of the two minority groups due to their high representation in both dropout and ethnic distribution.

This situation reveals an academic achievement gap and how it impacts students beyond the measures of only standardized testing. This data warn of escalating challenges as the representation of African American and Hispanic students steadily increases in tandem with increasing numbers of dropouts among these student populations.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined, from a student's perspective, the factors that contribute to students of color dropping out from Horizon High School. While the dropout problem reaches beyond the scope of this specific high school, it affects students, families and schools at national and statewide levels. This study focused specifically on the context of this particular high school.

Focus Areas of Study

The focus areas that guide this study are:

- What are some experiences that led Hispanic and African American students at this high school to the decision of dropping out of school?
- What are the perceptions of Hispanic and African American students who have dropped out of this suburban high school about systems, people, programs, and practices that in their view impacted or contributed to their decision to drop out?

Conceptual Framework

Solutions to the dropout crisis, especially for students of color, can only emerge from a better understanding of the underlying causes of this problem. Mehan (1997) provided a framework based on contextual factors surrounding the dropout phenomenon. Mehan (1997) proposed that students drop out of school in social, not personal, terms. He argued that part of the discourse surrounding dropouts is framed as a character flaw, a personal pathology, or an individual choice (1997).

Mehan (1997) argued that the *at-risk* construct, alleges that a student suffers from a socially induced deficiency because this construct focuses on social, economic, and cultural conditions as it continues to treat these conditions as characteristics of students. Similarly, deficit thinking also places the blame on students and families. Deficit thinking, according to García and Guerra (2004) is educators' beliefs that the student and the families are at fault because they enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills. One of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in the United States' schools is deficit thinking (Yosso, 2005). The result is a discourse that deflects attention away from injustices perpetuated and institutionalized by the powerful

and blames oppressed students, families, and communities for lacking the cultural and moral resources for advancement (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

By contextualizing the dropout phenomenon in a way that relocates the causes, meanings, and problematic, Mehan (1997) argued that we can shift attention away from the presumed deficiencies of individual students and show that students' reasoning is not faulty but instead reflects a thoughtful analysis of existing institutional and socioeconomic circumstances (1997). Furthermore, the author argued that:

...the influence of organizational arrangements and the practical circumstances they generate, then, suggests that the place to look for reasons for dropouts is in the institutional arrangements of the school in relationship to the socioeconomic conditions of society and not in the characteristics of individual students (pp.11).

Significance of the Study

As it relates directly to the context of a large suburban high school, this study will increase and improve the understanding of the complex, multilayered, and interrelated barriers to successful high school completion for students of color. This understanding is essential for the school to reduce or eliminate conditions and practices that perpetuate the existing achievement gap which prevents students from graduating. The findings from this study will also add to the existing literature and to assist in the development and fostering of programs and practices that will capitalize on student's strengths while satisfying their specific social, emotional, and academic needs.

Limitations

This study was limited to capturing the perceptions of students of color in one specific context: a large suburban and diverse high school in Southeast Texas.

According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), external validity is the extent to which the findings of a case study can be generalized to similar cases. The first limitation of this study is that the findings obtained are limited to the context of the study and to the informants interviewed specifically for this research.

The second limitation in this study is related to internal validity. Merriam (1988) posited that internal validity deals with the question of how one's findings match reality and how the findings capture what is really there. In this case study, the data generated resulted from face to face interviews using an open ended question protocol that I developed based on the review of the literature. Considering the fact that as the interviewer I am also a school administrator at the campus from which the informants dropped out there is a possibility for students to hold back or to not share as openly and as freely, especially if they had any negative feelings towards the school or the school administration. I addressed this by notifying the informants about my role as researcher during the interview and by reminding them about the ultimate goal of listening to their voices in hopes of helping other successfully graduate high school.

Organization of the Study

This qualitative research followed the case study approach to inquiry. The study is organized into five chapters. Chapter I is an introduction to the study and it includes an overview of the current dropout situation, context of the study and the background of

the school, the statement of the problem, the focus areas of the study and its significance. Additionally, this chapter includes limitations and a list of definitions and terms.

Chapter II of this record of study includes a review of the literature and previous studies as they relate to the implications of dropping out, especially for students of color. This chapter also includes factors and predictors of dropping out. Following the factors and predictors I present Mehan's theoretical framework and Valenzuela's subtractive schooling construct. The chapter ends with a list and discussion of best practices associated with students' academic success as measured by high school completion or graduation rates.

Chapter III provides details about the methodology followed in this study. A brief summary of the case study qualitative inquiry approach introduces the chapter. This summary is followed by a discussion about the role of the researcher, data collection and data analysis procedures, and information about the informants and the informants' selection process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the standards of validation and evaluation used in the study and a summary of the chapter.

A discussion of the findings is presented in chapter IV. Additionally, a brief profile of each participant is provided and a discussion of the themes and sub themes that emerged from the analysis of the data frames the chapter. In the fifth and last chapter of this record of study I present the discussion, implications for practice, policy and future research, and conclusions.

Definitions and Terms

African American – indicates a person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. As defined by the Texas Education Agency in the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) (Texas Education Agency, 2010).

ALC – Alternative Learning Center. As defined by the local school district in the context of this record of study.

Annual Drop Out Rate – is the percentage of students who drop out of school during one school year, in other words, the number of dropouts from grades 7-12 divided by the total number of students enrolled in grades 7-12 the fall of that same year (Texas Education Agency, 2009a).

Cohort or Longitudinal Dropout Rate – the percentage of students from a class of beginning seventh or ninth graders who drop out before completing high school (Texas Education Agency, 2009b)

DAEP – Disciplinary Alternative Education Program. As defined by the local school district in the context of this record of study.

Dropout - The Texas Education Agency, in its 2009 Accountability Manual, provides a definition for dropout as a student who has enrolled in 2007-08 in a Texas public school in grades 7-12, but did not return to a Texas public school the following fall within the school-start window, was not expelled, did not graduate, receive a GED, continue high school outside the Texas public school system, begin college, or die (Texas Education Agency, 2009a)

GED - stands for General Education Development. It is the process of earning the equivalent of a high school diploma, often referred to as GED certificate or credential. The process involves taking classes, studying, and passing a five part test (American Council on Education, 2010)

Hispanic – Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably in this study to indicate populations of Spanish-speaking students whose family immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean.

JJAP – Juvenile Justice Alternative Placement, also known as JJ.

Latino – Latino and Hispanic are used interchangeably in this study to indicate populations of Spanish-speaking students whose family immigrated to the U.S. from Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean.

Plato – a self guided, self paced credit recovery software program used by this school district and in this specific school. This school has allocated one full time teaching position and one classroom facility to this program.

TYC – Texas Youth Commission

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The high school dropout crisis continues to highlight the achievement gap between White students and students of color in the United States. At Horizon High School the dropout problem mirrors the state and national trend, which is an increase in the representation of students of color in the school population and a higher number of Hispanic and African American students dropping out of high school in comparison to their White counterparts.

The purpose of this study was to investigate what were some experiences that led Hispanic and African American students at this high school to the decision of dropping out. This study examined what are the perceptions of Hispanic and African American students who have dropped out of this suburban high school about systems, people, programs, and practices that in their view impacted or contributed to their decision to drop out. The review of the literature assisted in framing the dropout phenomenon by focusing on (1) the implications of dropping out of school for students of color and how this perpetuates cycles of poverty and underachievement, (2) the factors and predictors of dropping out of school, (3) Mehan's (1997) framework of contextual factors surrounding dropouts, and (4) Valenzuela's (1999) subtractive schooling construct. Additionally, in my review of the literature, using Mehan's (1997) framework as a guideline, I examined research related to successful and recommended best practices used to reduce dropout rates.

Economic, Social, and Emotional Implications of Dropping Out

The dropout problem reaches far beyond its impact on students who leave school and their families. This crisis affects their local community's economic health and the nation at large as individual consequences develop into increased cost on a national scale. This economic impact is reflected in the loss of productive workers, the earnings and revenues they would have earned, and the higher cost associated with increased incarceration, health care, and social services (Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison, 2006).

In January of 2010 over 150 educators, business and community leaders, policymakers and other stakeholders met in Washington, DC to attend a forum highlighting the local economic benefits that come as a result of reducing the dropout rate. Bob Wise, president of Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia cited findings showing that if just half of the Class of 2008 dropouts from the forty five largest metro areas had graduated, they would have likely earned over \$4 billion in combined additional wages during the average year. He explained how this increased income would have been enough to support 30,000 new local jobs, increased spending on home and vehicle purchases, and millions in increased tax revenues to state and local governments (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).

Furthermore, at the personal level, the impact of dropping out of school also affects students' earning capacity. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) reported that, the average annual income for a high school dropout in 2005 was \$17,299 while the

average for a high school graduate was \$26,933, marking an average difference in income of over nine thousand dollars each year.

In an increasingly competitive global economy, the consequences of dropping out of high school are devastating to individuals, communities, and our national economy (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). A 2004 report from the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development found the United States falling behind internationally in high school completion, and is now 10th, behind such nations as Korea, Norway, the Czech Republic, and Japan (Barton, 2005). In a globally competitive market increasingly dependent on technology and services it is essential for countries to not only produce graduates but to prepare them for the work force with skills that will allow them to compete. Mehan (1997) asserted how economists and policymakers maintain that completion of high school is the absolute minimal educational level necessary to prepare youngsters for the vast majority of jobs in the modern economy. In the case of African American and Hispanic students, this means that they will be even more disadvantaged in the future job market than they have been in the past (1997).

As a result of leaving high school prior to completion, most dropouts have serious educational deficiencies that severely limit their economic and social well-being over the course of their lives (Rumberger, 1987). Individual dropouts suffer because many have difficulty finding steady, well-paying jobs not just when they first leave school but over their entire lifetimes (Rumberger, 1987). According to Barton (2005), in 2003, only four in ten of the 16 to 19 year-olds who had dropped out of school were

employed. Additionally, some were single parents who were in a welfare support system, and others found alternative sources of income in a sublegal economy. Most of these youth are headed for a life of sporadic employment and low wages (Barton, 2005). Dropouts' lower levels of educational achievement does not have just an immediate economic consequence; it also becomes a tremendous disadvantage over time since dropouts have fewer opportunities to obtain additional education and training required to remain even relatively competitive in the job market (Rumberger, 1987).

According to Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) in 2001 the unemployment rate for dropouts 25 years old and over was almost 75% higher than for high school graduates and approximately two thirds of all state prison inmates have not completed high school. Additionally, young women who drop out of high school are more likely to become single parents at young ages. As a result of these listed factors, high school dropouts are more likely to wind up on welfare (Mehan, 1997). Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Wulsin (2008) also reported that dropouts earn about one million dollars less over their lifetimes, are twice more likely to slip into poverty, are eight times more likely to be in jail, and are half as likely to vote.

Communities and society at large also pay a price as a result of young students dropping out of school. Furthermore, when we examine and disaggregate the prison population by ethnicity, the number of African American and Hispanic inmates is alarmingly higher compared to White and other ethnic groups (Mauer & King, 2007). Sum et al. (2009) reported how the incidence of institutionalization problems among young high school dropouts was more than 63 times higher than among young four year

college graduates. Their report stated that nearly one of every ten young male high school dropouts was institutionalized on a given day in 2006-07 versus fewer than one of 33 high school graduates (Sum et al., 2009).

The implications of dropping out of school reach beyond social and economic consequences. There are also emotional and psychological implications to dropping out of school that reach well beyond the economic repercussions. Reyes and Jason's study (1992) revealed that among other negative consequences of dropping out, there is a greater likelihood of low-status and disenfranchisement from society and its institutions. As a result of dropping out, they are also more likely to experience racial discrimination, to receive disapproval from parents, friends, and society, and to have poor self-esteem (Tidwell, 1988).

Implications for Students of Color

While it is true that the dropout problem is widespread and crosses among racial and socioeconomic lines, it affects some groups more than others, especially Hispanic and African American students. Additionally, minority populations, who have always displayed higher dropout rates than the white population, have increased in public schools (Rumberger, 1987). According to Oguntoyinbo (2009), the number of Americans of Hispanic descent is growing at a rate four times faster than that of the rest of the nation, they also make up 15% of the U.S. population, a figure that is expected to double in 40 years (2009). Statistics place Hispanic high school students at a higher risk of dropping out compared to their white peers. The National Center for Education

Statistics (2009) reported that in the 2003-04 academic year, African American and Hispanic high school students were more likely to drop out than White students.

The statistics are even more problematic when it comes to incarceration for young African American and Hispanics. Sum et al. (2009) reported that for men in race-ethnic groups, incarceration rates were highest among high school dropouts. Among the nations' male high school dropouts, however, institutionalization rates were considerably higher among young Black men than they were among members of the other race-ethnic groups.

Ponjuan (as cited in Oguntoyinbo, 2009) argued that Latino and African American males are seven times more likely to be tagged with the at-risk label and to have the ADD (attention deficit disorder) tag. So they end up getting tracked into different educational pathways that ultimately lead them away from college.

Factors and Predictors of Dropping Out

The predictors and the reasons for dropping out of school are usually multilayered and complex, especially for students of color. Dropping out of school does not happen all of a sudden, research shows that dropping out of school is a long-term process of disengagement that occurs over time and begins in the earliest grades (Barton, 2005). According to the literature reviewed, an array of interrelated factors contribute to dropping out of school.

Schargel, Thacker, and Bell (2007) identified and sorted risk factors of dropping out into four categories: (1) previous school experience, (2) personal or psychological characteristics, (3) adult and family responsibilities of student, and (4) family

background and cohesion. Previous school experience included attendance, previous retention in at least one grade level, low grades (Cs and Ds or below), disciplinary problems or perceived disruptive behavior, and mobility (attended five or more schools during a lifetime). The second category, personal or psychological characteristics, included external locus of control (i.e. being in agreement with others' perception of their individual ability, worth, or value), and low self esteem; at least one disability (ADHD, learning disability); poor peer support; depression or other emotional problems; early sexual activity or promiscuity; and substance abuse. In the category of adult and family responsibilities the authors include having a child and having to work to help support the family. Oguntoyinbo (2009) added to this category that many Latino students are expected to get jobs once they come of age to help meet family obligations. The fourth and last category, labeled as family background and cohesion, includes single-parent home, permissive parenting, poor parent-child relationships, the families dependence on public assistance, parents' unemployment, primary language of the family not being English, having a sibling who has dropped out of school, and parents who did not graduate from high school.

Bridgeland, Dilulio and Burke Morrison (2006) listed in their findings the following three major reasons that students gave for dropping out: (1) a lack of connection to the school environment, (2) a perception that school is boring, (3) feeling unmotivated, (4) academic challenges, and (5) the weight of real world events. Their findings also revealed that dropping out of school was not a sudden act, but a gradual process of disengagement initiated by attendance patterns.

Similarly, Vizcain's research (2005) revealed that age, retention history, program of studies, suspension, and GPA were found to be statistically significant in Latino students' decision to drop out of school. Other findings in the same study revealed that 31% of the Hispanic male sample dropped out prior to completing their high school education, in other words during the junior and senior year.

Roderick (1995) cited the Youth in Transition study findings of one grade retention increasing the risk of dropping out by 40 to 50% and two grades behind increasing the risk by 90%. Additionally, the author reported how sophomores who had repeated at least one previous grade dropped out more than twice the rate of youths who repeated a grade.

Schargel, Thacker, and Bell (2007) also identified school related risk factors and listed them as: ineffective discipline system, overburdened school counselors, negative school climate, retention and/or suspensions used to control discipline, disregarding students' learning style, passive instructional strategies, lack of relevant curriculum, low expectations of student achievement, and fear of school violence.

Moreover, research conducted the by the Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy (Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2009) revealed that the second most referenced reasons for students dropping out, after home family issues, were academic struggles and boredom due to lack of engagement in school.

Rumberger (1987) noted there are marked differences reported by different social groups about the reasons for dropping out of school. In a study of high school attrition among Hispanic youth, Velez (1989) cited the following factors that affect the

process of dropping out; (1) confrontation (disciplinary problems, suspension from school, cutting classes, and absence when not ill), (2) accelerated role taking (dating), (3) school factors (grades, participation in extracurricular activities, and placement in a particular track), (4) background (socioeconomic status [SES], family structure or number of parents in the household, age, sex, and schools changed because of residential moves), (5) socio-psychological (educational plans and mother's educational expectations), (6) migrant status (recency of immigration).

More recently, Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant (2010) released findings that revealed that the leading reason cited by students for dropping out was not seeing the connection between classroom learning and their own lives and career dreams. Nearly half the informants in their study cited among the principal reasons for dropping out: (1) boredom, and (2) classes not being interesting. The informants in this study did not see the value of some of their classes nor their relevance. Additionally, the authors report of students expressing how they longed for better teachers who kept classes interesting and wanting more one-on-one instruction from teachers (2010). Another factor identified in their study was a difficult home environment or other responsibilities. According to the authors, “ many informants said that the accumulation of tough circumstances and other barriers students face, rather than one particular problem, better explained many students' decision to drop out” (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant, 2010).

Garcia (2001) underscored the significance of looking beyond dropout factors based on characteristics of school dropouts like socioeconomic status, immigration

status, and English language proficiency rather than based on schooling of these dropouts. In other words, the focus needs to be on how they are being educated and not on what defines them as students. Similarly, Fine (1991) also emphasized the value of moving away from looking at the attributes of the schools from which students drop out rather than focusing on the practices that obsess on identifying the personal characteristics of students.

Mehan's Framework

While most research and studies focused on personal and individual student's characteristics combined with environmental factors Mehan stated how he joined McDermott (1989), McDermott and Varenne (1995), Fine (1991), Swadener & Lubeck (1995), and Trueba, Spindler & Spindler (1989) as he interrupted this discourse and proposed that students drop out of school in social, not personal, terms (1997). He argued that part of the discussion surrounding dropouts is framed as a character flaw, a personal pathology, or an individual choice since the problem is often seen as failure of individuals. He proposed that dropping out is an institutional production that reproduces the structures of inequality in the educational, economic, and civic domains of every day life (1997). Mehan (1992) also attributed the inequality in educational outcomes to social reproduction. Reproduction theory suggests that inequality is the consequence of capitalist structures and forces that constrain the mobility of lower-class youth (1992).

In his model, Mehan (1997) noted that the *at-risk* construct alleges that a student suffers from a socially induced deficiency because this construct focuses on social, economic, and cultural conditions as it continues to treat these factors as characteristics

of students. This idea is then aligned with deficit thinking which places the blame for underachievement on students and families. Deficit thinking, according to García and Guerra (2004) is the belief that the student and the families are at fault because they enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills. A review of the literature by Vélez and Saenz (2001) also revealed an orientation that implicitly serves to reinforce the view that students who drop out are deficient, deviant, and inadequate. This approach emphasized deficiencies of students and their families in accounting for the failure of students in the educational system. Yosso (2005) asserted that one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools is deficit thinking. The results is a discourse that deflects attention away from injustices perpetuated and institutionalized by the powerful and blames oppressed students, families, and communities for lacking the cultural and moral resources for advancement (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

As seen in the earlier review of the literature, antecedent conditions and personal characteristics of students are usually labeled as what Mehan (1997) described as *disabling* conditions. These are listed in the literature as racial and ethnic identity, gender, socioeconomic status, academic performance, self-concept (self-esteem), family organization, and English language fluency. He described disabling conditions as those factors that place students at risk for dropping out and that contribute indirectly to lower achievement levels and an increased risk of failure in school. Natriello (1995) agreed by asserting that:

...The overemphasis on the relationships between individual characteristics and dropping out in effect places blame for early school

leaving on students who may be victims of educational systems that do not meet their needs (p. 116-117)

Mehan's construct focused on the social organization of schools, the meaning that school has for students, and the connection students perceive among schooling, employment, and other aspects of their everyday lives (1997). It is based on the dynamics of social life and how characteristics of people are converted into social actions that leads us to ask ourselves questions like: (1) How is social life organized such that low income parents' socioeconomic conditions become translated into a student's choice to drop out?, (2) How are students' ethnicities perceived by school personnel such that they are placed in one educational program rather than another, which in turn, leads those students to find school meaningless? The result of this focus is then an examination of: (1) some of the institutional processes that socially organize dropping out like the social organization of schooling, specifically school sorting practices such as tracking, and (2) the everyday and school life of students. The studies reviewed by Mehan (1997) suggest that we should adopt *contextual* instead of an *individual* interpretation of students' withdrawal from school. Based on his findings, students' withdrawal from school is then not a flaw or error in reasoning nor a manifestation of linked social pathologies and inherited characteristics. Instead, it stems from students' fairly astute analysis of inequality-producing institutional practices and the socioeconomic circumstances surrounding schools (1997).

The Contributions of School to the Construction of Dropouts

Contrary to the popular belief that dropping out is a student's choice, Mehan (1997) suggested that schools arrange for these choices to be made. Some examples are the systems and practices in place that promote tracking, sorting, and labeling of students. These practices have existed in the form of: (1) separating students and altering the content of the curriculum to which they are exposed (watering down), (2) tracking by placing students in ability groups for instruction. These practices result in ethnic and linguistic minority students being consistently underrepresented in programs for the gifted and talented and often overrepresented in special education. Mehan (1992) suggested that the school's contribution to inequality can be assessed when the internal life of schools has been examined closely. He argued that socially constructed institutionalized practices for assessing and placing students operate for students to be designated members of educational categories (1992).

According to Mehan (1997), tracking often takes on a caste like character and once students are placed into low-ability groups, they are seldom promoted to high groups. Rubin and Noguera (2004) explained how "tracking serves to perpetuate and reinforce educational inequities along race and class lines and in most schools, placement in designated tracks corresponds strikingly to race and class privilege" (p. 92-93). Their research (2004) suggested students of color are more likely to be relegated to the lower tracks. Due to language limitations and to the criteria used for taking advance placement classes, these students do not have equal access to advance placement classes either. Students of color are underrepresented in the kind of programs that offer students

hope, motivation, and encouragement to enter higher education (Solorzano and Ornelas, 2002).

Organizational arrangements also contribute to the dropout crisis according to Mehan's model. As students tend to go to neighborhood schools, in most cases schools serving predominantly poor and minority students, these schools offer fewer advanced and more remedial courses in academic subjects than schools serving more affluent and majority (White) students. He contended (1994) that in addition to gaining differential access to curriculum and instruction students in different tracks receive different kinds of teachers. Students in low-income and minority neighborhoods are more likely to get less experienced teachers than students in more affluent neighborhoods (Mehan, 1994)

In their dropout study in the Austin Independent School District in Texas, Romo and Falbo (1996) also learned how the school system as a whole impeded students' progress toward graduation. Their study examined the strengths and weaknesses of that specific school system. Their analysis revealed that the chief cause of the high dropout of Hispanic youth lies not with Hispanics but within schools and communities, in line with Mehan's construct (1997). The authors further concluded how many students in their study made a reasonable decision when they decided to drop out.

School related factors for dropping out, as Rumberger (1987) stated, are well documented and have received considerable attention, particularly because many of these factors are ones that can be manipulated through practice and policy. Students' personal characteristics, conversely, cannot be manipulated or changed. He adds that:

While most research on school-related factors has focused on students' behaviors and performance in school while little attention has been given to the influences of schools themselves – their organization, leadership, and teachers – on students' decision to drop out.

Velez and Saenz (2001), however, named school related components as *Structural-Level Factors* and group them in three categories: (1) school practices, (2) relative group size and ethnic group, (3) and community economic context. Among the school practices they identify: (1) tracking or curricular placement, (2) grade retention, and (3) strict reinforcement of attendance laws. They described relative group size of ethnic group as the practice of the majority group to erect structural barriers and obstacles to keep minority group members from achieving high levels of social mobility. The last of the three categories, community economic context, is the link between the economic attributes of communities and the dropout rates among youth.

Barton's (2005) research added another factor in which schools contribute to the dropout crisis; the scarcity of guidance counseling. He argued that some of the responsibilities of guidance counselors should be to: (1) pick up on early indicators of dropping out and initiate discussions with students about their behavior and what lies behind it, (2) clarify links between staying in school and getting a job upon leaving to convince students about the importance and benefits of graduating from high school, and (3) help students plan their careers and make occupational choices.

Specifically, two major factors contributed to the limited role guidance counselors played in the improvement of high school retention and completion: (1) the

number of students that counselors must work with and (2) the myriad of non-counseling duties they performed. According to the NCES, there is approximately one counselor for every 500 elementary and secondary school students (Barton, 2005). Additionally, counselors are burdened with other administrative duties not related to helping at risk students stay in school such as scheduling classes and the administration of standardized tests. Ironically, in schools where students are most in need and where the dropout rates are the highest, the staff time available is even bleaker. According to Barton (2005), less counseling time is available in schools with a higher percentage of minority enrollment, and in schools where fewer students are college bound.

Mehan's construct is supported by Baker et al. (2001) as they argued that school retention and completion are affected by the learning environment because organizational structures affect student motivation and their eventual engagement in schooling. They added that schools, as educational and social institutions, organize themselves so that engagement is fostered or deflected. Their discourse suggested that schools play a role in the dropout or completion of their students because they structure the form and content of the school day so that engagement is either promoted or deflected (2001).

Similarly, findings from Hampden-Thomson, Warkenstien, and Daniel's study (2009) indicated that on-time graduates and dropouts accrued different numbers of course credits by the end of their sophomore year. High school dropouts earned fewer credits than on-time graduates within each academic year, and the cumulative course credit accrual gap increased each subsequent year. Additionally, dropouts accrued fewer

credits than on-time graduates in the subjects of English, mathematics, and science (2009).

The Institutional Production of Dropouts

The main factors identified as contributing to the institutional production of dropouts in Mehan's (1997) construct were: (1) entrenched tracking programs, (2) less rigorous curricula, and (3) disengaged teachers. However, he also identifies other factors that play into the dropout formula like; (1) state and district funding formulas that penalize schools with high percentage of students with academic difficulties, (2) instructional practices that silence students' voice through curriculum and pedagogy that disregard their lived experiences and treat sociopolitical issues as straightforward yes/no dichotomies, and (3) disciplinary rules and regulations that silence critique and legitimate inequality.

Mehan (1997) cited Fine (1986) as concluding that students do not drop out of school, instead they are forced out of school:

... by teachers and administrators operating as dictated by the state, by history, by tradition, and by the demands of efficiency. As long as they do, often with good intentions and with what they presume to be the best interest of students, we will continue to witness unequal educational outcomes that correspond, by no means arbitrarily, to the contours of social class, race/ethnicity, gender, and disability (pp. 25-26).

There are a number of forces that encroach upon schools and influence the production of dropouts, especially in fiscally challenging times. Mehan (1997) described

these constraints as *practical circumstances* as they are inevitable and do not seem to be the result of malevolence, conspiracy, or bad faith. However, the courses of action taken in response to these circumstances often have an impact on student dropout.

Rodriguez (2008) substantiated Mehan's construct by stating how structural conditions and constraints pervasive in high schools also encourage dropout. This is evidenced by the structurally large size of schools which make the experience for many students impersonal and makes them feel invisible, anonymous, ignored, and even dehumanized. Furthermore, research also showed that disciplinary procedures and policies perpetuate such student dispositions in school (Rodríguez, 2008).

In addition to the contribution factors listed above research conducted by McSpadden McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and Heilig (2008), revealed how in the state of Texas the state's high-stakes accountability system has a direct impact on the severity of the dropout problem. The authors stated that their findings show how disaggregation of student scores by race does not lead to greater equity as it puts the most vulnerable students (the poor, the English language learners, African American, and Latino children) at risk of being pushed out of their schools so the school ratings show "measurable improvements" (2008). Barton (2005) added that there is some evidence that high schools, likely feeling the pressure of the test-based accountability movement and the increased use of exit exams, have diverted students towards obtaining a GED and joining programs that will prepare them for the test. Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick (2006) study also revealed that the association between state policies on high school exit examinations and public high school completion grows stronger as states become more

racially and ethnically diverse. McSpadden McNeil, Coppola, Radigan, and Heilig (2008) conclude that the findings of their study show how the accountability system itself is complicit in the very losses it claims to reverse.

In line with the effects of state accountability systems and the impact they have on the dropout crisis Federal mandate like the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that every school be held accountable for making Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) by meeting a certain academic goals and criteria. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), in its policy brief suggested that while the intentions of the NCLB are to ensure success for all students, the emphasis on test scores at the expense of graduation rates results in pressure on some schools to give up on struggling students, and to counsel or force them out of school before they bring down school performance (2008).

Finally, while schools are charged mostly and primarily with educating students they can contribute to the success of students and to reduce or eliminate the achievement gap by becoming facilitators of coordinated services for children. For many students and their families the school is their main link and point of contact with the community and with society. Fusarelli (2008) states that:

Schools need to respond to both academic and social needs they need to seek and maintain a balance between an emphasis on improved instruction and achievement and an emphasis on providing the needed services and supports for poor children and their families. Tensions arise in trying to achieve this balance. Strong educational leadership may help

to reduce these tensions over the purpose and role of the public school (p.369).

The Students' Voices

According to Mehan's framework (1997), the general interpretation of dropout research findings in the past has been to portray students' reasoning as flawed or deficient because they do not see the value of education. McDermott (1989) and Gilmore (1989) stated how the reasons for dropping out are more complex than the vocabulary that has been used to describe them. Mehan (1997) explained that:

....The general conclusion that we can infer from listening to the voices of dropouts is that students who are in trouble in school do not see a connection between studying, the world of work, or the rest of their lives. As a result of this perceived disconnection students develop an ideology that critiques the system and rationalizes their own lack of academic success (p. 12).

Furthermore, according to Mehan (1997), many poor African American and Latino students have developed an ideology and a course of action that directly challenges conventional American wisdom about the relationship between academic performance and occupational success (1997).

Finally, Mehan (1997) suggested that instead of interpreting family problems and circumstances as unfortunate and as conditions over which schools have little influence, a contextual analysis invites an alternative interpretation. In this light then, family problems may exist precisely because the school experience has been discouraging,

unengaging, and uninviting and because schools have been structured in a way that do not accommodate students experiencing family challenges (Fine, 1991).

By contextualizing the dropout phenomenon in a way that relocates the causes, meanings, and problematic of dropping out by placing the dropout phenomenon in the broader context in which it occurs, Mehan (1997) argued that we can shift attention away from the presumed deficiencies of individual students and show that students' reasoning is not faulty but instead reflects a thoughtful analysis of existing institutional and socioeconomic circumstances.

Venzant Chambers (2009) also suggested that terms like achievement gap insinuate that White students are superior to and more special than Black students, and that they achieve at a higher level by virtue of heroic effort. She explains how the connotation in the term "achievement gap" implies the problem lies with Black and Latino students' ability to "achieve". Using this term, she clarifies, conveniently sidesteps any possible responsibility on the part of educators.

Subtractive Schooling

Similar to Mehan's construct, Valenzuela's (1999) concept of subtractive schooling suggested that at some schools schooling is a subtractive process that divests U.S. – Mexican youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure. In Valenzuela's (1999) words:

Before dismissing urban, U.S.-born youth as lazy underachievers, it behooves researchers and practitioners to first examine the school's role in fostering poor academic performance (p.5).

Her research suggested that schools are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students' cultural and ethnic identities, creating social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the students and between the students and the staff (1999).

Additionally, Valenzuela (1999) in line with Mehan (1997) argued that academic success and failure are products of the schooling process and system rather than the outcome of what students do.

Valenzuela (1999) grounded the subtractive schooling construct on the framework of (1) caring, (2) the erosion of students' capital or social de-capitalization, and (3) subtractive assimilation. In subsequent research, Valenzuela (2005) also linked subtractive schooling to accountability systems like the one in Texas. She suggests that the state accountability system perpetuates a subtractive approach to the education of racial, cultural, and linguistic minorities.

Best Practices

While the dropout crisis is grave it is not hopeless. According to Barton (2005), dropping out is not in some way preordained, and what happens in the school can overcome much. Rodriguez (2008) argued that individual risk factors are not necessarily deterministic and that research has shifted as a result of the examination of the impact that school-level dynamics have in mediating student dropout. As in so many other critical scenarios, prevention is key to reducing the dropout rate. While some school dropouts return to school (Chuang, 1997) and others are increasingly obtaining General Education Development (GED) certificates (Stidwell, 2009) preventing their departure

in the first place would be academically and financially a more effective practice for students, families, communities, schools, and districts.

In an effort to reach the students who are at risk of dropping out we need to examine options that will broaden the opportunities for students to remain in school and successfully graduate. While identifying and analyzing the reasons why students drop out of school is important in order to address the diverse needs of students, schools and districts must identify the specific and effective practices and programs schools can put in place to help students stay in school (Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2009). An effective way to accomplish this task is to study and measure the success of existing and recommended programs and practices and capitalize on the lessons learned from effective interventions to keep students in school and reduce the number of students dropping out.

Even though dropout rates are generally higher in high poverty and high minority schools, some schools do a much better job than others at keeping students at school (The Education Trust, 2010). Following is a review from the research and the literature of recommended programs and practices, based on recent studies and analysis of the available data:

In 2008 the Texas Education Agency released a report of best practices in dropout prevention based on a report released by ICF International, in partnership with the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (Texas Education Agency, 2008). The report found that three Texas programs had consistent, positive, and meaningful effects on preventing dropouts. The three programs included Career Academies, Communities

in Schools, and Project GRAD. Moreover, the study identified the most effective dropout strategies utilized to be: (1) school community collaboration, (2) safe learning environments, (3) family engagement, (4) mentoring / tutoring, (5) alternative schooling, (6) active learning, and (7) career and technology education.

Additionally, Smink and Schargel (2004) based on their nationwide research, identified 15 effective strategies for dropout prevention. The strategies were divided in four main categories: (1) the basic core strategies, (2) early intervention, (3) making the most of instruction, and (4) making the most of the wider community (Schargel, 2010).

The first category, the basic core strategies, include: (a) mentoring / tutoring, (b) service learning, (c) alternative schooling, and (d) after school opportunities. The second category, early intervention, includes: (a) early childhood education, (b) family engagement, and (c) early literacy development. Under the fourth category, labeled as making the most of instruction, they include: (a) professional development, (b) active learning, (c) educational technology, and (d) individualized instruction. The final category, making the most of the wider community, includes: (a) systemic renewal, (b) school-community collaboration, (c) career and technical education, and (d) safe schools.

Other findings from Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison (2006), based on their investigations, suggested the following systems of support to improve students' chances of staying in school: (1) improve teaching and curricula to make schools more relevant and engaging and enhance the connection between school and work, (2) improve instruction and access to supports for struggling students, (3) build a school

climate that fosters academics, (4) ensure that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school, (5) improve the communication between parents and schools (2006).

Findings from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (Dynarski et al., 2008), revealed the six recommendations for dropout prevention based on collection and examination of research studies that evaluated the impacts of dropout prevention programs. The recommendations included: (1) utilize data systems that support a realistic diagnosis of the number of students who drop out and that help identify individual students at high risk of dropping out (diagnostic), (2) assign adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out (targeted intervention), (3) provide academic support and enrichment to improve academic performance (target intervention), (4) implement programs to improve students' classroom behavior and social skills (targeted intervention), (5) personalize the learning environment and instructional process (schoolwide intervention), and (6) provide rigorous and relevant instruction to better engage students in learning and provide the skills needed to graduate and to serve them after they leave school (schoolwide intervention) (2008).

It is important to note that neither the Texas Education Agency's (2008), Smink and Schargel (2004), the Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison (2006), nor the Institute of Education Sciences list of successful dropout prevention practices identified specific practices applicable to students of color. The Texas Education Agency's list (2008), however, stated that:

Results indicate that dropout prevention programs (as listed in the ones identified) are reporting successes in various settings and with different populations. The evidence demonstrates that it is possible to achieve positive results using a core set of effective strategies, even among the highest risk populations (2008).

The language, however, was not clear in terms of the *at risk* label. One would infer that the term includes, but is not exclusive, to students of color

Components of Best Practices in Contextual Factors

While the school has no control over the challenging life circumstances of many students of color schools can control and manipulate contextual factors related to the schooling experience. In addition to the above mentioned findings, other significant components identified in the literature, and more specifically associated with the dropout of students of color, have been identified as follows:

Leadership

Among the recommendations found in the literature, Rodriguez (2008) called for courageous leadership that moves beyond the traditional teaching and learning dynamic to address the dropout problem. The necessary skills required to lead the schools of the 21st century have changed as the needs of our schools and students have shifted.

“Contemporary school leaders face a daunting array of challenges, they are called upon to serve an evolving range of roles, and must draw upon a breadth of knowledge and skills to provide effective leadership to the students, teachers, and communities whom they serve” (Goldring & Schuermann, 2009).

Furman (2004) stated that the study of leadership in the twenty-first century is about how leadership can help achieve valued outcomes such as social justice, racial equity, and learning for all children in school. Bates (2006) argued how social justice in education, as elsewhere, demands both distributive justice (which remedies undeserved inequalities) and recognitional justice (which treats cultural differences with understanding and respect). Educational leaders can no longer escape the consideration of such issues as they are brought to the fore by the recognition of the failure of schools and school systems to ameliorate injustice in the distribution of resources and to recognize and celebrate difference as a means to social and cultural progress (Bates, 2006).

In an increasingly diverse society school leaders face the challenge of creating integrated schools where all students have access to the same educational opportunities and to contribute to the eradication of the achievement gap. According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) only a small fraction of school principals are well trained to lead efforts of instructional improvement, particularly in culturally diverse, low-income communities and schools. Students from low income families face different and specific challenges. Williams (2005) described low income minority families as the “truly disadvantaged”. He stated that these families are so far removed from the possibility of upward mobility that some term them the underclass. They are largely African American and Latino. Their communities share the characteristics of developing nations: low economic development, high infant mortality rates, short life spans, and low levels of educational attainment. The challenges for students and families in socioeconomically

challenged communities are abundant and diverse. Levy and Copple (1989) described these challenges as the new or modern morbidity which are posed by increased incidents of parental unemployment or underemployment, substance abuse (by youth and adults), limited or poor health care, child abuse and domestic violence, sexual promiscuity, academic failure, and dropping out of school. School leaders then need to be cognizant and sensitive to the needs of students who come from poverty and from communities and families who face these challenges.

Equally important to understanding the needs of students who come from challenging socioeconomic families is for school leaders to be elements of change and supporters of social justice. Knowledge and awareness of the systems in place that perpetuate cycles of poverty and oppression are essential for leaders to identify and challenge such systems and practices. Owens & Valesky (2007) described critical theory as a form of social criticism that holds that institutionalized oppression of groups of people in society – cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender groups - is often supported by the oppressed peoples themselves, who believe the system to actually be in their own best interests. Freire (2006) added to this concept by describing the need for a revolutionary leadership in which co-intentional education takes place and in which the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation becomes a committed involvement and not merely a pseudo-participation. By practicing and modeling justice and fairness, school administrators and staff members train students of color and students from challenging socioeconomic families to be self advocates in the pursuit of justice and equality.

Hondo, Gardiner, and Sapien (2008) proposed that school leaders must work toward four key aspects of leadership. First they should be multicultural leaders, ensuring that students of color are served with multicultural practices. Second, school administrators need to be instructional leaders who use their knowledge and understanding of teaching to influence how teachers teach and how students learn by ensuring culturally responsive curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Third, they should work as managerial leaders, who manage the operation of the school. Finally, administrators should be participatory leaders whose job is to incorporate parents, community, and other constituents into the school (2008).

Leadership Beliefs and Practices

Carter (2005) called for teachers and school administrators to be multicultural navigators. She defined multicultural navigators as individuals who develop their competence and fluency in multiple cultural repertoires through varied cross-cultural, interracial and interethnic exchanges (2005). They are also identified as those who stand out because of their abilities to draw on skills and knowledge from the repertoire of the culture of power, which is linked to mobility in mainstream society and to draw on one or more non-dominant cultural repertoires, which are linked to status and position within marginalized or subordinate cultural communities (2005).

In the context of diverse schools leaders must not only communicate their beliefs and values, they must also use them to guide their practice by creating strong and cohesive teams working together with the goal of ensuring success for all learners.

Hoyle (2002) asserted the importance of teams believing in their core values and working together with a passion for excellence.

Two essential traits of a school leader who advocates for students of color are integrity and a strong sense of justice. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLL) standard number five described a school administrator as an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner (Owens and Valesky, 2007). Furthermore, educational administrators have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education (Starratt, 1991). By living by these beliefs, school leaders in diverse schools model behaviors and set the standard for the values that are expected from all staff members in the school setting.

School leaders who understand the needs of a diverse population and value the capital that all learners and teachers bring to school discourage the practice of equity traps. McKenzie and Scheurich (2004) described equity traps as ways of thinking or assumptions that prevent educators from believing that their students of color can be successful learners.

Madsen and Mabokela (2005) stated how the job of ensuring high-quality performance by teachers, and ultimately students, in multicultural school settings falls on the shoulder of the school leadership. Leaders in diverse contexts must incorporate interpersonal and intergroup interactions, organizational transformation, studies of inequality, and moral and ethical structure into their framework to address diversity issues (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005).

Teachers

Teachers play a key role in students' decision to drop out of school and in their decision to remain in school and successfully graduate. Gándara and Contreras (2009) argued that the single most critical resource in any school is the teacher. Carter (2005) pointed out how teachers must be aware of the impact that low expectations can have. She contends that students are sensitive and astute and they read the cues and signals that adults send to them. She also posits how often we do not realize how a slight interaction can undermine the student's academic commitment. Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant (2010) contended that research has shown how the expectations that teachers have for their students have an effect both on student performance and on whether they drop out of school or not. Culturally relevant teachers are key players in the success of students of color.

According to Ladson-Billings (2006), culturally relevant teachers envision their students as being filled with possibilities. Deficit thinking, by contrast, was defined by Milner (2006) as teachers' perceptions that students of color do not already possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes to succeed and learn. García and Guerra (2004) also defined it as educators' belief that the student and the families are at fault because they enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills. Kunjufu (2006) affirmed this concept by stating how teacher expectations, not family income, are the most important factor in determining educational achievement. Furthermore, according to hooks (1994), teachers can radically change pedagogy and provide students the education they desire and deserve by acknowledging

multiculturalism and diversity in the classroom. This kind of teaching gives way to a transformation of consciousness and creates a climate of free expression.

Teachers can also be elements of change by creating classroom environments that foster dialogue and allow all voices to be heard. According to Cummings (1992), the traditional classroom with a lot of teacher talk and a lot of student listening reproduces the conditions of social injustice that characterizes student's family relationships with the dominant group. He believed that "the challenge for educators who aspire to be more than a cog in the wheel of social reproduction is to create conditions for learning that expand rather than constrict students' possibilities for both identity formation and knowledge generation and that highlight rather than conceal the historical and current division of power and resources in the society" (p.101).

Hondo, Gardiner, and Sapien (2008) posited that once students recognize caring and respect on the part of the teacher, they are motivated and willing to learn and success will follow. They further explained how knowing the students, their backgrounds, and their culture is a key pedagogical talent of teachers to connect with them and results in powerful learning (2008). According to Denbo (2002), the high academic performance of African American students is the result of educators believing in their students' ability to learn and their own ability to teach and supporting those beliefs with a wide variety of opportunities to learn, innovative school policies, challenging curriculum, and effective teaching practices.

Teacher Recruitment

Hiring caring teachers who understand the needs of a diverse student population then is the first step towards ensuring a caring staff in multicultural schools. If school administrators are to ensure a climate of equity and social justice in the school they will need to understand the significance of developing interviewing skills and models for the implementation of a structured interview process. This process facilitates the selection of the most qualified candidates and ensures the best “fit” based on the needs of the campus and the team. Research has demonstrated that structuring employment interviews improves psychometric properties and hinders the emergence of bias, because using predetermined questions for every applicant produces an assessment of job candidates that is less open to interviewer bias (Campion and Palmer, 1997, as cited by Hebl, Madera, and King, 2008).

Teacher Preparation for Working With Students of Color

According to Carter (2005) teachers’ and other school officials acknowledgement of multiple forms of cultural capital signifies a willingness to expand the body of knowledge and concede cultural equality in schools. Gándara and Contreras (2009) examined an array of prevention and intervention programs across the nation which took for granted well-prepared teachers and the programs they found to be considered the best spent considerable resources developing teacher capacity to work with Latino and other students from disadvantaged communities (2009).

Given the disparity of multicultural and ethnical representation of teachers compared to the diverse student representation in schools, teachers and staff then need to

be trained to work effectively and successfully with diverse students. This component is significant because according to Padilla (1995), cultural mismatch theories emphasize disparities between home and school environment as causes of underachievement for students of color. He also adds how primary cultural discontinuities cause conflict between students and schools and lead to academic failure. Additionally, these conflicts are a result of differences between minority and Anglo cultures in nonverbal and verbal communication, cognitive styles, cultural values, and behaviors (1995).

Staff development is a key component in the quest for school improvement and student achievement. According to Malen and Rice (2004) numerous studies demonstrate that school capacity is an essential component of meaningful educational reform. Staff development also needs to be aligned with the needs of teachers and students. According to Kunjunfu (2006), effective principals understand the significance of staff development on student outcomes.

Staffing

Teacher allocation also plays a role in the achievement of students of color. In other words, which students are getting the most teacher quality, however defined, and which are getting the least (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). School administrators must then make data driven decisions to allocate teachers, the single most important school resource, to match the needs of students, especially students at risk and students who are struggling academically.

Instructional Practices

Review of the impact of instructional practices in the literature reveals how differentiated instruction and culturally relevant pedagogy can have a significant impact on the academic success of students of color. When teachers are given some degree of freedom in the delivery of the curriculum and the classroom instruction they can then adopt more pedagogical practices which allow teachers to capitalize on their own and their students' prior experiences, cultural background, and language to develop relevant and inclusive lessons for all learners in the classroom. Kumashiro (2000) argued that educators need not only to acknowledge the diversity among their students, but also to embrace these differences and to treat their students as raced, gendered, sexualized, and classed individuals. Furthermore, he added that educators should incorporate the students' home cultures into their classrooms and pedagogies, teaching in a culturally sensitive and culturally relevant way (2000). This is the basis for effective differentiated instruction, which according to Tomlinson (2003) begins with awareness and understanding of basic student needs and progresses as teachers understand those basic needs. The adoption of these concepts gives teachers guidelines of best practices while allowing flexibility and individualization of lessons to suit both learners and teachers in an environment of different teaching and learning styles.

Instructional practices that foster culturally relevant pedagogy are imperative as this has been described by a number of researchers as an effective means of meeting the academic and social needs of culturally diverse students (Howard, 2003). Ladson-Billings (1995) defined culturally relevant pedagogy as designed to problematize

teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of the student-teacher relationship, the curriculum, schooling, and society.

Curriculum

Having culturally sensitive leadership, teachers, and instructional practices are only part of the formula for schools with diverse populations. A culturally relevant curriculum adds value to the schooling experience of students of color and enhances their learning experience. Reyes and Valencia (1993) argued that most school curriculums and assessment instruments are based on middle class White values that emphasize individualism and competition as the essence of successful achievement.

When the curriculum produces classes that are meaningless and irrelevant to students of color they become bored and unmotivated. According to Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison (2006), the participants in their study perceived school as boring. These conditions then become factors associated with dropping out of school. Schargel, Thacker, and Bell (2007) identified lack of relevant curriculum to the causes for dropping out of school. Additionally, The Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy's Report (2009) listed boredom due to lack of engagement as a contributing factor to dropping out.

Findings from Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant's (2010) study revealed that students who dropped out named among the causes for dropping out boredom, non-interesting classes, and participants not seeing the value of some of their classes nor their relevance. The participants also shared their desire for interesting classes with more one-on-one instruction from teachers.

Instructional practices that meet the needs of students of color result in culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995) stated that culturally relevant teaching needs to meet three requirements: (a) an ability to develop students academically, (b) a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and (c) the development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness. Instructional practices that meet the learning styles and needs of students of color and acknowledge the capital they bring to the classroom foster the conditions required for culturally relevant teaching. This sense of community can also produce peer relationships that result in part of the system or networking of support for students of color. Farrell's (1990) findings reveal how for students who dropped out friends were most often the people students went to for help. Loyalty to friends was the most admirable behavior that the participants exhibited in his study (Farrell, 1990).

In addition to engagement and meaning, culturally relevant instructional practices foster participation and a sense of community in the classroom. Whitmore and Crowell (2005) suggested how community in the classroom in itself is more important to learning than any method or technique used in class. This very sense of community additionally creates what hooks (1994) defined as a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute and take part in the learning process. This kind of participation and engagement encourages collaboration. Nieto (1994) asserted that schools and teachers can recognize all sources of legitimate knowledge by facilitating collaborative relations of power in the classroom.

Data Driven Decision Making

Findings from the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy (2009) revealed the use of data to identify students at-risk of dropping out as one of the most important practices and tools. According to the findings the most commonly mentioned uses of data were; early indicators of potential dropouts, attendance rates in high school, and measuring the success of interventions. In its guide for school superintendent's the Youth Transition Funders Group (2008) suggested that the practice of segmenting student data uses analytical tools from which districts can better tailor intervention strategies by examining data in terms of meaningful student subgroups. In order to create critical and cost-effective interventions, the patterns of each group and subgroup must be understood (2008).

Jerald (2006) posited the significance of data collection and analysis. He states that data makes it possible to observe what happens to students who develop risk factors at any point along the way, and thereby to paint a more detailed, nuanced portrait of the patterns and pathways students tend to follow up as they move toward dropping out or graduating from school (2006). The diagnostic step of collecting and analyzing data then needs to be the foundation of any successful prevention program. Jerald (2006) added that knowing which students are at greater risk for dropping out is the first step to reducing dropout rates.

Summary

High school dropout among students of color is complex and multidimensional. An array of social, institutional, family, and individual factors come into place in the

study of this phenomenon. These factors often do not contribute in isolation but instead seem to blend and fuse making the lines that separate them blurry and confusing. As dropping out of school is actually the final outcome of a frustrating schooling experience, or the loss of hope of what seems to some an unattainable goal, it is important to consider the factors attributed to this phenomenon.

In an effort to view the bigger picture of school dropout among African American and Hispanic students and to frame the problem in the context of a diverse suburban high school I examined various issues related to dropping out of school. The literature reviewed was divided and organized into: (1) Economic, social, and emotional implications of dropping out of school, (2) Implications for African American and Hispanic students, (3) Factors and predictors of dropping out, (4) Mehan's Framework, (5) Valenzuela's construct of subtracting schooling, and finally, (6) Recommended best practices.

The economic, social, and emotional implications of dropping out examined a review of the financial implications including the cost to local communities and to the nation at large. At the individual level the review of the literature examined the impact of dropping out for students including lower wages, educational deficiencies, and even emotional and psychological implications. The repercussions for students of color are examined in light of incarceration rates, unemployment, and social mobility. The factors and predictors of dropping out were explored by reviewing prior research and literature that spans over more than 20 years from 1987 to 2010.

Mehan's (1997) construct of contextual factors surrounding drop outs provided the theoretical framework for this study and is examined in detail in the literature along with some of Mehan's other work. Valenzuela's subtractive schooling construct was examined and reviewed as it complements Mehan's contextual factors theory.

Finally, the literature examined recommended best practices from several sources as they fit the contextual factors of the high school in the study with a diverse student population and a high representation of students of color and students labeled at-risk. Within the list of best practices, I specifically focused on reviewing the concepts of leadership, teachers, and instructional practices and their direct relation to the dropout of students of color.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Within the qualitative research paradigm, the case study approach guided the inquiry in this study. The approach to inquiry that researchers select is framed by the paradigm that guides their investigation. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) provided a comprehensive definition inclusive of the concepts and assumptions associated with the qualitative research paradigm; they defined it as “multimethod in its focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them” (p.2).

I selected the qualitative research paradigm for its interpretive and constructivist epistemology and for how it will help me, as a researcher and practitioner, improve the educational field’s knowledge base. The objective is to obtain in depth and detailed understanding of the issue and to shed light on practices, systems, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate social injustice, educational inequities, student under-achievement, and deficit thinking. Creswell (2007) explained how qualitative research is conducted to empower individuals to share their stories and to hear their voices.

Research guided by the qualitative research paradigm is important to the field of education because of the reflection, action, and collaboration that define the type of knowledge produced by research conducted within this paradigm (Meriam, 1991). The findings produced by research conducted under this paradigm answer questions related to social structure, freedom and oppression, power and control. As educational reform

calls for theory and practice that leads towards the eradication of achievement gaps and behaviors that foster racism, deficit thinking, White privilege, social injustice, and educational inequities, his research paradigm provides the philosophical underpinning necessary to achieve educational reform goals and create awareness about these issues.

Case Study

Creswell (2007) defined case study research as inquiry that involves the study of an issue or problem using the case itself as a specific illustration. It involves the study of an issue explored through one or more cases within a bounded system. It is a qualitative approach in which the investigator: (1) explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases), through detailed, in depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and (2) reports a case description and case-based themes (2007).

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) described case study as the in-depth study of one or more instances of a phenomenon in its real-life context that reflects the perspective of the informants involved in the phenomenon. A case, then, is an illustration or a specific instance of the phenomenon. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) listed three major purposes of case studies: (1) description, (2) explanation, and (3) evaluation. Description attempts to provide thick descriptions or statements that re-create a situation and as much of its context as possible accompanied by the meanings and intentions inherent in that situation. The explanation of case study is to provide explanations of patterns, or how one type of variation observed is systematically related to another observed variation. The evaluation purpose of case study research is to make evaluative judgment (2007).

Through the use of a case study approach I intended to understand the experience of dropping out of school from the informants' perspectives in an effort to unveil the structures and systems in place in high school that perpetuate the achievement gap between students of color and their White peers. The objective is, through the dialogue resulting from interviews, to identify factors that determine and constrain the informants' worldviews.

The characteristics that set the case study approach apart from other qualitative research approaches are: (1) the focus to develop an in-depth description, explanation, and analysis of a case or multiple cases with the goal of providing in-depth understanding of the specific case or cases studied; (2) the unit of analysis is the study of an event, program, or activity and can include more than one individual; (3) data collection is based on interviews, observations, documents, or even artifacts; and (4) data is analyzed through description of the case and the themes of the case, or through cross-case themes (Creswell, 2007; Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007; Schwandt, 2007). Furthermore, case studies involve field work in which the researcher interacts with study informants in their natural settings (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

In terms of the design of a case study, Gall, Gall, & Borg (2007) argued that consistent with qualitative research in general, the design of each case study is determined by the researcher conducting the study and is specific to the phenomenon being studied. Case study design, therefore, is not an event, but an emergent process that occurs throughout the case study (2007). Given this flexibility in the design, Creswell (2007), based on Stake's approach (1995), identified five steps researchers need to follow

in the procedures for conducting a case study: (1) determining if a case study approach is appropriate to the research problem, (2) identifying the specific case, (3) selecting extensive data collection by drawing from multiple sources, (4) deciding the type of data analysis to be used (holistic or embedded), and finally, (5) in the interpretive phase, the researcher reports the meaning of the case.

This case study is bounded by time and context. The time frame is of three years, 2007 to 2010, within which the twelve informants dropped out of school. The single context is a large and diverse suburban high school in Southeast Texas.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher is one of the main differences between the qualitative and the quantitative research paradigms. The qualitative research paradigm allows for researchers to examine phenomena from a subjective perspective and look for meaning beyond numeric and statistical data. According to Kraus (2005), qualitative researchers believe in understanding a phenomenon by viewing it in its context and by becoming immersed into the culture or organization studied since there is no single unitary or objective reality.

Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) affirmed that case study researchers play the role of primary “measuring instrument” in data collection by carrying out data collection and becoming personally involved in the phenomenon being studied. This means that the researcher is likely to interact closely with research informants and use empathy and other psychological processes to grasp the meaning of the phenomenon as it is experienced by individuals and groups in the setting (2007). My role as a researcher, in

adhering to the qualitative research tradition, has been one of a directly involved participant by designing the case study, collecting data, transcribing, analyzing, and reporting.

Creswell (2007) added that qualitative research is conducted when there is a need to minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the informants in a study. In this case, as a school administrator at the school in the context of this study, my intention was to purposefully minimize any power relationships that may have existed between me as a researcher and the informants as former students.

Informed Consent

Prior to attempting to locate or contact any informants, I obtained permission from the Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix H). I also obtained consent from the school district's office of research in which Horizon High School is located (see Appendix I). Upon approval for research from the Texas A & M IRB and the school district I contacted potential informants. As expressed earlier, issues of gaining entry and obtaining trust will be instrumental to the validity and success of this study. I informed and assured informants about the importance of protecting their identities and maintaining confidentiality. I first explained verbally the purpose of the study and their role in the research and then provided a copy in writing (see Appendix J). Verbal and written permission to audiotape and transcribe interviews was requested from the informants prior to the beginning of the interview. I assured the informants of security measures to protect their identity (coding system) and to store audiotapes, transcripts, and field notes. Informants were also advised that audio tapping was optional

and if they did not feel comfortable with the recording I would be willing to take notes. All informants agreed to the audio recording of the interview.

Data Collection Procedures

Creswell (2007) argued that the backbone of qualitative research is the extensive collection of data, typically from multiple sources of information. More specifically, in case study research, the type of data collected can be in the form of documents and records, interviews, observation, and physical artifacts. In this study my main source of data was one-on-one interviews with the informants. Additional data was generated by field notes taken during the interview and by observations of the informants when they were students at Horizon High School. As a school administrator at the last school these informants attended, I was able to observe them in the school setting and to also obtain academic, disciplinary, and attendance information from school records.

The type of interview I conducted was semi-structured and open ended. The interview protocol included 10 questions. Data was recorded by using field notes for observations during the interview and by audio recording the interviews.

Informants

Another key characteristic that distinguishes qualitative research is its flexibility in sampling. First, the sample size in qualitative studies is typically small since the focus is more in the depth in the description than in the quantity and numbers. In this study I selected purposeful sampling as the sampling procedure. According to Creswell (2007), in purposeful sampling the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central

phenomenon in the study. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) stated that in purposeful sampling the goal is to select cases that are likely to be information rich with respect to the purpose of the study. Additionally, purposeful sampling is not designed to achieve population validity. The intent is to achieve an in-depth understanding of selected individuals, not to select a sample that will represent accurately a defined population (2007).

The criteria for selection of the purposeful sample in this study was students who had dropped out of this specific suburban high school, who were African American or Hispanic, and who 18 years or older. I also wanted to have an equal representation of male and female informants. I randomly selected 30 students from a list of dropout from this school who met the criteria. My goal was to contact and interview a total of 12 informants. I started with a list of thirty since I knew that tracking all of them would be challenging and that with statistical probability I would be able to contact at least half of the potential informants from the original list. My first attempt was to establish contact by telephone. This task proved to be taxing since most of the telephone numbers obtained from school records were no longer in service or were no longer the correct numbers. From the original list of thirty students I was able to establish communication by phone with only seven. With the other five students I established contact by looking up their home address in school records and conducting a home visit. The final sample for this study resulted in seven Hispanic, five African American, seven females, and five male students, for a total of twelve informants. Four informants were Hispanic females,

three were Hispanic males, three were African American females, and two were African American males.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured, open-ended interview was developed and used with all twelve informants. According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), the semi-structured interview involves asking a series of structured questions and then probing more deeply with open-form questions to obtain additional information. The open-ended interview involves a predetermined sequence and wording of the same set of questions to be asked of each respondent, in order to minimize the possibility of bias (2007). The interview questions were developed from themes discovered in the literature reviewed and using Mehan's conceptual framework as a guide. The interview questions were developed with the goal of providing questions that would yield reasonably unbiased data. I personally conducted each interview and took interview notes while audio recording. I personally transcribed each interview into text.

Data Collection

Data for this case study was collected through the use of face to face, semi structured, open-ended interviews with informants with the goal of obtaining rich description which is at the core of qualitative research. Four informants agreed to meet me at a fast food restaurant to be interviewed, three met me in my office at Horizon High School, and four informants welcomed me into their home to be interviewed.

The data collected also included field notes from observations of the students during the interview, field notes about the students' neighborhoods and home

environments, and field notes based on my prior knowledge about the students' lives obtained from my professional experience with the students' as a school administrator at the last public high school they attended.

Data Analysis

Boyatzis (1998) described thematic analysis as the process to be used with qualitative information for encoding the data. This may be a list of themes which form a pattern found in the information that describes and organizes the possible observations and interprets aspects of the phenomena (Boyatzis, 1998). In this case study I selected the use of themes as the process to analyze the data obtained through semi structured interviews.

The interpretational analysis process selected for this case study is based on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative approach to analysis. The constant comparative method is concerned with generating many categories or properties about general problems. Some of these properties may be causes, conditions, or consequences. This method, instead of consideration of all available data, requires saturation of data (1967). This process involves: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory.

Huberman and Miles (1994) suggested that investigators make preliminary counts of data codes and determine how frequently codes appear in the database. Once the field notes were gathered and the interviews transcribed, the first step was to examine the data and code it into as many categories of analysis as possible while

comparing incidents applicable to each category. I created a spreadsheet to facilitate the task and organize the themes.

According to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) method, the second step is the integration of categories and their properties. In this step the coding continued and the constant comparative units changed from comparison of incident with incident to comparison of incident with properties of the category that resulted from the initial comparison of incidents (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I identified the properties to each category and further compared them with the initial comparison of themes.

Step three of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) process is to delimit the theory. As the themes or categories emerged I compared them to those in the existing review of the literature and to prior research and theory. This constant comparison of the themes and sub themes resulted in the theoretical properties of the categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The last step in Glaser and Strauss' (1967) analytical process is writing theory. Upon completion of the second step the integration and reduction of categories resulted in three themes: (a) school factors, (b) home factors, and (c) student factors contributing to the informants' decision to drop out. Further analysis, merging, and reduction of themes yielded sub themes within each theme. Further discussion of the themes and their relation to existing literature and theory will be explored in chapter V of this study.

Validity

Schwandt (2007) stated that validity in qualitative research is the claim made about the meaning of dependable evidence and the methods used to assemble such

evidence. Creswell (2007) defined validity as the accuracy of the account using one or more of the procedures for validation, such as member checking, triangulating sources of data, or using peer or external auditors of the accounts. As a researcher, I relied on triangulation, peer debriefing, and rich, thick description as methods of validity to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the findings and discussions resulting from my research.

Triangulation

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning, verifying the repeatability of an observation or interpretation. Triangulation was defined by Creswell (2007) as the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroboration evidence in qualitative research. Merriam (1988) added that triangulation strengthens reliability as well as internal validity. In this study, validity was attained through corroborating evidence from the use of multiple data sources, specifically unstructured interviews with twelve informants to shed light on the issue of dropping out of school. Schwandt (2007) added that data from observations may be compared with data from interviews as a means of triangulation. The data generated from the unstructured interviews was compared to my field notes from observation of informants during the interview and from prior knowledge about informants and their stories.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing, another validation strategy used in this study, is described by Creswell (2007) as one that provides an external check of the research process. Merriam (2009) argued that such an examination or review can be conducted by a colleague either familiar with the research or one new to the topic. Schwandt (2007) argued that this strategy can also involve sharing ideas about procedures and logistics in the field in order to get advice and to check the dependability of ways of proceeding. Peer debriefing was ensured in this research study by debriefing and discussing methodology and findings with the dissertation committee chairperson as well as with two doctoral student colleagues. Some of these discussions took place face to face, over the telephone, and through e-mail.

Rich and Thick Descriptions

In case study research, the term descriptive means that the end product of a case is a rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009). This rich, thick description, according to Creswell (2007), allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability because of the details the writer provides about the informants or the setting under study. Furthermore, Schwandt (2007) added that to thickly describe social action is actually to interpret it by recording circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, that characterize a particular episode. In this case study I provided thick and rich descriptions by including a detailed profile of each participant and by including multiple excerpts taken from the narrative generated from interviews in

an effort to offer the reader insight into the informants' perceptions and their views about dropping out of school.

Anticipated Ethical Issues

Due to the nature of qualitative research and the researcher's involvement with informants in the context of the study, researchers conducting case study research must be cognizant of possible ethical issues that could potentially arise from their data collection, instrumentation, and data analysis. As a practitioner in the educational field, specifically a school administrator in the capacity of assistant principal, I anticipated informants reluctance to honestly express any frustrations, disappointments, or anger with the school as an institution or with school practices, procedures, systems and/or school personnel. In this case gaining entry and obtaining the informants trust was key to obtaining reliable data by breaking down as many barriers that could possibly exist between the researcher and informants.

As a Hispanic female I feel strongly about the challenges that immigrants, English language learners, and other groups face and struggle with in every day life in America. I identify with many of their lived experiences and have experienced some of their struggles first hand. Specifically, I have struggle with language barriers as a second language learner.

I moved from a Spanish speaking environment in Puerto Rico to the United States as an adult. Even though English was already a second language for me when I arrived in the United States, I had to adjust from using basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) to developing and obtaining more cognitive-academic

language proficiency (CALP) (Ovando and Collier, 1985) to join the workforce and the academic world. I also had to adapt to cultural differences between my Puertorrican heritage and mainstream American culture.

David Flinders (1992) identified four types of ethics that can provide a basis for viewing and resolving issues that arise in qualitative research: (1) utilitarian ethics – by which researchers judge the morality of their decisions and actions by considering the consequences. The most desirable consequence being to produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people; (2) deontological ethics – by which researchers judge the morality of their decisions and actions by referring to absolute values, such as honesty, justice, fairness, and respect for others; (3) relational ethics – by which researchers judge the morality of their decisions and actions by standard of whether these decisions and actions reflect a caring attitude towards others; and (4) ecological ethics – by which researchers judge the morality of their decisions and actions in terms of the participant's culture and the larger social system of which they are part. By keeping in mind these different ethical issues and using them to gauge my own thinking I attempted to be cognizant, recognize, and overcome any ethical issues in conducting this study.

Summary

I offered in Chapter III a discussion about the qualitative paradigm, specifically of case study, and its relevant application to educational research. I introduced the discussion of methods by sharing my role as a researcher. I provided an outline of the qualitative methodology I used in this study for the purposeful selection of informants, data collection, and data analysis. I also reviewed the strategies used in this study to

ensure trustworthiness of the methodology and validity of the findings. In the last section of this chapter, I concluded with a brief discussion of anticipated ethical issues.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

The review of the literature revealed a myriad of factors attributed to dropping out of school. Specifically, this study focused on those school environment factors that, from the student's perspective, contributed to dropping out of this suburban high school. By capturing their stories after dropping out of school, I attempted to look at the school dropout experience through the eyes of Hispanic and African American students, in search of answers and solutions to deterring or eradicating this phenomenon, especially in the context of Horizon High School. It was also my intention, through the findings of this study, to capture their voices and facilitate a better understanding of their specific needs as students of color. Hopefully, this study will add to the existing literature available to school administrators and policy makers to assist them in funding, developing and implementing proactive practices and policies that will narrow or eradicate the existing achievement gap.

The purpose of this research was to gather and analyze data that focused on the two areas of the study: (1) what are some experiences that led Hispanic and African American students at this high school to a decision to drop out of school, and (2) what are the perceptions of students of color who have dropped out from this school about systems, people, programs, and practices that in their view impacted or contributed to their decision to leave school before graduating?

The purposeful sample for this study resulted in 12 informants. There were seven Hispanic, five African American, seven females, and five male students. There were four Hispanic females, three Hispanic males, three African American females, and two African American males (See Table 1).

Table 1
Informants' Age, Ethnicity, and Gender Distribution

| Participant | Ethnicity | Gender | Current Age | Age at Dropout | Family Status |
|-------------|------------------|--------|-------------|----------------|---------------|
| Sara | Hispanic | Female | 18 | 17 | Two parents |
| Victoria | Hispanic | Female | 21 | 19 | Two parents |
| Daniela | Hispanic | Female | 18 | 17 | Single parent |
| Nelly | Hispanic | Female | 18 | 18 | No parents |
| Joe | Hispanic | Male | 18 | 17 | Single parent |
| Ricardo | Hispanic | Male | 18 | 17 | Two parents |
| Nick | Hispanic | Male | 21 | 19 | Single parent |
| Rose | African American | Female | 18 | 17 | Single parent |
| Clarissa | African American | Female | 18 | 17 | Single parent |
| Amanda | African American | Female | 19 | 18 | Single parent |
| Alex | African American | Male | 18 | 18 | Single parent |
| Darius | African American | Male | 18 | 18 | Two parents |

The Informants and Their Stories

Each of the informants had a compelling story to tell. During the interview, some of them allowed their stories to flow as part of the conversation and most of them did not hold back in sharing their narratives. Others were not cognizant of the connection between their story and how their circumstances affected their decision to drop out of school. As a researcher, I was astounded by their desire to share details about their lives

with me. I interpret this willingness to share as their need and wish to have their voices heard. For this reason, and to honor their voices, I include a brief profile of each participant. The information in each profile is based on details obtained from the interview, from my prior knowledge about each participant as an administrator at the campus they last attended, and from my observations about their neighborhoods and their home environments. In order to protect their identities and privacies each participant and the individuals they named in the interview have been assigned a nickname.

In this study, listening to and capturing the informants' voices and perspectives and learning about their daily challenges allowed me to have a better understanding of their decision to drop out of school and how they internalized and interpreted their decision. Mehan (1997) expressed that placing students reasoning for dropping out in the context of the social organization of schools gives us a way to understand the dropout phenomenon better. He encouraged the use of contextual analysis to better understand the relationship among students' reasoning, educators' decision making, cultural processes and general societal constraints (Mehan, 1997).

Sara

Sara is an 18 year old Hispanic female. She lives in a caring and nurturing middle class home with both parents. She intends to obtain a General Education Development certificate GED or some other form of high school completion certificate via a home schooling program or by attending evening adult classes at a community college. Sara also wonders about the possibility of even attending postsecondary studies

since she is an illegal immigrant and does not know if she could be admitted in a college or university. This is a concern shared by many students with a similar immigration status. Sara did not have a disciplinary record at school and did not have attendance issues. Her most difficult and only challenge was academics.

Sara's oldest sister also dropped out of school when she became pregnant at an early age. Sara dropped out of school six months prior to the interview for this study and is currently working in the food service industry. She dropped out of school at 17 out of frustration from being in the tenth grade two years in a row. She shared that she dropped out because she lost hope since it would take three more years to obtain the necessary credits to graduate from high school. The following excerpt explains her rationale:

I never considered dropping out prior to this summer, but this summer I felt there was no hope. I felt there was no point on me to keep going to school. I wasn't doing good.

Victoria

Victoria is a 20 one year old Hispanic female. She dropped out of school two years ago, when she was in the tenth grade, after spending four years in high school. She blames the drama that surrounded her at school with her boyfriend and other students as the reason for dropping out. She also shared how she just lost hope after only acquiring eleven credits in four years. In addition, she was summoned to court due to excessive absences. She comes from a supportive middle class family and lives with both parents in a middle class neighborhood. Her parents encouraged her to stay in school and graduate. She claims she did not get in trouble at school but that a school disciplinary

action that resulted in suspension may have contributed to her final decision. In terms of her academic experience at school the following statement captured her frustration and her voice:

I took IPC (Integrated Physics and Chemistry) four times, four years in a row. It IPC frustrated me; I always thought ‘I’m never going to pass this class’. I had four different teachers in IPC, one each year, and never passed the class.

She is currently working in the electronics assembly industry while taking a high school completion course by mail. She has no concrete plans for the future.

Daniela

Daniela is an 18 year old Hispanic female who dropped out of school nine months prior to the interview, at the age of 17. She now works in the fast food service industry. She lives alone with her mother in a trailer park community of predominantly Hispanic residents. Her older sister also dropped out of school several years before she did.

Daniela suffers from diabetes, heart problems, depression, and anxiety. To control her diabetes, she needs to inject herself with insulin three times a day. Her boyfriend and next door neighbor also dropped out of school the year before her. According to her, the reason why she dropped out of school was that she gave up on herself and she feels she did not try hard enough. Prior to dropping out of school she was in some advanced level classes. She did not have a disciplinary record in school and she claims she did not have negative experiences with teachers. Daniela stated during the

interview that her absences due to illness did set her back and made it difficult to catch up with school upon returning from an absence.

Daniela does not have plans for the future and did not express an interest in exploring an alternate route to high school completion. When I asked her if she had regrets about dropping out she stated that she did not know because she never thinks about it. Through previous conversations with her mother, as a school administrator, I discovered that in addition to diabetes and a heart condition she suffers from depression and anxiety.

Based on the conversation with Daniela during the interview, she blames herself for dropping out of school as evidenced by the following quote:

I dropped out because I gave up on myself. [I was] not trying hard, not trying harder. I was not trying to do it again, over and over again.

Nelly

Nelly is an 18 year old Hispanic female. She dropped out of school a year prior to the interview at the age of 17. Her mother died when she was two years old and, in her own words, she has been shuffled around since then. She has lived with her father, her uncle, her godmother, her aunts, and her grandmother. She has been expelled from school multiple times and placed at alternative learning centers including the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP).

She attributes as one of the reasons for dropping out of school the fear of getting in trouble or getting a ticket. She was afraid that if she received a citation for any reason

her probation officer would be notified and she would have to appear in court one more time. She feared that a court visit could result in a referral to TYC (Texas Youth Commission) or even incarceration. She admits having used drugs in the past and also shared that she is no longer a drug user. She acknowledges and thanks her current boyfriend who convinced her to stop using drugs. She last lived with her grandmother before moving into an apartment with a 17 year old friend who also dropped out of school. Her friend is a teenage mom. They live together with her friends two young sons and pay their rent with her social security income. She has always lived in the same community which is a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood.

Nelly does not currently work nor attends school. She would like to finish high school and dreams of studying cosmetology. She would also like to be a guidance counselor for youths in trouble as she considers she could establish relationships with them by sharing her story and relating to their circumstances. She is very proud to be drug free. Nelly would like to get her high school diploma or GED but she faces roadblocks to even initiate the first step of the process. She needs a valid identification card which she cannot obtain because she does not have a birth certificate; it has been lost among her many caregivers throughout the years. She does not have transportation to get to any of the government agencies that will assist her with obtaining the necessary documents (birth certificate or valid ID).

When I asked Nelly what kept her from dropping out sooner and what motivated her to stay in school, since she had been thinking about it for about a year. Her answer was somewhat surprising as stated below:

Well, my motivation was to be in the same school with my little brother and cousin. I wanted to watch over them so no one would pick on them. I wanted to protect them.

Joe

Joe is an 18 year old Hispanic male. He dropped out of school a year ago when he was 17 years old. He lives with his mother in a socially and economically challenging neighborhood predominantly Hispanic and African American. He is the second in his immediate family to drop out of school. His older brother dropped out of school and is currently detained in an immigration facility while waiting for the completion of his immigrant status or his deportation. His stepfather has been deported and currently lives in Mexico. Joe also dropped out of school to help his mother financially. Since his stepfather was deported his mother earns the only income in the household. His brother was turned into immigration authorities after being apprehended for a home invasion and robbery. His mother must pay an attorney \$10,000 for the defense of her oldest son and for processing his immigration paperwork. She cleans houses for a living and must meet the \$500 per month financial commitment with the attorney. Unfortunately, this young man has not been able to contribute to his mother's financial needs since he has not found a job after he dropped out of school.

For Joe, getting a court order due to attendance issues pushed his decision to drop out of school. He knew his mother could not afford to pay the ticket so he talked her into allowing him to drop out of school to avoid the ticket. Joe is currently unemployed and hopes to eventually obtain a GED certificate and attend a local community college.

According to Joe he did not have a disciplinary record at school even though he wanted to be like his brother who was always in trouble. He looks up to his brother and wants to be like him as he expressed in the following statement:

Sometimes when I think about it I wanted to be like my brother. I wanted to be liked, I wanted to be popular, he was popular in the wrong way, he was into drugs and into gangs.

Ricardo

Ricardo is an 18 year old Hispanic male who dropped out of school a year prior to the interview, when he was 17 years old. He has supportive parents who encouraged him to stay in school. He is the second family member to drop out of school after his older sister dropped out two years earlier.

After dropping out, he obtained the equivalent of a high school diploma from a private/charter school upon completion of an exam. There is a charge of \$180 to take the exam. However, his dream of joining the ARMY has temporarily been stalled since the Armed Forces do not acknowledge the high school diploma or certificate he obtained from the private/charter school. He is currently unemployed and hopes to join a community college to obtain the twelve college credits required by the ARMY before applying again.

Ricardo was never in trouble at school and he admits to leaving school because he simply lost hope. He felt that due to the limited credits he had acquired it would take him too long to complete his high school graduation requirements. He expressed his hopelessness in the following statement:

It would have taken me too long to finish high school. I did not have many credits. In a way I lost hope. I had failed a year and it would have taken me two more years.

Nick

Nick is a 21 year old Hispanic male. He lives in a challenging neighborhood predominantly populated by Hispanic residents. He dropped out of school at 19 out of the need to help out his mother financially. In his case the parents had separated and he felt compelled to help his struggling mother who was also having health problems associated with back and hands injuries. Nick is the oldest of three brothers.

In addition to the need to assist his mother financially he left school because he was not being academically successful. He attributes his academic failure to the lack of concentration at school caused by his worries about problems at home. His family also experienced having their electricity disconnected and he shared during the interview how they did not have food or clothes when he decided to leave school. He also expressed how much he enjoyed school and how he enjoyed learning. He shared that while he was in school he used drugs and was socializing with gang members and students whom he referred to as bad kids. He is currently drug free and no longer associates with gang members.

Unfortunately, dropping out of school did not bring any immediate help or long term solutions to Nick's family problems as he is currently unemployed and has not worked in several months. His last employer did not pay him the salary corresponding to the last two weeks worked and now owes him more than six hundred dollars. Nick and

his family are illegal immigrants and have no hope for a solution to their immigration status. Lack of money and resources has created this sense of hopelessness.

Nick expressed how he enjoyed school and regrets his decision to drop out as expressed in the following excerpt from the interview:

I loved school, it was hard and all but I loved studying. I wanted to get something out of it, unfortunately for me I didn't. I hope other people would be able to appreciate it.

Rose

Rose is an 18 year old African American female who became a mother at 15. She lives in a socially and economically challenged community predominantly populated by African American and Hispanic residents. During her pregnancy and shortly after the birth of her child her parents were going through marital problems and there were constant arguments and fights in the home. Her parents eventually separated and her father left the home. Her mother is a substance abuser. Their electricity and water service has been disconnected more than once. In fact, their electricity was disconnected during a very cold winter shortly after the birth of her son and the water is currently disconnected. She expressed how difficult it was for her to juggle the responsibilities of being a parent and a teenage mother. Her child's biological father has never paid child support.

Rose dropped out of school at the age of 17. She later obtained the equivalent of a high school diploma through a private/charter school after taking a required exam and is currently enrolled in a local community college. She is experiencing academic success

in a local community college and aspires to eventually attend law school and become an attorney. Obtaining several scholarships has facilitated her efforts to continue college studies. She has also moved out of her mother's home and now lives with her baby in her father's house.

She attributes dropping out of school to the struggles of balancing parenting while going to school and being a student. Her statement captures her perceptions as follows:

After I had my son I didn't know it would be that hard. As he started getting older I had other responsibilities. The older he got the more I had to do.

Clarissa

Clarissa is an 18 year old African American female who dropped out of school six months before the interview when she was in the eleventh grade. She lives with her mother and younger sisters. She was expelled from school several times and in alternative learning schools including the Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program.

Clarissa makes two claims for having dropped out school: first, she missed too many days of school due to suspensions and could never catch up, and second, she received so many citations that she could not bear standing in front of the judge one more time. She states that she received citations for fighting and that the fighting was due to anger issues. She lost track of how many tickets she received. Her situation is best described by the following statement in her own words:

I got lots of tickets, I cannot even count, I got like 15 tickets. The last time I got a ticket the judge just got bitter of seeing me, he kept sending me to places where they made me take medicine and I just couldn't do it anymore.

Clarissa is currently unemployed and plans to move to New York City, obtain a high school diploma, and eventually attend college.

Amanda

Amanda is a 19 year old African American female. She dropped out of school in the tenth grade when she was 18. Shortly after her mother passed away she decided to drop out. Amanda is an only child living in a middle class neighborhood with a supportive and caring father. Her father is a veteran and is currently unemployed. He also has heart related health problems.

After dropping out of school, Amanda took an exam at a local private/charter school which earned her an alternative high school completion certificate. She has since enrolled in a local community college. While she struggled with her classes in high school, especially algebra, she claims to be successfully passing all her classes with As and Bs in college. She is enjoying her college experience, and plans to become a nurse to help others like her mother and her father. She was exposed to the nursing career after spending much time in her life in hospitals taking care of both parents.

Knowing that her friends were graduating, and that she still had so many classes to take discouraged her from trying and from staying in school. She did not have a disciplinary record and she attributes her decision to drop out to her loss of hope. She

shared she was always behind in school and she did not receive the help and support necessary to keep up with some of her classes. Her mother suffered from diabetes and also had a heart condition. She expressed how she constantly worried about her mother when she was at school:

I worried about my mom at school but I wouldn't tell anybody about it. I wondered, did she take her medicine? I mean, is she alive? I'd worry about coming home and finding her dead, sometimes when I got off the bus I would just walk to the park or stay at the door cause I didn't want to go inside the house cause what if she was not alive.

Alex

Alex is an 18 year old African American male. He dropped out of school a few weeks prior to the interview in his senior year in high school. He was raised by his father with whom he has a very close relationship. His father is, in fact, his main source of inspiration, motivation, and support. They have experienced financial difficulties and were recently evicted from their home when the bank foreclosed on it after his father loss his employment. This incident forced him to move in with his biological mother, with whom he has not lived or had a relationship with since he was three years old. He does not have a positive relationship with her and resents the way she treats him. He accuses her of lying and of using drugs.

Alex became a father at 16. Even though his daughter lives with her mother and not with him he is very involved in her life. He sees her on a weekly or even daily basis when possible and he takes his parental duties seriously. He has paid child support

consistently since his daughter was born two years ago. Alex claims he was struggling academically when he dropped out of school. Because he had parental responsibilities he was working in the evenings and attending school during the day.

Alex attributes his dropout status to his challenging home situation and to not being able to juggle the responsibilities of being a parent and a student. This summer he experienced a major setback in his personal life. While visiting his child he engaged in an argument with the baby's mother which became a physical struggle of pushing and pulling. The baby's grandmother called the police and accused him of domestic violence. He spent a week in jail and his court date is still pending. He has also moved out of his mother's home and now lives in his own apartment. He recently lost his job and is struggling to pay child support, rent, and find a job.

Alex expressed how his personal challenges affected his decision to drop out in the following statement:

I really didn't have any problems with the teachers and the administrators. I didn't do anything bad. It was more the problems at home that were affecting me when I wasn't at school.

Darius

Darius is an 18 year old African American male. He lives with both parents in a middle class neighborhood. He dropped out of school six months prior to the interview at the age of 18. He attributes his decision to dropping out to family problems. The death of his uncle affected him and took his concentration away from school. He was also worried about family problems and unable to focus on school work. He depended on his

uncle for advice and guidance and felt at a loss when he passed away. He claims he did not have a discipline record or got in trouble at school. According to Darius he was accused of making a threatening remark to a teacher and was going to be sent to an alternative learning center. He did not want to shame his family and decided to drop out before going to the alternative learning center.

Darius also has an older sibling who dropped out of school. Darius is currently unemployed and does not have a plan for the immediate future. Similarly to other informants in this study, he blamed himself and took responsibility for his decision to drop out as evidenced by the following statement:

It wasn't administrators or none of the teachers, it was me. I was acting up, not them. They were disciplining me right. I didn't have my head right, I felt they were attacking me. I have to think back and I think it was me.

Summary of Profiles

Rose and Alex were teenage parents. None of the students had meaningful connections to school or were involved in sports, clubs, or extracurricular activities. None of the informants had an official mentor while they were in high school. All except Nelly and Clarissa did not have disciplinary problems at school. Sara, Daniela, Joe, Ricardo, and Darius had a sibling who dropped out of school before them. Daniela, Joe, Nick, Rose, Clarissa, Amanda, and Alex came from a single parent home.

Findings

I generated and gathered the data for this study by conducting a semi-structured, face to face interview with each participant using a ten question instrument (see appendix G). I also gathered data from field notes taken of my observations during the interviews. As a school administrator at the last campus the informants attended, Horizon High School, I knew most of the informants and had observed them in the school environment. I generated field and observations notes based on my past observations of some of the informants' in the school setting. As an administrator I had access to their school records, which include grades, attendance records, and discipline data, I also gathered and analyzed data from these sources.

During the interview the informants' voices were captured through note taking and voice recording. After each interview I transcribed each audio recording. During the interview process, for the purpose of validating the accuracy of findings, after each question I re-stated their answers allowing them to confirm my clear understanding of their responses. The data generated from interviews was analyzed for themes. Each interview transcript was assessed as a segment of raw data. The themes emerged from patterns found in the informants' answers to the various questions in the interview. The constant comparative data analysis generated three major themes of the factors that informants attributed to dropping out of school: (1) challenging home situations, (2) personal realities, and (3) school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems.

Based on the informants' responses, the theme labeled *challenging home situations* was associated with contributing factors emerging from the home life, home

environment, or circumstances related to home and family life. *Challenging home situations* was divided into two sub themes: (a) financial challenges and (b) family and personal problems that did not allow them to concentrate at school (death, divorce, and family fights among others).

Another theme identified from the analysis of the data was labeled *personal realities*. Under this theme, the students identified factors that were neither school nor home related. They attributed these factors to themselves as students. Four sub themes were identified from this theme: (a) loss of hope which lead to giving up and stop trying, (b) frustration or embarrassment for being too old to be in school, and (c) emotional and physical health, and (d) juggling teenage parental and student roles,

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was *labeled school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems*. This theme included school related factors associated with their decision to drop out of school and how these factors impacted them as students. This theme was further divided into seven sub themes labeled as: (a) academic difficulties, (b) teachers, (c) grade retention, (d) attendance issues, (e) law enforcement and discipline, (f) social issues at school, and (g) school administrators' attitudes and actions.

Challenging Home Situations

Factors outside of school which informants identified as contributing to dropping out were further coded as *challenging home situations*. Within this theme two sub themes were identified: (a) financial challenges, and (b) family and personal problems that did not allow them to concentrate at school. The second theme included, but was not

limited to, a death in the family, parents' divorce, family arguments and fights, and economic challenges.

Financial Challenges

The most salient response related to this theme was informants expressing having to find work to help their parents financially as a reason for dropping out. Nick and Carlos, both Hispanic males, identified this theme as the primary reason for dropping out.

In Nick's case, he shared his story in detail as stated below:

I decided to drop out because I needed to do something to help my mom.

It was not decided for me to drop out I just went ahead and did it for my own because there was nothing coming in, I just saw my brothers there, not eating, no lights, it was hot, they were almost dying.

Mehan (1997) argued against the discourse that frames dropping out as a an

individual choice. While in his narrative Nick states that dropping out of school was his choice one can dispute that the circumstances surrounding his life led him to drop out of school. Nick struggled with his sense of responsibility as an older son to help his mother by dropping out and finding a job and with the alternative of staying in school and graduating. Therefore, Nick's rationale echoes the discourse of blaming students for their lack of academic achievement. Nick adopts the practice of self blame by blaming himself for dropping out and did not blamed or pointed at a school system that failed him by not facilitating

opportunities for continuing his schooling while working to help his family.

Freire (2006) affirmed this when he explained how as long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically “accept” their exploitation.

Family and Personal Problems

Overwhelmingly, nine out of twelve informants attributed personal and family problems as primary and secondary factors affecting their decision to drop out of school. They believed these problems did not allow them to focus or concentrate on school work. This sub theme includes the most responses as a contributing factor to dropping out. Rose, Nick, Joe, and Darius identified it as primary factors. Alex, Sara, Victoria, Daniela, and Amanda identified it as secondary factors affecting their decision to drop out.

Nick’s narrative exemplifies this sub theme as he shared his story with details during the interview:

I guess [I dropped out] because I had a lot of problems at home too and at school I was so worried. I had problems concentrating, too much problems at the house, no electricity not enough money, not enough clothes or food. I decided I was the man of the house. I wanted to take responsibility too. I wanted to help.

Alex shared a similar story about the impact that personal and family problems had on his concentration and on his decision to leave school:

I really didn't have no problems with the teachers and the administrators, I didn't do anything bad. It was more the problems at home that were affecting me when I wasn't at school. I got along with all my teachers. It's like the problems I had this summer when I went to jail.

Sara's story echoes the previous two. She expressed how the problems from home followed her to school:

(There were) financial problems at home. I could not concentrate I would think about the home problems, problems with the house, they would go up to my head. That's why I started working, to help them out too.

Joe's voice also spoke loud and clear about the effect of personal and home problems and how they ultimately impacted his decision to leave school.

(I dropped out) to help my mom, because I saw her struggling with all the financial stuff, with my brother and all the bills and the cost. (Brother was apprehended for home robbery and taken into custody by Immigration. And my stepdad was deported, she had no help. And my brother's lawyer is charging \$10,000.

Darius and Amanda suffered from losing close family members and this added to their worries by distracting them and causing them to lose the concentration needed for academic success. When asked about what he considered to be the primary factor that contributed to his decision to drop out Darius offered this rationale:

Family problems (caused me to drop out). My uncle passed away and it took an effect on me and my school work. I couldn't work, I couldn't study.

The informants expressed the difficulties of challenging family and home environments that were part of their lives. The circumstances they described and their socioeconomic status placed all the informants in an academically *at-risk* category based on the criteria for receiving free or reduced lunch at school. According to Mehan (1997) the at-risk construct alleges that a student suffers from a socially induced deficiency and deflects attention away from injustices perpetuated and institutionalized by the powerful. The informants blamed the challenges and struggles surrounding their lives as the reasons for dropping out. This reflects how their own rationale for dropping out resulted in what Mehan (1997) describes as the mentality of deflecting attention away from injustices by the powerful and blames oppressed students, families, and communities for lacking the cultural and moral resources for advancement. Mehan (1997) also posed the question of how can social life be organized such that low income parents' socioeconomic conditions become translated into a student's choice to drop out? The informants in this study blamed their socioeconomic status for their academic failure of not graduating. None of them blamed the school or social system for a lack of services, support systems, or programs that could have helped them and their families so that they could successfully stay in school.

Personal Realities

The second theme that emerged from the data was a challenge to code and to label with a name and description. Under this theme I clustered the sub themes that were associated with the lack of students' resiliency, inconsistency in self advocacy, a sense of frustration, embarrassment, and emotional and physical health. I labeled the theme *personal realities* factors since the emerging codes revealed feelings and emotions that came from within and were associated with how the student reacted to their environment and their circumstances, both at school and at home. Four sub themes resulted from the coding of the data in this theme: (a) loss of hope and giving up, (b) frustration and embarrassment about being too old to be in high school, (c) emotional and physical health, and (d) juggling their roles as teenage parent and student.

Loss of Hope

Nick, Alex, Nelly, Sara, Joe, Ricardo, Clarissa, Darius, Amanda, Victoria, and Daniela expressed how they either lost hope, gave up, or just stopped trying. For some it was the academic challenges, for others it was personal and family problems, and for others it seemed like it was a feeling of depression or frustration. Nelly, Sara, Ricardo, and Daniela considered this sub theme the principal factor that contributed to dropping out. For Nick, Alex, Joe, Clarissa, Darius, Amanda, and Victoria it was a secondary factor. Their voices capture these feelings in the following examples:

Amanda started thinking about dropping out at the end of the school year, because she saw all her friends were going to graduate and she was not, this is what she shared:

It was too hard. Basically (I blame) myself because I wasn't doing the work. And it just came to the point when I said "I just can't do this anymore". I didn't want to do it, I just didn't want to try.

Sara also shared her feelings of hopelessness associated with academic challenges and the difficulty of her classes:

I felt I couldn't do it. It was too hard for me. I did not take my finals, because I was failing all my classes. I didn't have the will, the desire to keep going. I felt there was no hope, there was no point on me to keep going.

Nelly's answer was sort and to the point: "I stopped trying, I gave up".

When I asked Daniela to mention a list of factors that contributed to her decision to leave school and drop out her answer was: "Because I gave up on myself, not trying hard or harder".

Similarly, when I asked Joe what programs or support systems could have the school put in place to motivate, encourage, and support him to stay in school he answered that there was nothing the school could have done because he had already fallen way behind.

Frustration / Embarrassment of Being Too Old to Be in School

The second sub theme identified under *personal realities* was a feeling of frustration and embarrassment of being too old to be in school. Alex, Ricardo, and Amanda identified this as a primary factor for dropping out. Joe, Carlos, Clarissa, and Victoria attributed it as a secondary factor for leaving school before graduating.

The following quote captures Ricardo's feelings about his high school journey and about his decision to drop out:

It would have taken me too long to finish high school. I did not have many credits, in a way I lost hope. I had failed a year and it would have taken me two more years. I don't blame no one for me dropping out, it is a decision I made and I regret it.

Joe also expressed a similar perspective:

I felt I was too old. I was embarrassed to be 17 and still a freshman. I had four credits.

Shortly after her mother passed away in the spring Amanda withdrew from school, when I asked her what drove her to make that final decision she shared the following:

I dropped out because I was 18 and still in the tenth grade. I don't want to be 20 years old graduating from high school. I started thinking about dropping out because I saw all my friends were going to graduate and I wasn't.

Emotional and Physical Health

Another sub theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was the students' emotional well being. Rose, Nick, Sara, Clarissa, Darius, Amanda, Victoria, and Daniela mentioned feelings of depression, frustration, sadness, anger, and at times even despair prior to finally deciding to leave school.

In the words of Rose, the feelings of depression about her family life and her circumstances were clear as evidenced by this excerpt from her interview:

Probably after everything that happened in my house, the arguing and family things that really made me depressed. And on top of that I had a baby too, my baby daddy wasn't helping me out at that time, and it's really depressing, I think that's the reason why. That's the extra edge of why I dropped out.

Clarissa shared how she struggled with feelings of anger and she blames her anger for all the fights and the discipline problems she faced at school. She shared that when she was summoned to court the judge would send her to what she called "some places where they gave me medication".

In Amanda's case feelings of sadness and depression may have been a temporary condition while mourning the death of her mother, however, based on her own account these feelings also contributed to her final decision to withdraw from school:

My mom passed away, that was another reason why school was really hard, it was no excuse, that was my mom and I didn't want to go to school, I was really sad. I thought about dropping out everyday since my mom died.

Daniela is a student with multiple health problems. She is diabetic and has relied on insulin injections three times a day since she was fourteen. She also suffers from a heart condition, anxiety and depression. She expressed how her medical issues affected her academic achievement and the impact her absences had on her school work:

I thought high school was going to be easier but classes were harder than I thought. Especially when I was absent, because I was sick, when I got back to school I felt like no one could help me.

Darius made it very clear how his emotional state of mind had affected his decision and how he feels this impacted him at school:

I was telling myself that I can't do this no more. I was stressed out. Like sometimes I go to the counselors' office to tell her what I had been through, and I broke down, I broke down emotionally, I was telling her I don't want to drop out but I was going to.

Juggling Parental and Student Roles

Rose identified the challenge of juggling parental and student roles as the primary reason for dropping out and Alex identified it as a secondary reason. Even though these two informants had support from their parents and from others it was still difficult to meet all of their obligations and responsibilities. Rose explained her challenges in the following paragraph:

My son ...that's the reason I dropped out because I could not go to school everyday, he would get sick, I had to take him to the doctor. I missed too many days of school, that's the reason why I dropped out.

Alex was proud to share that he had always met the financial obligations of paying child support for his daughter. He did not live with the baby's mother and he made every effort to see his two year old child every day. He explained his situation as follows:

I have a baby. I get up everyday with my Daddy and I go out and try to find a job, then I go see my daughter. When I was in school it was difficult. I would leave school at 2:30 and then I went to work. Juggling all the responsibilities of being a father and of school was difficult for me.

Alex is very proud of his father and of the relationship he has with him. He speaks highly of his father all the time and it seems like he wants to emulate him in this sense.

As evidenced by the quotes listed above from the narrative of the informants during the interview, several of the students expressed how they lost hope, gave up, or stopped trying. Mehan (1997) argued that “students’ unwillingness to participate comes from their assessment of the costs and benefits of playing the game. It is not that schooling will not propel them up the ladder of success; it is that the chances are too slim to warrant their attempt” (Mehan, 1997, p. 14). In a way, giving up can be interpreted as what Mehan (1997) describes as a form of resistance to an institution that cannot deliver on its promise of upward mobility for all students. The result then is the sense of hopelessness that several of the informants expressed.

School Related Factors That Reflected a Lack of Support Systems

In questions number one and two of the interview the informants responded with what they considered to be primary and secondary reasons for dropping out of school. The *school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems* theme sub themes generated seven sub themes. The seven sub themes that emerged are: (a) academic difficulties, (b) teachers, (c) grade retention, (d) attendance issues, (e) law enforcement

and discipline, (f) social issues at school, (g) school administrators' attitudes and actions.

Following is a discussion and findings in more detail:

Academic Difficulties

Nick, Alex, Sara, Ricardo, Clarissa, Amanda, and Daniela identified academic difficulty as a primary or secondary reason for dropping out of school. Alex, Amanda, Veronica, and Sara mentioned their personal struggles with Algebra and Veronica mentioned how she took Integrated Physics and Chemistry four times: Alex, for example, expressed the following:

If I would have stayed in school I probably would be failing algebra II right now, cause I'm not good in math. I'm not a fast pick up, I would re-take the test and still fail. You have the smart kids and you have the kids that's iffy, I'm a kind of person that's iffy.

Ricardo also struggled academically and shared his feelings about how difficult he found the classes:

Sometimes they weren't teaching me that good, I was getting confused. The hardest class was algebra, I was failing.

When I asked the question about systems or people having a greater impact on her reason for leaving school Amanda shared the following:

It was more the school work. I didn't get it. It was like the teachers and the school work. It was a combination of both. It was too hard. And it just came to the point when I said; I just can't do this anymore. I just didn't want to try.

The academic difficulties also emerged as answers to other questions like question number eight, which addressed what programs or support systems could have the school hold in place to motivate, encourage, or support them to stay in school. Alex, Sara, Ricardo, Darius, and Amanda included in their answer the need for more tutorials, different tutorials, and specialized tutorials. Nelly, Clarissa, and Amanda suggested smaller classes and more opportunities for one-on-one with teachers.

Most of the informants acknowledged that at least in part their decision to drop out was due to academic difficulties. Many internalized their academic challenges or difficulties from a deficit thinking perspective. Freire (2006) described this as self-depreciation and labeled it as another characteristic of the oppressed which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. Freire (2006) stated how they call themselves ignorant and say the professor is the one who has the knowledge without realizing that they too are proprietors of knowledge. Mehan (1997) stated that students who are in trouble at school, in this case academic trouble, do not see a connection between studying, the world of work, or the rest of their lives. He added how as a result of this perceived disconnection, students develop an ideology that rationalizes their own lack of academic success. Several of the informants blamed their decision to drop out on what they perceived and described as not being smart enough, falling behind, not trying hard enough, and not understanding the academic content.

Teachers

Nelly identified teachers as the primary reason for dropping out and Sara, Ricardo, Clarissa, Amanda, and Daniela mentioned teachers among secondary reasons for dropping out.

When I asked Nelly what she considered to be secondary factors that contributed to her decision to drop out she expressed the following:

It was teachers who were sarcastic and annoying. When I came to school Mrs. M told me that I had a star by my name because I had come from ALC, she would always make remarks about it.

Sara did not feel she was getting the support and help she needed from her teachers. She also identified teachers as a contributing factor to dropping out of school when she made the following statement:

It seemed like the teachers didn't care, if I would ask questions they would get like mad. I had a teacher that when I would ask how do you do this? or how do you do that? he would get mad.

Amanda shared similar feelings of frustration about her perception of teachers and the role they played in her decision to drop out:

Some of the teachers, they really didn't give me time, they didn't give me a chance, they wouldn't be patient with me. I'd raise my hand and sometimes they'll look at me and kind of made me feel bad cause it made me feel like I was stupid.

When I asked Amanda if she could change one, or several, things about school that would have helped her stay in school and graduate successfully she voiced her feelings as follows:

Better teachers, who had a lot of patience, who would understand your situation. They have to understand there are students who won't get it right away, give them time as well, that would have helped me.

While some students identified teachers as contributors to their decision to drop out, other students also expressed the positive effect that teachers had in their lives. Some students spoke highly of their teachers and how some teachers had played an almost parental role in their lives. And when asked who motivated them, encouraged them, and helped them stay in school before they dropped out of school Rose, Alex, Nelly, Ricardo, Clarissa, Amanda, and Victoria credited their teachers.

Mehan (1997) expressed how teachers contribute to students' decision to drop out by routinely silencing the students' voices through curriculum and pedagogy that does not acknowledge their personal experiences or the issues that are relevant to them. Additionally, he blames the school's organization for the student's decision to drop out like placing students in boring classes with dull materials and unmotivated teachers. Several of the informants blamed themselves for not trying harder while others acknowledge how their teachers did not give them the one-on-one attention they needed nor validated their questions or their need for help.

Grade Retention

Alex, Sara, Joe, Ricardo, Clarissa, Darius, Amanda, Victoria, had spent two or more years in the same grade. This sub theme emerged naturally from the raw data even though the question was not asked directly. Therefore, since it was not directly asked to any of the informants this does not necessarily mean those who mentioned in the interview were the only ones who had experienced grade level retention. Consequently, the informants who mentioned grade retention felt strongly enough about it to consider it a contributing factor to dropping out of school.

Sara shared how the number of credits accumulated affected her classification and how she felt about it:

I failed tenth grade twice, I found out I did not have many credits.

I needed like three more years for me to keep going, to graduate. I think I had like ten credits.

Victoria also shared her frustration at not being able to move on and felt she was stuck in the same grade when she expressed the following statement:

I was a sophomore and I had been in school for four years. I was a freshman for two years, and two years as a sophomore. I had eleven credits.

Similarly, Darius had experienced the effects of retention. He felt hopeless about his academic situation. He expressed that he had been in high school for two and a half years but was still classified a ninth grader.

While some informants had first experienced retention in high school, where they found themselves struggling to move to the next grade, others like Amanda and Alex had felt the impact of retention since elementary school. Amanda expressed it as follows:

My mom she held me back in second grade. I was supposed to being graduated but I slacked off. Come to find out, I'm 18 and in the tenth grade.

Retention in elementary school also impacted Alex in a negative way. When I started talking to him during the interview and asked him what were the primary factors that contributed to dropping out of school he started his first sentence by expressing that he had failed first grade and that was one of the reasons why he was still a junior at 18. Grade retention is another example of what Mehan (1997) describes as organizational arrangements and the practical circumstances they generate. Policies and practices like grade retention can often have a negative impact on students in the long term and often result in negative consequences like in this case when students are retained one or more years. In the case of some of the informants, it was later in their lives when staying behind their peers had a negative impact on them and their decision to leave school.

Attendance Issues

In the case of attendance, Rose, Amanda, Joe, Clarissa, Sara, Victoria, and Daniela felt that it contributed either as primary or secondary factors to dropping out of school. Rose and Sara considered this issue serious enough to be part of the primary reason why they left school.

When I asked Rose if it was systems or people who had the strongest impact on her decision to drop out she replied with the following statement:

Probably the system.... When you miss so many days then you have to do all these extra things to make up the extra hours that you already missed. You have to make up extra credit. It was the extra work I had to do.

Even though Joe attributed dropping out to the need to help his mother he also shared how attendance had played a role in his decision as he expressed in the following statement:

Also (I dropped out) because of my attendance. I used to get tardies. A ticket came through the mail, it was a court order. When I told my mom they had given me a ticket for tardies and my mom didn't have money to pay the ticket then I just dropped out.

In Victoria's case, she also received a court letter due to absences. She attributes her decision to drop out partially to attendance issues:

I had a lot of absences too. I even had to go to court. That contributed to my decision.

In the case of attendance issues, Mehan (1997) describes how the way in which a particular school chooses to implement district policy can result in one of the forces that impinge upon the school and thereby influence the production of dropouts. For at least one of the informants, leaving school was a way out of having to deal with a court citation and the possible consequences that may have

been associated like a citation that would eventually burden the family financial situation even more.

Law Enforcement and Discipline

This sub theme emerged as a result of Alex, Nelly, Joe, Clarissa, Darius, and Victoria identifying discipline issues and law enforcement citations as either primary or secondary factors attributed to dropping out. Nelly and Joe identified discipline or citations as primary factors and Alex, Clarissa, Darius, and Victoria identified them as secondary.

I asked Nelly what had the strongest impact on her decision to drop out; people (teachers, administrators, peers) or systems (rules, policies, laws). She explained her answer as follows:

I was skipping and getting in trouble, I was called to the office and I was afraid that if I got in trouble at school they would inform my probation officer and then he would report me and I would have to go to TYC (Texas Youth Commission).

Clarissa disclosed during the interview that she had anger problems that caused her to get in fights with other students. She even got in fights while at the Alternative Learning Center and at the Juvenile Justice Alternative Placement. The following statement captures the essence of her feelings:

I got a lot of tickets, I cannot even count, I got like 15 tickets. The last time I got a ticket the judge just got bitter of seeing me, he kept

sending me to places where they made me take medicine and I just couldn't do it anymore.

Additionally, she also shared the implications of the school disciplinary consequences on her academic performance:

I wasn't doing well in my classes cause I was never at school, all my grades were really low. I was never at school because I was suspended. I wasn't doing well so I didn't see the point of going to school.

Alex had disciplinary issues only related to dress code violations, this is how he felt about the school discipline and its implications for him:

I got suspended for sagging pants. I got suspended for three days, and then I had in-school suspension, and I missed that so I got suspended again, I ended up missing a whole week of school. That's when I said I need to get out of here. I don't need to be at school.

Darius case is similarly poignant. He shared a story in which, according to him, he was falsely accused of making a threatening remark to a teacher:

I was not a bad kid, I had nothing in my record and then I got in trouble with the principal about that threat. ...the whole situation was like not my fault. I really didn't say that but I have to go along with what they say. I felt like my whole life was messed up if I go to ALC (the Alternative Learning Center), it was the only way of not having it on my records I didn't want to go because I didn't want anybody in my family to

ask my mom where is he going to school and for her to have to say, he is going to ALC.

Attendance issues, discipline, and law enforcement fall into what Mehan (1997) described as forces that impinge upon the school and thereby influence the production of drop outs. He additionally argued that these practical circumstances “make their appearance day in and day out and seem to be an inevitable part of the everyday routine of education in a bureaucratic institution, and they do not seem to be res result of malevolence, conspiracy, or bad faith (Mehan 1997, page 11).

Social Issues at School

Social issues at school are in part created by the school climate. For some informants the challenges that came with these issues also contributed to their decision of dropping out. In the case of Clarissa she understood how fighting with other students had an impact on her decision to leave school.

Darius made it clear in this statement how the social problems he encountered in terms of a relationship with another student affected his decision:

I felt like nobody loved me. I wanted love from a girl. I had a girlfriend at school and me and her was going on and off and I was trying to please her and she really didn't appreciate the stuff that was going on and the things I was trying to do for her. I had to move on and that is why I left school.

Male students, however, were not the only ones who shared social challenges.

Victoria also expressed facing similar challenges:

There was too much drama with friends at school, boyfriend issues. We broke up and his sister and friends started saying things about me. I wanted to get away from all the drama.

The impact of social issues at school is best described by Valenzuela (1999) as she stated the power of positive social relations. She expressed how “positive social relations at school are highly productive because they allow for the accumulation of social capital that can then be converted into socially valued resources or opportunities (e.g., good grades, a high school diploma, access to privileged information, etc.) (Valenzuela 1999, p. 28). She also argued that productive relations in school make schooling worthwhile and manageable for students. In the case of some of the informants in this study, they perceived that social issues at school had an impact on their decision to drop out.

School Administrators’ Attitudes and Actions

School leadership and counselors also played a role in the informants’ decision to drop out of school. Ricardo and Nelly attributed school administrators and counselors’ attitudes and actions as secondary factors that impacted their decision to drop out of school. Both students shared the negative impact these attitudes had on their decision to leave school.

Ricardo expressed a sentiment of frustration over the lack of help he received from his counselor at school when he was trying to register in more credit recovery

classes, also known by Plato at Horizon High School. His narrative reflects his perceptions:

I was talking to the counselor, she told me she was going to call me in, she got me in Plato for one class, but after that I would request to see her, she would never bring me in. I think I would have been able to do more credits in Plato but she didn't give them to me, she was like making an excuse.

Nelly shared during the interview that when she was found skipping the class she did not like because the teacher was sarcastic and judgmental her assistant principal did not give her a second chance. Her perception was that he has trying to get rid of her. Based on the way she was treated by her assistant principal she felt she was not welcome at the school.

Summary

Interviewing twelve students using an interview instrument composed of ten open ended questions allowed me to gather rich data about their perceptions of the various factors that played a role in their decision to abandon school prior to graduating. To make sense of the data and find the emerging themes I followed Glaser and Strauss (1967) constant comparative method for data analysis.

Before presenting the results from the interviews I provided the reader with a brief portrait of each participant in an attempt to assist the reader to better understand each participant's story. Creswell (2007) argues that rich, thick description allows readers to make decisions regarding transferability because the writer describes in detail

the informants or setting under study. He further explains that these details enable readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred based on shared characteristics (2007).

Each informant had a compelling story to tell about the challenges they faced at home and in their lives. All the participants struggled with academic issues. Some were challenged by circumstances like the death of a parent or a close family member, others had serious health issues and depression. One participant even talked about issues of deportation and incarceration of immediate family members. The participants had no control over these situations. While these situations impacted their lives and had a negative effect on their school experience the circumstances were totally out of their locus of control. Their struggles, the uncertainty about their immediate future, and the daily challenges they experienced were part of their lives and the reasons they considered staying in school was not an option for them. In spite of these challenges the students did not blame the school for their decision to drop out. They took ownership of their decision to leave school.

The three main themes that emerged from the data analysis were: (1) challenging home situations, (2) personal realities, and (3) school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems. From each theme additional sub themes also emerged as listed below.

Based on the informants' responses, the theme labeled *challenging home situations* was associated with contributing factors emerging from the home life, home environment, or circumstances related to home and family life. *Challenging home*

situations was divided into two sub themes: (a) financial challenges and (b) personal and family problems that did not allow them to concentrate at school (death, divorce, and family fights among others). For most of the participants, *challenging home situations* was the primary and secondary reasons for leaving school.

Another theme identified from the analysis of the data was labeled *personal realities*. Under this theme, the students identified factors that were neither school nor home related. They attributed these factors to themselves as students. Four sub themes were identified from this theme: (a) loss of hope which lead to giving up and stop trying, (b) frustration or embarrassment for being too old to be in school, and (c) emotional and physical health, and (d) juggling teenage parental and student roles.

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was *labeled school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems*. This theme included school related factors associated with their decision to drop out of school and how these factors impacted them as students. This theme was further divided into seven sub themes labeled as: (a) academic difficulties, (b) teachers, (c) grade retention, (d) attendance issues, (e) law enforcement and discipline, (f) social issues at school, and (g) school administrators' attitudes and actions.

In the fifth and last chapter I will discuss the findings and their meanings as they relate to Mehan's (1997) Contextual Factors theoretical framework. I will also explore their correlation to prior research and the literature reviewed in chapter II. Conclusions and implications will also be presented as I discuss the findings in chapter V.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to examine, through the use of a case study approach, the perceptions of African American and Hispanic students concerning their decision to drop out of school. In the context of Horizon High School, a large and diverse suburban high school in Southeast Texas, the two specific areas of study were: (1) experiences that led students of color to the decision of dropping out, and (2) the perceptions of students of color who have dropped out of this high school about systems, people, programs, and practices that in their view impacted or contributed to their decision to drop out.

Mehan's (1997) construct about contextual factors surrounding dropouts provided the theoretical framework for the study. His construct proposed that: (1) students drop out of school in social, not personal terms, (2) part of the discourse surrounding dropouts is framed as a character flaw, and (3) that the *at-risk* construct alleges that a student suffers from a socially induced deficiency because this construct focuses on social, economic, and cultural conditions as it continues to treat these conditions as characteristics of students. In his construct, Mehan (1997) suggested that by contextualizing the dropout phenomenon in a way that relocates the causes, meanings, and problematic we can shift attention away from the presumed deficiencies of individual students and show that students' reasoning are not faulty but instead reflects a thoughtful analysis of existing institutional and socioeconomic circumstances.

In line with Mehan's construct, I also presented and examined the concepts of deficit thinking and Valenzuela's (1999) subtractive schooling. Deficit thinking as defined by Milner (2006) is teachers' perceptions that students of color do not already possess the necessary skills, knowledge, and attitudes to succeed and learn. Deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child's education. Valenzuela's (1999) subtractive schooling construct suggests that at some campuses schooling is a subtractive process that divests U.S. – Mexican youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure. She argues that schools are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture students' cultural and ethnic identities; creating social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the students and between the students and the staff (1999).

The review of the literature resulted in an examination of various issues related to dropping out of school. The literature reviewed was divided and organized into: (1) Economic, social, and emotional implications of dropping out of school, (2) Implications for African American and Hispanic students, (3) Factors and predictors of dropping out, (4) Mehan's Framework, (5) Valenzuela's construct of subtracting schooling, and finally, (6) Best practices recommended in the literature reviewed.

The context for this study, Horizon High School, is a suburban high school of 3,000 students in a large southeast Texas school district. The school has experienced an increase in diversity in its student population since it opened in 2002. The ethnic

distribution of the student population in 2002 was 16% African American, 39% Hispanic, 35% White, 10% Asian, and 0.1% Native American (Texas Education Agency, 2008-09b). The current student population is composed of 47% Hispanic, 23% White, 18% African American, 12% Asian, and 0.4% Native American. Additionally, the composition of the school is 8% limited English proficient, 51% at-risk, and 47% of students are eligible for free/reduced lunch (Texas Education Agency, 2008-09b).

The informants in this study included seven Hispanic students, five African American, seven females, and five male students who had dropped out from a Horizon High School. Four informants were Hispanic females, three were Hispanic males, three were African American females, and two were African American males. All twelve informants met the criteria for free and reduced lunch.

Data that generated rich and thick descriptions, in the tradition of case study research, resulted from interviewing a total of twelve informants face to face. The interview protocol included ten open ended, semi structured questions related to the informants schooling and their own experience of dropping out of school. The first seven questions in the interview protocol were related to the informants' schooling experience and the last four questions were directly related to the informant's perception of how the school can be improved. Additionally, I used field notes from observations during the interviews as data. Some of the informants were interviewed in their homes, some were interviewed at mutually agreed fast food restaurants, and some were interviewed in my office at Horizon Middle School. Other data I gathered and analyzed included my past observations of some informants in the school setting prior to dropping

out. As a school administrator at the last school the informants' attended I had the opportunity to meet them and observe them prior to their decision to drop out. A review of school records that included report cards, attendance, and discipline records also generated data in the form of field notes.

The main themes and sub themes that emerged from the interviews resulted from an interpretational thematic analysis process for encoding data based on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative approach to analysis. The constant comparative method is designed to generate categories or properties about general problems. Three main themes emerged from the data analysis. From each theme additional sub themes also surfaced. The first theme that emerged was *challenging home situations*. Based on the informants' responses, this theme was associated with contributing factors emerging from the home life, home environment, or circumstances related to home and family life. *Challenging home situations* was divided into two sub themes: (a) financial challenges and (b) family and personal problems that did not allow them to concentrate at school (death, divorce, and family fights among others).

The second theme identified from the analysis of the data was labeled *personal realities*. Under this theme, the students identified factors that were neither school nor home related. They attributed these factors to themselves as students. Four sub themes were identified from this theme: (a) loss of hope which lead to giving up and stop trying, (b) frustration or embarrassment for being too old to be in school, and (c) emotional and physical health, and (d) juggling teenage parental and student roles,

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was *labeled school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems*. This theme included school related factors associated with their decision to drop out of school and how these factors impacted them as students. This theme was further divided into seven sub themes labeled as: (a) academic difficulties, (b) teachers, (c) grade retention, (d) attendance issues, (e) law enforcement and discipline, (f) social issues at school, and (g) school administrators' attitudes and actions that impacted their decision to drop out.

The findings of this study echoes the students' voices and what they perceive to be factors impacting their decision to drop out. The findings revealed that among the twelve informants, the overwhelming majority of answers to what students considered primary and secondary reasons for dropping out of school were linked to *challenging home situations*. Among the contributing factors in this category were fights at home, divorce of parents, family financial challenges, and a death in the family. These findings support the findings in the literature and in previous research about factors that students identified as significant causes for dropping out. Some of the factors identified were adult and family responsibilities of students, the weight of real world events, home family issues, parents' unemployment, and a difficult home environment and other responsibilities (Schargel, Thacker, and Bell, 2007; Bridgeland, Dilulio and Burke Morrison, 2006; Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy, 2009; and Rumberger, 1987).

In light of Mehan's (1997) construct, *the challenging home situations* theme is then viewed not as an unfortunate state of affairs in impoverished communities like the

ones the informants in this study came from nor as a condition over which schools have little influence. Mehan (1997) suggested that *family problems* may exist precisely because the high school experience has been discouraging, unengaging, and uninviting and because schools have been structured in such a way that they do not accommodate students experiencing family problems (Fine 1991). The school did not seem to have systems of support in place to compensate for the challenging home situations of the informants. Since *challenging home situations* was a repetitive theme in the answers of the majority of the informants, one could argue that having social and academic systems of support would have made a difference in their decision to drop out or remain in school while having a positive impact on their *personal realities*.

The second theme identified from the analysis of the data was labeled *personal realities*. In this category the students attributed factors such as giving up, lost of hope, frustration, and embarrassment due to being too old to be in school, emotional and physical health, and juggling teenage parental student roles as the causes for dropping out. While most of these factors are not necessarily the student's fault, they still perceived them as factors or causes attributed to them as individuals. This was evidenced in Alex and Amanda's statements about not being good in mathematics or simply not being smart. Some students blamed themselves for what they considered their failure in school. Unfortunately they did not see it as a flaw of the system or of the adults but as their own fault. While there may be school or home related factors that caused them to lose hope and give up, the students' perceived that it was them who had given up and stopped trying. Most, informants did not make a conscious connection between their

sense of hopelessness and how circumstances beyond their control contributed to their frustration and despair. This thinking on their part then resulted in the unfortunate outcome of self-blame for dropping out of school. This finding is also consistent with the literature and with research conducted by Schargel, Thacker, and Bell (2007), in which they identified personal or psychological characteristics, low self esteem, depression, and other emotional problems. Bridgeland, Dilulio and Burke Morrison (2006) also identified among informants feeling unmotivated as a cause for dropping out.

The informants' sense of hopelessness is explained by Mehan (1997) as the ideology that many students of color have developed and a course of action that directly changes conventional wisdom about the relationship between academic performance and success. The combination of what they view as academic failure and the lack of resources or lack of opportunity and knowledge of how to tap into existing resources result in a sense of hopelessness. When students believe they are not smart enough, that they cannot catch up academically and that the obstacles for graduating high school are insurmountable they give up and drop out, like in the case of the informants in this study.

By expressing a sense of hopelessness the informants also shared their feeling of giving up. They viewed their situation as a permanent condition. Freire (2006) stated that "in order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform (Freire 2006, p. 49).

The third theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was *labeled school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems*. In this category the students blamed disciplinary consequences at school that drove them to the decision of dropping out. These causes included a recommended placement at the alternative learning school, suspension from school, or having to make up time for excessive absences. It also included enforcement of the law such as court letters related to attendance and citations for engaging in school fights or truancy. Again, the findings in this study are aligned with the findings in previous research and in the literature. For example, Schargel, Thacker, and Bell (2007) identified previous school experience as a factor that contributed to dropping out and included elements like attendance, previous retention in at least one grade level, low grades, disciplinary problems or perceived disruptive behavior. Similarly, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison's (2006) study revealed school factors as contributors to dropping out like academic challenges. Viscain (2005) also found that retention history, program of studies, and GPA to be statistically significant in the decision to drop out among students of color. Roderick (1995) posited how retention in one grade level increased the risk of dropping out by 40 to 50% and being behind two grades increased the risk by 90%.

The findings in this study are consistent with Mehan's (1997) construct. Among the factors that Mehan (1997) attributed to the higher number of drop out among students of color are disciplinary rules and regulations that silence critique and legitimate inequality. He also suggested that the dropout crisis is a consequence of bureaucratic practices. He specifically explains how practices like holding students back

a grade for lack of attendance due to extenuating circumstances only perpetuate such bureaucratic practices. In his construct, Mehan (1997) agrees with Fine (1991) in stating that students do not drop out of school but instead are forced out of school. Valenzuela (1999) supported this notion by stating that academic success and failure are presented more as products of schooling rather than as something that young people do.

Other findings in this study echoed in the literature reviewed are how dropping out of school is a long term process of disengagement that occurs over time (Barton, 2005; Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison, 2006), how coming from a single-parent home seems like a significant factor, and how having a sibling who has dropped out of school also seems to be common factor among students of color who drop out of school. Among the twelve informants in this study, all but two shared how they had been thinking about dropping out for at least eight months to a year prior to making the final decision. Additionally, most of the informants in this study came from single parent homes and had at least one sibling who dropped out before them.

In the context of this study the findings are congruent with Mehan's (1997) framework. According to the informants' perception the causes that had a strongest impact on their decision to drop out were their challenging home situations. Mehan (1997) argues that dropping out is an institutional production that reproduces the structures of inequality in the educational, economic, and civic domains of every day life. Based on the findings and on the existing literature and research, I argue that while the school as an institution is not responsible or accountable for the family factors that contribute to students' decision to drop out, it can compensate by providing systems of

support for students to assist them in overcoming the factors outside of the school walls that contributed to their decision to leave. Therefore, in the context of the study, the findings reveal that while the school related factors that reflected a lack of support systems were not perceived by the informants' as the primary reason for leaving school, the lack of support also prevented them from staying in school and successfully graduating. This is evidenced in statement like the one made by Alex in which he wished he would have had a mentor at school or a teacher who would have taken a parental role to help him and guide him. Similarly, Nick expressed he would benefited from having someone talk to him prior to dropping out and advising him against his decision with hard facts about the challenges of living without a high school diploma. Additionally, the informants shared how more tutorials, flexible school schedules, and one-on-one help would have helped them and would have made a difference in their decision to leave school.

The data generated from the informants' voices and perceptions in the context of this study in combination with the literature and research reviewed reveal that some of the systems of support necessary for schools to compensate for the challenges at home and in their personal life and for their personal realities need to include: (1) culturally responsive and caring leadership, (2) mentoring programs, (3) well trained caring teachers (4) a meaningful and relevant curriculum aligned with adequate assessment and with (5) best pedagogical practices.

The Role of Leadership

The role of school leaders cannot be ignored or undermined in the quest for academic equality and success for all students. The necessary skills required to lead the schools of the 21st century have changed as the population has diversified and the needs of our schools and students have shifted. López (2003) states that,

In today's schools educational leaders must interact with a diverse array of constituents, many of whom are from different cultural backgrounds and speak languages other than English. School leaders must be prepared to work with individuals who are culturally different and help create learning environments that foster respect, tolerance, and intercultural understanding. (p.71-72)

Mehan (1997) shared Fines (1991) arguments as he stated that exclusion operates powerfully and institutionally inside schools and that although educational laws, policies, and practices have been transformed, the exiling of those least privileged still persist. He adds that while teachers and administrators act without malevolence they need to only operate as dictated by the state, by history, by tradition, and by the demands for efficiency to fall into the patterns that perpetuate such exclusion. As evidenced by the findings, the personal and family circumstances surrounding the informants' lives in this study were at best challenging. While school leaders cannot change the socioeconomic conditions of students they can advocate for them by ensuring equitable and just allocation of resources, provide caring and well prepared teachers, systems of support in the form of advocates and mentors, plenty and appropriate guidance counseling,

enrichment programs, opportunities for advancement, credit recovery programs, and rigorous, relevant, and meaningful curriculum and instruction. The review of the literature revealed that when students have access to these opportunities and resources they are better prepared and equipped to overcome the adversities and challenges imposed by their socioeconomic and home circumstances. In this sense Mehan's (1997) construct holds schools responsible for the social reproduction and the inequalities produced by schools. If students are already at a disadvantage because of environmental forces outside of the school and outside of their own locus of control, then the school involuntarily contributes to the reproduction by not providing opportunities for social and economic mobility nor the tools and skills for students to overcome challenges and adversity. These decisions, in the end, are made by policymakers and school leadership.

The most complex and comprehensive aspect of culturally responsive leadership is having a focus on the development and facilitation of a personal vision, a school vision, and the nurturing of a school culture that promotes the success of all learners, including those who are disadvantaged. An educational leader's style and decision making are shaped by personal beliefs, values, experiences, knowledge, and skills. Students of color cannot afford leadership behaviors that may promote social reproduction by overlooking the cultural and social capital they bring with them. For example, Valenzuela (1999) posits that students' social capital can be converted into socially valued resources and opportunities that can translate into good grades, a high school diploma, and access to privileged information among others.

Leaders in diverse schools must possess the skills to develop and implement school initiatives that promote culturally responsive pedagogy. Students of color and the schools they attend need leaders with a vision who can first acknowledge and then understand the needs of students of color. By acknowledging and understanding their needs school leaders can then demand and promote the use of inclusive practices and ensure the rights of all stakeholders, especially those whose voices are silenced by oppression, poverty, inequity, injustice, racism, and prejudice. Williams (2005) describes low income minority families as the “truly disadvantaged”. He states that these families are so far removed from the possibility of upward mobility that some term them the underclass. They are largely African American and Latino. Their communities share the characteristics of developing nations: low economic development, high infant mortality rates, short life spans, and low levels of educational attainment (Williams, 2005). In schools with students of color and with a high percentage of low income families, success for all students will only result from this knowledge and understanding from school leaders. Achieving awareness and understanding of the unique needs of students and their families is critical for leaders in these schools.

The leadership needed in schools and districts with diverse populations must be of individuals that are also managers who oversee the efficiency of systems and resources in pursuit of the academic success of all learners. These leaders must be relentless in their quest to eliminate the existing achievement gap. They accomplish this by continuously advocating for their students and challenging policies, budgets, and mandates that are not in the best interest of students of color. Mehan (1997) stated how

educational services are made available differently to students, therefore differential educational opportunity is institutionally mediated and often an unintended consequence of bureaucratic organization rather than a direct result of either personal choice or structural forces.

Creating and sustaining a school vision inclusive of the specific needs of all students is at the heart of progressive school leadership. A culturally responsive leader promotes team work and positive team dynamics with the goal of ensuring the success of all students. Hoyle (2002) asserts the importance of teams believing in their core values and working together with a passion for excellence. School leaders and the teams they create must look at issues of personal and organizational vision through a lens that allows them to examine the shared values, their passion for student excellence, and the team's goals and objectives as they relate to eliminating the achievement gap and ensuring success, graduation, and college and career readiness for all learners. These goals go beyond meeting state and federal accountability requirements because they are student-centered rather than goal oriented to meet federal and state mandated standards and objectives.

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLL) standard number five describes a school administrator as an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner (Owens and Valesky, 2007). Educational administrators have a moral responsibility to be proactive about creating an ethical environment for the conduct of education (Starratt, 1991). As a culturally responsive leader, having a grounded and clear vision of an ethical practice

and professional integrity is fundamental in an increasingly diverse society. Students of color need ethical leadership in their schools who will stand for what is right and for what is best for them without compromising the equal advancement of all learners. This kind of leadership requires administrators to make courageous calls by defying policies, rules, and systems that affect the academic achievement of students of color.

In the case of the informants in this study, the informants also struggled with poverty. All of the informants qualified for free or reduced lunch. Because many students of color also come from low socioeconomic home environments, culturally responsive leaders need to understand critical theory and the concept of social justice. Critical theory is described by Owens and Valesky (2007) as a form of social criticism that holds that institutionalized oppression of groups of people in society – cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender groups - is often supported by the oppressed peoples themselves; who believe the system to actually be in their own best interests. This concept was supported in this study by the belief of some of the informants that they were responsible for dropping out. They blamed themselves for losing hope, giving up, and not trying hard enough. Critical theorists contend that this is achieved by the manipulation of meaning by those in power so as to legitimate the values and beliefs of the power elite. This notion is also supported by Mehan (1997) as he argues that dropping out of school is often framed as a character flaw or an individual choice. Therefore, through daily personal reflection, examining and challenging their own practice and the current systems, school leaders must seek to lead in what Freire (2006) describes as a revolutionary leadership in which co-intentional education takes place and

in which the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation becomes a committed involvement and not merely a pseudo-participation.

School leaders in diverse schools must examine their own decision making against practices that may perpetuate deficit thinking, which according to García and Guerra (2004) are educators' beliefs that the student and the families are at fault because they enter school without the necessary prerequisite knowledge and skills. They must also advocate for social and individual justice by using the tools and systems in place to insure fairness and equity. School leaders must practice influential leadership that not only complies with policy, laws, and regulations but that also influences policy making and challenges the status quo.

The informants in this study shared their challenging daily struggles and financial limitations. Levy and Copple (1989) describe the new or modern morbidity as the challenges posed by increased incidents of parental unemployment or underemployment, substance abuse (by youth and adults), limited or poor health care, child abuse and domestic violence, sexual promiscuity, academic failure, and dropping out of school. In schools with high percentages of low income students it becomes indispensable for school leaders to ensure success for all learners. Educational leaders can address this modern morbidity by examining students' needs beyond the academic issues. Educational leaders can no longer escape the consideration of such issues as they are brought to the forefront by the recognition of the failure of schools and school systems to ameliorate injustice in the distribution of resources and to recognize and celebrate difference as a means to social and cultural progress (Bates, 2006). Being a strong and

ethical leader is then a requirement of the twenty-first century kind of leadership necessary to bring about significant changes and educational reform.

Mentoring

As a researcher, I found most of the informants' responses and rationale to be profound and mature. Considering their young age, their thinking and their tones were reflexive and intense as evidenced by their answers and their narratives. For example, this can be seen in their answers to questions about interventions that they considered would have been successful in their case. Six informants, when asked what support systems they believe would have helped them stay in school, identified mentoring as an intervention that would have helped them have a successful and more positive schooling experience.

The literature supports this study's informants' responses about mentoring. The Texas Education Agency's (2008) report of best practices in dropout prevention lists mentoring as one of the seven most significant interventions. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison (2006) also list among their five systems of support to improve students' chances of staying in school ensuring that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school. Likewise, findings from Dynarski et al. (2008) revealed the significance of assigning adult advocates to students at risk of dropping out and identified it as a targeted intervention.

Teachers

The findings from this study revealed the challenging home situations and personal realities of the informants. According to Mehan (1999), the course of action

that educators take in response to practical circumstances often have significant consequences for students. He also stated that for the most part, educators seem to be genuinely concerned for the welfare of students in their charge. In this study, among the informants' responses, the subject of teachers emerged in almost every category. For example, several informants identified sarcastic and annoying teachers as contributors to their decisions to drop out in questions number one and two. Other informants identified teachers as people who motivated them to not to drop out of school earlier. Several informants voiced how some teachers were caring and played almost parental roles in their lives. The informants' perceptions in this study of the roles of teachers in the academic success and the decision to stay or drop out of school is also consistent with the existing literature and research.

Some students shared how a single comment from a teacher had an everlasting impact on their schooling experience and how it affected their academic success. While some research findings do not specifically list teachers as a cause of dropping out they do list contributing factors that could be viewed as caused by teachers. For example, one could argue how students' grades, previous retention in at least one grade level, disciplinary problems or perceived disruptive behaviors, as listed by Schargel, Thacker, and Bell (2007), could be considered indirectly related to teachers. Carter (2005) posits how often we do not realize how a slight interaction with a teacher can undermine the student's academic commitment. Teachers set the tone and the standards in their classrooms. When educators allow pedagogy to be radically changed by the recognition of a multicultural world, they can give students the education they desire and deserve.

They can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberating education (hooks, 1994).

Teachers also play key roles in the success of students of color. Carter's (2005) findings show that teachers expect more from White students than from students of color and more from middle-class students than from working and lower class students. If students of color are to be motivated to achieve, it will be because of the belief that any child can excel with the proper support. In my study, for example, Amanda expressed her frustration about comments made by teachers that reflected deficit thinking when it came to her and her friend's academic lack of academic achievement.

Some of the informants expressed how they found the classes boring and yet difficult instead of challenging and inspiring. Several students expressed a desire for hands-on activities, games, and fun learning rather than the traditional lecture type of teaching. In terms of the teacher-student relationship there is a need for more classrooms that represent a safe place for cultural interactions and self-expression. Classrooms that empower students and challenge them to take ownership of their own learning promote an environment of freedom and risk taking. Cummings (1992) argued that the traditional classroom with a lot of teacher talk and a lot of student listening reproduces the conditions of social injustice that characterizes their family's relationships with the dominant group. Furthermore, he believed that educators should "create conditions for learning that expand rather than constrict students' possibilities for both identity formation and knowledge generation and that highlight rather than conceal the historical and current division of power and resources in the society" (p.101).

Curriculum

Who teaches students of color is equally as important as what they teach and how they teach it. The *what*, also known as the curriculum, is a critical component of the academic formula for success. A culturally sensitive classroom needs to include a culturally relevant curriculum. However, most school curriculums and assessment instruments are based on middle class White values that emphasize individualism and competition as the essence of successful achievement (Reyes & Valencia, 1993). Cultural and ethnic diversity and the values that each student hold, based on their background, are at times in conflict with what students of color encounter in regular classrooms. Reyes and Valencia's (1993) statement then partially explained why while some informants perceived classes to be boring others considered them too difficult. This reflects a lack of alignment between the needs of the students and what the curriculum has to offer. Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morrison (2006) also revealed in their findings the informants' perception that school is boring. Schargel, Thacker, and Bell (2007) also identified lack of relevant curriculum to the causes for dropping out. The Rennie Center for Educational Research and Policy's Report (2009) also list boredom due to lack of engagement as a contributing factor to dropping out.

Instructional Practices

The informants in this study expressed their perceptions of the kind of interventions that would have helped them stay in school and be successful. They identified different instructional practices such as more use of technology, making learning fun, playing games, more hand-on activities, engaging classes (not boring),

more opportunities to work in partnership with peers, less worksheets, and opportunities in the class to interact one-on-one with the teacher or with another adult like a teacher assistant. The informants seemed to remember what worked for them in the classroom and what did not work.

Instructional practices are critical in the success of students at risk of dropping out as evidenced by the findings of prior research and by the literature. For example, Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, and Friant's (2010) findings reveal how students who dropped out named among the causes for dropping out boredom, classes not being interesting, and the informants' not seeing the value of some of their classes neither their relevance. Furthermore, the authors report of students expressing how they longed for better teachers who kept classes interesting and wanting more one-on-one instruction from teachers. These are all conditions that can be remediated by the use of appropriate and culturally relevant pedagogical practices in the classroom.

Instructional or pedagogical practices address how the curriculum is delivered by the teacher in the classroom. Whitmore and Crowell (2005) suggest the importance of the classroom by explaining how community in itself is more important to learning than any method or technique used in class. In describing classrooms that make a difference, hooks (1994) believes in the creation of classrooms with a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute. Also, hooks (1994) believes the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility where there is an opportunity to foster freedom and to demand openness of mind and heart that allows reality to emerge and collectively search for ways to move beyond and transgress. It is then imperative for

students of color to be in classrooms with existing instructional practices that promote and ensure the success of all learners by addressing their needs and valuing the knowledge and capital that each student brings to class.

In line with other scholars and researchers, Nieto (1994) finds that “by encouraging collaborative relations of power, schools and teachers can begin to recognize other sources of legitimate knowledge that have been overlooked, negated, or minimized because they are not part of the dominant discourse in schools” (p. 395). Students of color can certainly benefit from learning environments that are based on these principles. Based on her research, Ladson-Billings (1995) suggested that culturally relevant teaching needs to meet three requirements: (a) an ability to develop students academically, (b) a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and (c) the development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness. By finding themselves in classrooms that meet these requirements the learning experience of students of color will more than likely be powerful, relevant, and meaningful.

Practical Circumstances

Finally, Mehan (1997) described what he calls *practical circumstances* that affect school dropouts and how the school contributes to dropping out. An example of how this relates to the context of Horizon High School is how recent district budget cuts forced the elimination of late busses or after school bus services for all schools across the district. This decision had a stronger negative impact on a school like Horizon High School, with high percentages of students of color and students from low socioeconomic status, than on more affluent schools. This financial decision across the district affected

Horizon's student participation in after school tutorials, extracurricular activities, and other after school academic enrichment programs. Most parents in a school like Horizon High School do not have the resources to provide private transportation for their children after the end of the regular school day. Students rely on the school bus as their only means of transportation to and from school. If students cannot stay after school they miss the opportunities provided by different after school programs. This specific situation exemplifies Mehan's (1997) notion of how educational resources are made available differently to students (equitable is not always necessarily fair), therefore differential educational opportunity is institutionally mediated and it is an unintended consequence of bureaucratic organization rather than a direct result of either personal choice or structural forces.

Portrait of a Potential Candidate for Dropping out at Horizon High School

Based on the home situations and personal realities of the informants of this study the profile of a potential candidate for dropping out of school at Horizon High School would include circumstances that were common to most of the informants. Some of those characteristics associated with their personal realities would include: being a student of color, between the ages of 17 and 19 years old, living in a household of a single parent, having a supportive family and friends, receiving free or reduced lunch, needing to work to assist family financially, having an older sibling who dropped out of school, feeling hopeless, and experiencing self-blame for school failure. The most salient characteristics of a potential candidate for dropping out associated with the informants' schooling experiences would be: not taking part in any sport or extracurricular activity,

not having strong connections with the school or school staff, needing a mentor, struggling academically, and experience being retained in at least one grade level.

Implications for Practice

The findings from this study, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and the literature reviewed in chapter II provide the foundation for a list of four recommended strategies that could be developed and implemented. These recommendations are based on the previously described portrait of a potential candidate for dropping out in the context of Horizon High School. These specific and purposeful strategies could be implemented in an effort to ensure an increase in the graduation rate of students of color. The four recommendations are related to: (1) school leadership, (2) teachers, (3) mentoring, and (4) instructional practices.

Leadership

In the area of school leadership schools with similar context to Horizon High School can adopt an aggressive approach to training school leaders on issues of culturally relevant and culturally sensitive leadership. My first recommendation is an examination and discussion of the findings from this study within the school leadership team for a group dialogue that will hopefully result in deeper analysis and discussion for a future action plan. The purpose of the discussion will be a reflective activity on how, based on the respondents' perception, the administrative team can better support the needs of students of color. Additionally, the team will also explore how to better train and support teachers to meet the needs of students of color and to increase their academic achievement.

Other strategies include a monthly book or research article study and discussion centered on diversity and the needs of students and staff of color. Specific staff development opportunities targeted to school leadership should relate to bridging cultural differences, the specific needs of diverse students and students from challenging socioeconomic circumstances, and the study and implementation of the most research proven and instructional strategies associated with the success of students of color.

The central idea of this recommendation is to invest time, financial, and staff development resources to train the administrative team so they can lead the campus staff development for the training of teachers and other support staff. By becoming the teachers of teachers the administrative team can then model and lead in the effort to create a school environment that fosters equity, meets the needs of students of color by acknowledging, understanding, respecting, and honoring their needs and by valuing the capital each student and staff member brings to the school.

Hopefully, these conversations, discussions, and training will result in school leaders' reflection and self examination about their values and beliefs in relation to students of color. The final goal is to train and lead the administrative team into a reflective practice that models culturally sensitive leadership in pursuit of academic excellence that will foster and support higher graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students.

Teachers

The literature reviewed in this study reveals the key role teachers play in the academic success of students of color. While many teachers, based on the informants'

responses, were supportive and caring others contributed to the informants' decision to drop out by being sarcastic and demonstrating lack of sensitivity to the specific needs of the informants. Just like in the case of the school administrative team, there should be a school wide targeted focus on teacher training for successfully working with students of color while addressing the needs of all learners in the classroom. This need for training can be initiated with a similar strategy to the one recommended for the administrative team. The process can be initiated by presenting the findings from this study to teachers, followed by reflective discussions about the lower graduation rate of students of color and how teachers can contribute to a higher graduation rate among this population.

The teacher training should include creating awareness and understanding of the challenging home situations that students of color face and struggle with. Teachers need to be cognizant of the struggles that many students face once they leave the school door. For many informants in this study it was difficult to leave behind their family and personal problems. The informants in this study identified and attributed their decision to leave school to financial challenges and family and personal problems that did not allow them to concentrate at school (death, divorce, and family fights among others).

Sharing the findings from this study with the teachers could be meaningful and relevant to them in relation to their context. By listening to the voices of the informants through their statements and through the discussion of the findings, teachers can reflect on their own practices and how they impact students of color in their classrooms.

Development of Adult and Peer Support Systems

The findings in this study revealed the specific needs of the informants in addition to what they perceived would have been successful practices and systems of support to help them stay in school. A majority of informants identified the need for a meaningful relation with an adult at school and how they believed it would have made a difference in their decision to successfully stay in school or drop out. Based on the findings of this study and on the literature reviewed, the students of color at risk of dropping out could benefit from having a mentor to help them successfully complete high school and graduate.

Developing and implementing organized programs that will foster meaningful relationships of a student with an adult or a peer is another recommendation based on the perceptions of the informants in this study. Schools could explore the participation of adults both from the school staff and from the community, especially from its business partners. Some of the partnerships the school could consider would be with local community colleges and universities. The school leaders could approach the leadership at local colleges and universities about developing and implementing initiative that would include the participation of staff and college students. This would also facilitate the building of a bridge high school and post secondary options. Associating with students and staff from a community college could assist them in getting familiar with at least one post secondary options and how this option can become a reality for them by staying in school and graduating. This kind of exposure to post secondary alternatives can foster hope for students of color at risk of dropping out.

Another finding in this study was the role that peers and friends played in the lives of the informants and how influential they were in their decision to stay in school longer. Several informants also found in their friends and peers a source of strength and support. These findings could assist teachers and administrators in developing a peer mentoring or support programs. These programs would facilitate an organized effort of relationship building of students at risk of dropping out with peers who can help them and support them in their effort to stay in school.

Instructional Practices

This recommendation is dependent on the outcomes of the leadership and teacher training recommendations. As a result of training focused on the needs of students of color the teachers and administrators then must evaluate the current instructional practices and compare them to successful practices recommended in the literature review used in other contexts similar to the one in this study.

Using the data gathered from the respondents' answers also sheds light on how instructional practices impact the learning of the students of color at risk of dropping out in the context of Horizon High School. The findings in this study also reveal how students described being bored in classes, or considered the content too difficult and challenging. Some informants shared how they needed more one-on-one instruction and hands-on activities. They also shared how they enjoyed playing games in class and welcomed the opportunity to work with partners or in small groups instead of the usual lecture type setting. Other informants shared how the use of technology and self guided programs assisted them in completing some of their classes. One informant described

how obtaining a laptop computer Through the One-On-One social studies program for 11th graders helped him keep track of his assignments, notes, and class work. Based on these findings schools could explore alternative instructional practices to improve the graduation rate of students of color and students at risk of dropping out.

The School as Agency of Coordinated Services

The findings in this study revealed how most of the informants attributed the *challenging home situations* and their *personal realities* to their decision to drop out of school. These findings can be interpreted as situations that if ameliorated or addressed in time could have prevented their decision to drop out. Some of the challenges were their need to work, depression, family problems, and juggling parental and student roles. Fusarelli (2008) argues that schools cannot ignore the social conditions and outcomes that are the prerequisites to improved academic outcomes. She argues that many students are failing because their social needs are not being met. This was evident in the narrative of many of the informants in this study. Some informants expressed how their families did not have money for food, how their utilities had been disconnected, and how they struggled as teenage parents to provide child care for their infants. Schools can contribute to the students' success and improve their chances of graduation by building partnerships with social agencies and assisting in the process of informing students and parents about social services available to them and by facilitating the access to such services.

While many social services exist and are available to students of color and their families the problem is their lack of knowledge and access to such services and the

agencies that provide them. Lack of transportation and language barriers are some of the obstacles between them and the services available. Schools can assist these students and their families by providing guidance and information into how to access the existing services in the community.

Implications for Policy

The findings in this study reveal the diverse needs of students of color in the context of Horizon High School and the daily struggles the informants faced to stay in school and successfully graduate. Most of the struggles the informants mentioned were home related and personal in nature. Among the challenges listed by the informants were financial limitations, health and mental issues, lack of opportunities for tutorials and credit recovery, and lack of programs of support in school. Policy makers need to keep in mind the diverse needs of students of color in their decision making related to the funding of special programs for schools with higher representation of African American and Hispanic students. Special consideration needs to be given to these schools to avoid what Mehan (1997) described as practical circumstances that affect the graduation rates in these schools. The findings in this study reveal a need for the development and funding of programs to provide coordinated services that address the needs of students of color in relation to challenging home situations like financial challenges, emotional and health problems, and access to resources. Additionally, there is a need for consideration of funding provisions for the expansion of support programs like mentoring, tutoring, and credit recovery opportunities.

Implications for Future Research

The existing literature related to the school dropout crisis explores mostly the general population of high school students and of what researchers consider to be students at risk of dropping out. The findings from this study reveal how students of color face challenging personal realities and home related factors that represent barriers to their academic achievement. This study can be expanded by addressing the specific needs of students of color in relation to race and gender. Future research can address questions of how these challenges may be different specifically for African Americans, Hispanics, African American males, African American females, Hispanic males, and Hispanic females.

Another area of research that can be expanded based on the findings from this study is how schools can build bridges for students of color to compensate for the challenges they face in their effort to graduate from high school. Future research can build upon the findings from this study to explore how the school can develop and implement systems of supports for students of color who face different realities that prevent them from graduating.

Conclusion

In the end, school dropout is the ultimate measure of how schools fail to meet the needs of all students, more specifically students of color, and it is the end result of the existing achievement gap. The literature reviewed spans more than 20 years of research. In the time frame since Rumberg (1987) and Mehan (1992) to the present little has changed in terms of the dropout of students of color. With the exception of a few

contributing factors, the reasons for dropping out remain almost the same. And while the needs of students of color have received more attention in the literature in the past few years, the achievement gap still exists and students of color still drop out of school at alarming and disproportionate rates.

While Mehan (1997a) blames schools for fostering conditions that promote dropping out he also acknowledges that schools have been charged with socializing immigrant populations, implementing segregation decrees and teaching. Since Mehan's research in 1992 we can now add the new federal and state accountability mandates like the No Child Left Behind and the Texas accountability system. Mehan (1997a) blames the many constraints limiting the school operations to factors beyond their control in living up to the expectations that have been set. Based on these circumstances I have emphasized the role of school leadership in the discussions since leaders can be catalyst by not only challenging current systems and practices but by also advocating and influencing policy on behalf of students of color.

There are no easy, simple, or quick solutions in the quest to narrow the achievement gap and increase the graduation rate of students of color. New and better alternatives must be explored and developed to accommodate and meet the needs of what could possibly become a majority in the U.S. population in the near future. The policy, funding, and educational decisions that are made today will have an impact on the kind of workers and leaders we prepare for tomorrow. As new political and economic changes shape the world, policy makers, educators, and educational leaders must be in tune with the needs of new groups of students arriving at the doorsteps of

U.S. schools. The literature suggests the need for future research related to culturally relevant pedagogy, instructional practices, and a different kind of leadership to insure an educational system based on democratic values and principles of social justice.

As issues of educational equity and social justice continue to surface classrooms need to be transformed into places where cultural, linguistic and racial differences are valued and celebrated. Schools must be a place where all voices can be heard, regardless of the language, racial, socioeconomic or cultural background. According to Giroux (1992), when wedded to its most emancipatory possibilities, democracy encourages all citizens to actively construct and share power over those institutions that govern their lives. At the same time the challenge of democracy resides in the recognition that educators, parents, and others must work hard to ensure that future generations will view the idea and practice of democracy as a goal worth believing in and struggling for. (p.5)

Therefore, an education system that tolerates and promotes social injustice and inequality is not representative of a democratic government and society.

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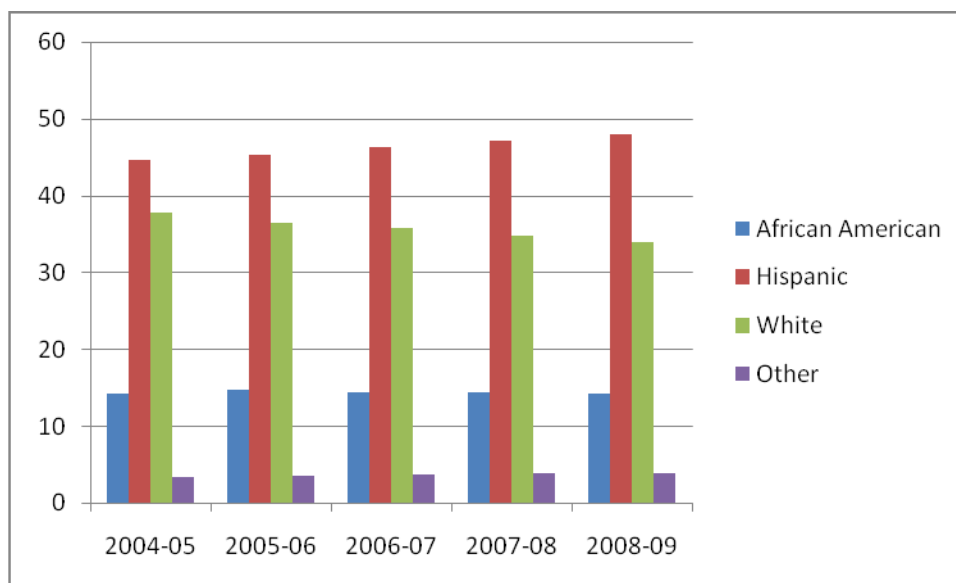
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APPENDIX A

TEXAS STUDENT ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION

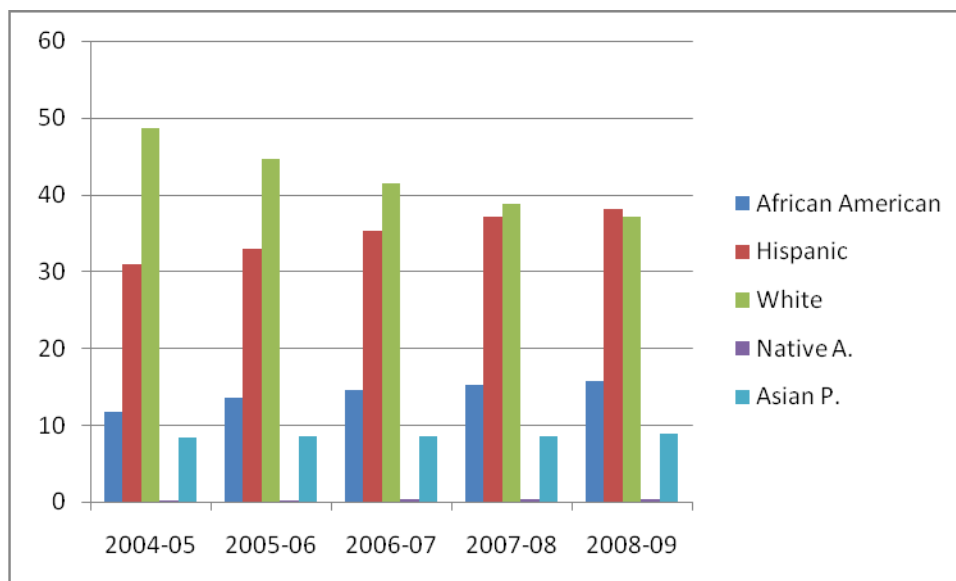
| Texas Student Ethnic Distribution | | | | | |
|---|------------|----------|-------|-------|--|
| (Based on Texas Education Agency's Pocket Edition - 2010) | | | | | |
| Year | African A. | Hispanic | White | Other | |
| 2004-05 | 14.2 | 44.7 | 37.7 | 3.4 | |
| 2005-06 | 14.7 | 45.3 | 36.5 | 3.5 | |
| 2006-07 | 14.4 | 46.3 | 35.7 | 3.6 | |
| 2007-08 | 14.3 | 35.8 | 34.8 | 3.8 | |
| 2008-09 | 14.2 | 47.9 | 34.0 | 3.9 | |



APPENDIX B

SCHOOL DISTRICT – ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION

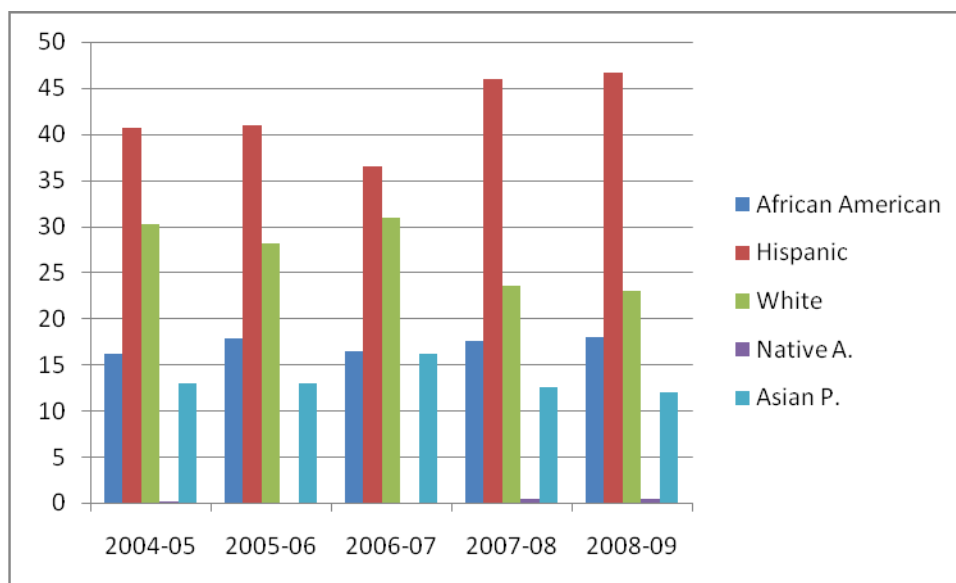
| School District - Ethnic Distribution | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|----------|-------|-----------|----------|
| (Texas Education Agency, 2009b) | | | | | |
| Year | African A. | Hispanic | White | Native A. | Asian P. |
| 2004-05 | 11.7 | 31.0 | 48.7 | 0.2 | 8.4 |
| 2005-06 | 13.6 | 32.9 | 44.7 | 0.2 | 8.5 |
| 2006-07 | 14.6 | 35.2 | 41.4 | 0.3 | 8.5 |
| 2007-08 | 15.2 | 37.1 | 38.8 | 0.3 | 8.6 |
| 2008-09 | 15.7 | 38.1 | 37.1 | 0.3 | 8.8 |



APPENDIX C

HORIZON HIGH SCHOOL ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION

| Local High School Ethnic Distribution (Texas Education Agency, 2009b) | | | | | |
|--|------------|----------|-------|-----------|----------|
| Year | African A. | Hispanic | White | Native A. | Asian P. |
| 2004-05 | 16.1 | 40.6 | 30.2 | 0.1 | 13.0 |
| 2005-06 | 17.8 | 41.0 | 28.2 | 0.1 | 12.9 |
| 2006-07 | 16.4 | 36.5 | 30.9 | 0.0 | 16.2 |
| 2007-08 | 17.5 | 45.9 | 23.6 | 0.4 | 12.6 |
| 2008-09 | 17.9 | 46.7 | 23.0 | 0.4 | 12.0 |

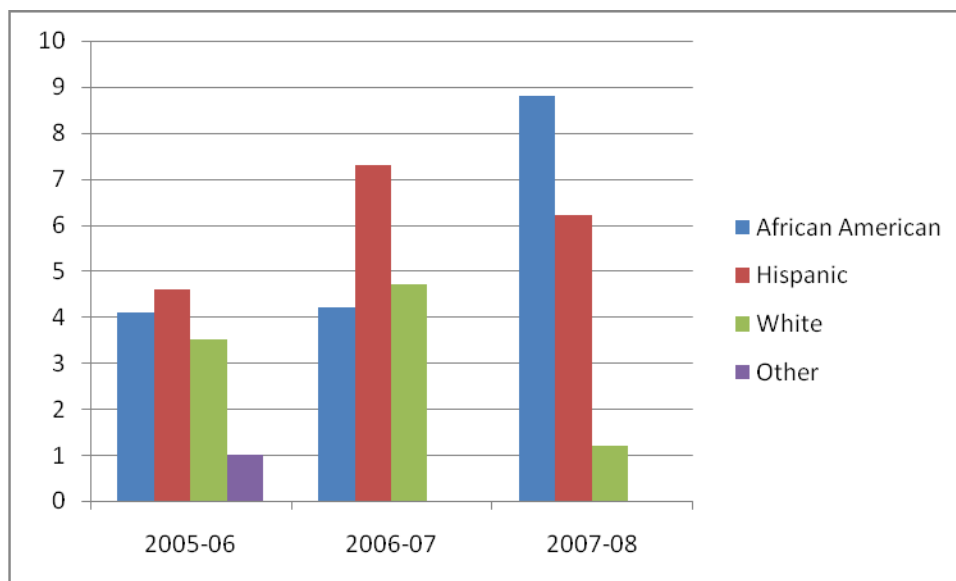


APPENDIX D

HORIZON HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATE BY ETHNICITY

| Local High School Dropout Rate by Ethnicity Distribution | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|----------|-------|-----------|----------|-------|
| (Texas Education Agency, 2009b) | | | | | | |
| Year * | African A | Hispanic | White | Native A. | Asian P. | Total |
| 2005-06 | 4.1 | 4.6 | 3.5 | 0 | 1 | 13.2 |
| 2006-08 | 4.2 | 7.3 | 4.7 | 0 | 0 | 16.2 |
| 2008-09 | 8.8 | 6.2 | 1.2 | 0 | 0 | 16.2 |

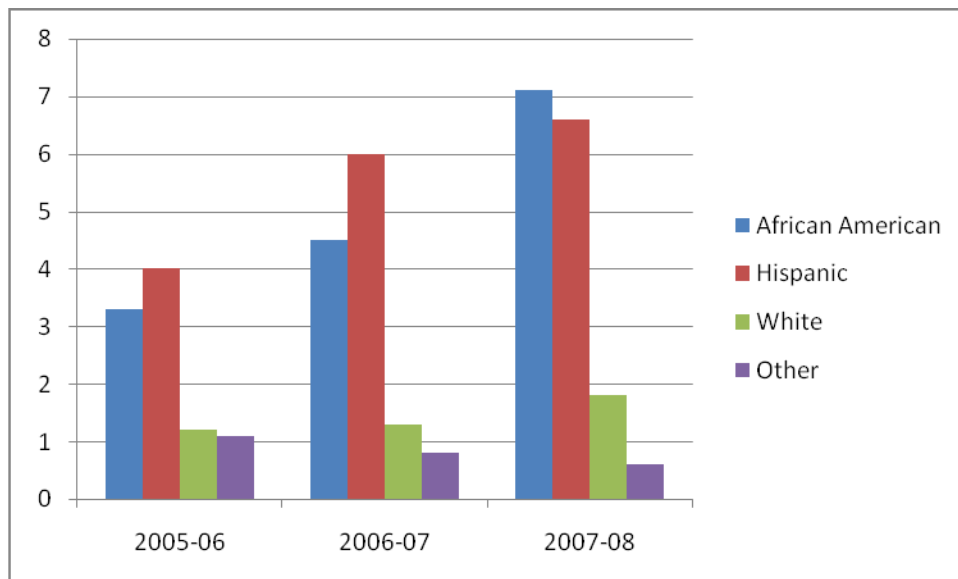
*The school opened in 2002 with a class of freshmen and sophomores; therefore the first data for a class cohort is available starting in the year 2006.



APPENDIX E

SCHOOL DISTRICT DROPOUT RATE BY ETHNICITY

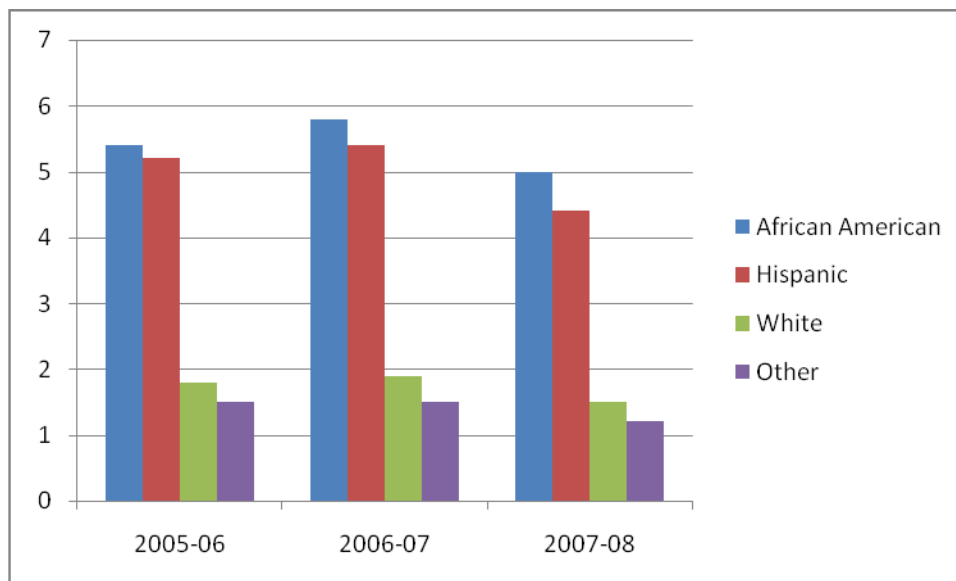
| School District Dropout Rate by Distribution (Texas Education Agency, 2009b) | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|----------|-------|-----------|----------|-------|
| Year | African A | Hispanic | White | Native A. | Asian P. | Total |
| 2005-06 | 3.3 | 4.0 | 1.2 | 0 | 1.1 | 9.6 |
| 2006-07 | 4.5 | 6.0 | 1.3 | 0 | 0.8 | 11.4 |
| 2007-08 | 7.1 | 6.6 | 1.8 | 0 | 0.6 | 16.1 |



APPENDIX F

TEXAS DROPOUT RATE BY ETHNICITY

| Texas Dropout Rate by Ethnicity (Texas Education Agency, 2010) | | | | | | |
|---|-----------|----------|-------|-------|--|--|
| Year | African A | Hispanic | White | Other | | |
| 2005-06 | 5.4 | 5.2 | 1.8 | 1.5 | | |
| 2006-07 | 5.8 | 5.4 | 1.9 | 1.5 | | |
| 2007-08 | 5.0 | 4.4 | 1.5 | 1.2 | | |



APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

High School Dropout: Perceptions and Voices of African American and Hispanic
Students

Semi-structured Interview Questionnaire Guide and Instrument

1. What do you consider the most important factor that contributed to your decision to drop out of school?
2. What other secondary factors do you consider contributed to your decision to drop out of school?
3. What had the strongest impact on your decision to drop out; people (teachers, administrators, peers) or systems (rules, policies, laws)? Explain.
4. If you had been thinking about dropping out prior to your final decision, was there anyone or anything keeping you from dropping out of school?
5. Before dropping out of school, was there anyone in school that motivated you to stay and graduate? Who? How?
6. Was the process of dropping out a sudden decision or was it a decision that you had been considering for some time? If so, for how long? Explain the process.
7. Do you feel there was a specific situation that pushed you to dropping out of school (an argument, a disciplinary action, a prolonged absence from school, etc.)?
8. What could have any school staff member done or say to make you change your mind about dropping out?
9. What programs or support systems could have the school have in place to motivate, encourage, support you to stay in school?
10. If you could change one (or several) things about school that would help you stay in school and graduate successfully what would it be?

APPENDIX H
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY
DIVISION OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES - OFFICE OF
RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

1186 TAMU, General Services Complex

College Station, TX 77843-1186

750 Agronomy Road, #3500

979.458.1467

FAX 979.862.3176

<http://researchcompliance.tamu.edu>

Human Subjects Protection Program Institutional Review Board

DATE: 21-Jun-2010

MEMORANDUM

TO: BAKER, WANDA - 77843-3578

FROM: Office of Research Compliance - Institutional Review Board

SUBJECT: Initial Review

Protocol

Number: 2010-0454

Title: African American and Hispanic Dropout Students: Perceptions of Contextual Factors

Review

Category: Exempt from IRB Review

It has been determined that the referenced protocol application meets the criteria for exemption and no further review is required. However, any amendment or modification to the protocol must be reported to the IRB and reviewed before being implemented to ensure the protocol still meets the criteria for exemption.

This determination was based on the following Code of Federal Regulations:

(<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm>)

45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior, unless: (a) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (b) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Provisions:

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.

U file:///mnt/Wanda%20Personal%20Documents/IRBpermis...

1 of 1 06/22/2010 08:50 PM

APPENDIX I

APPROVAL LETTER FROM SCHOOL DISTRICT TO OBTAIN DROPOUT DATA FROM SCHOOL RECORDS

_____ Independent School District

Department of Campus Improvement and Research

_____, Ph.D. -Senior Director of Campus Improvement and Research

_____, Ed.D. -Coordinator of Program Evaluation and Research

To: Wanda Baker

From: _____, Ed.D.

CC: _____, Ph.D.

Date: July 22, 2010

Re: Approval of Application to Conduct Research in _____ ISD

Your request to conduct the following research project in _____ ISD has been approved:

African American and Hispanic Dropout Students: Perceptions of Contextual Factors.

As you pursue this project, please refer to the conditions listed below:

- Keep Mr. _____, Principal of _____ High School, informed of all activities involved with the project.
- You may only contact informants once. If they do not respond, you may not contact them a second time.
- Student records may only be reviewed within _____ High School and may not be copied or removed from the campus.
- Practice confidentiality while conducting the various steps necessary to complete the project.
- Use a random code system to record data collected. Never use any identifying information such as names or _____ ISD ID numbers.

APPENDIX J**INFORMATION SHEET / CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE****Title of Research Study**

High School Dropout: Perceptions and Voices of African American and Hispanic
Students

Principal Investigator

Wanda Baker - doctoral student, Texas A & M University

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research and to record the consent of those who agree to be involved in this study.

You have been asked to participate in a research study about students' perceptions of the school as an organization. The purpose of this study is to investigate what is the perception of students who have dropped out of school of how the school impacted their decision to drop out. The study will also investigate what are some experiences that led Hispanic and African American students to the decision to drop out of school.

You were selected to be a possible participant because you were selected from a list of student who dropped out of the Cy Ridge High School during the school year 2009-10, you are 18 years of age or older, you are an African American or a Hispanic student.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a 90 minute semi-structured interview.

Your participation will be audio recorded and transcribed. It is not mandatory to have the interview audio taped; if you do not wish to have your interview audio taped the researcher will take manual notes of your interview and answers.

What are the risks involved in this study?

The risks associated with this study are minimum and not greater than the informants feeling uncomfortable as they discuss their experience of dropping out before completing high school.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

Informants will not receive any direct, tangible benefits from participating in this study. However, potential benefits to the educational field will be discovery of what are the best practices and programs to motivate, encourage, and support high school students to stay in school and successfully graduate, especially as it relates to African American and Hispanic students. The findings could help narrow the achievement gap between students of color and their White peers.

Do I have to participate?

No. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without our current or future relations with Texas A & M University being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?

This study is confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of a number coding system to identify informants. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Wanda Baker, the researcher, will have access to the records and the data.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Wanda Baker, the researcher, will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for one year and then erased or destroyed.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Wanda Baker at (832) 971-2345, or via e-mail at wandabaker1@gmail.com

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A & M University. For research-related

VITA

WANDA BAKER

7900 North Eldridge Parkway

Houston, Texas 77041

Telephone: (832)971-2345 / e-mail: wandabaker1@yahoo.com

EDUCATION

- | | |
|-------|--|
| 04/11 | Doctorate Degree – Ed.D.– Educational Leadership Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas |
| 12/03 | Master’s Degree – Educational Leadership Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas |
| 05/78 | Bachelor of Arts Interamerican University of Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico |

CERTIFICATIONS

- Principal
- Texas Secondary Spanish (Grades 6-12)
- Texas Elementary Self-Contained (Grades 1-6)
- Texas Bilingual/ESL-Spanish (Grades 1-6)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 07/09 to present | Cypress Ridge High School – Cy Fair I.S.D. Houston, TX Position – Assistant Principal |
| 6/05 to 07/09 | Kahla Middle School – Cy Fair I.S.D. Houston, TX Position – Assistant Principal |
| 6/04 to 6/05 | Labay Middle School – Cy Fair I.S.D. Houston, TX Position – Assistant Principal |

AFFILIATIONS

- Texas Council of Women School Executives
- Delta Kappa Gamma Society International (Chapter President and State Committee Member)
- Texas Association of Secondary School Principals