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Voice of a Fifth-Year High School Student: An Exploration Of The Journey To Achieving A Diploma

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VOICE OF A FIFTH-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE JOURNEY TO
ACHIEVING A DIPLOMA

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
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Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education in the College of Education and Behavioral Studies, Department of Leadership, Policy and Development, Program of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

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ABSTRACT

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The mantra for public education could be "one size fits all." Unfortunately, some students struggle under the current education system; they find learning difficult and master content at a slower rate. Educational leaders today face hundreds of decisions daily but none are more important than those that support the graduation of children from high school. No Child Left Behind (2002) has brought the problem of graduation rates to the forefront of educational concerns but previous reforms have had little effect. This qualitative inquiry sought to add to the understanding of dropouts and non-completers by examining barriers to receiving a diploma, e.g., the traditional thinking that a student must take only four years to complete high school. Grounded in an epistemological foundation built on constructionism, this inquiry was guided by a critical theory framework and was driven by case study and portraiture methodologies. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to understand the journey a fifth-year high school student took as he continued in his education toward achieving an accredited high school diploma.

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CHAPTER I

FRAMING THE INQUIRY

The mantra for public education could be "one-size-fits-all." Unfortunately, one size fits all does not meet the needs of students who find learning difficult, struggle to master content, or encounter events that disturb the students' conventional four-year path through high school. Despite rising dropout rates, high schools carry on business as usual. More than one-third of students in grades 5-12 are struggling or suffering in school and life (Bradley, 2009). Students continue to struggle in school and the rate of dropouts in high schools continues to rise (Wise, 2008). Every school day, more than 7,200 students fall through the cracks of America's public high schools (Swanson, 2010). Three out of every 10 members of this year's high school senior class, 1.3 million students in all, will fail to graduate with a diploma (Swanson, 2010). The effects of this graduation crisis fall disproportionately on the nation's most vulnerable youths and their communities. A majority of non-graduates are members of historically disadvantaged minorities and other educationally underserved groups (Swanson, 2010). They are more likely to attend school in large urban districts and come disproportionately from communities challenged by severe poverty and economic hardship (Swanson, 2010).

Education for children is an economically sound investment when comparing the cost to a possible alternative of jail. Nationwide, it costs around $5,000 a year to send a child to public school; $22,000 a year is spent to keep a person in prison (Ohanian, 1999).

In a nation that wants so desperately to educate students, it is clear that the allocation of state and federal funds could be better spent on the accountability of No Child Left Behind (NCLB; 2002).

Many civil rights advocates initially hailed the Bush Administration's major education bill, optimistically entitled No Child Left Behind, as a step forward in the long battle to improve education for those children traditionally left behind in American schools, specifically students of color and students living in poverty, new English learners, and students with disabilities. The broad goal of NCLB was to raise achievement levels of all students, especially underperforming groups, and to close the achievement gap that parallels race and class distinctions (Meir, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, & Wood, 2004).

The cost of an education goes deeper than the daily costs of running a school. Clearly, the payback of a diploma is marked in the student's possible career and job opportunities (Payne, 1996). The ability to live independently and free of government funding is a common purpose for education. Avoiding generational poverty strengthens the individual and communities (Payne, 1996). As described by Payne (1996), generational poverty is at least two generations of poverty. Poverty plays a significant role in whether a student will be able to finish high school (Payne, 1996).

A high dropout rate is not a new educational problem in the United States; rather, it has been a persistent issue of concern. For example, in the mid-twentieth century, students were often unable to finish high school due to World War II; young men and women were called upon to serve their country before completing high school. The American Council on Education originally developed the General Education Degree

(GED) in 1942 in response to the military's request for a series of tests soldiers could use to prove their knowledge and education level at a time when many soldiers were joining the military before finishing high school. The notion was that the soldiers would be able to demonstrate an educational level equivalent to a high school diploma once they returned from service and could then enter the regular workforce. Without the tests, the only alternative for returning military personnel looking to continue their education was to go back to high school, which, because of their age, was not a realistic option. Although originally developed for military personnel, the GED became a popular high school alternative for many students in the fifties and early sixties. Today most of the students who take the GED are non-military civilians. Since they were first created in 1942, the tests have been revised several times to keep up with the increasing requirements of the modern job market (GetGED, 2010). The GED could be considered a great alternative for students wanting to better their education. The problem with that was according to a study done in 2009, students who took the GED were not categorized as "high school completers" (GetGED, 2010), but they are also not labeled as dropouts.

Records were also kept at the state and local level of dropouts throughout the country. The National Center for Educational Research (Tang & Sable, 2009) conducted a study that examined 100 top schools in the nation. One part of the study examined enrollment and dropout rates. This report presented counts of high school completers, grade 9 through 12 dropout rates, and an average freshmen graduation rate. The term "high school completer" included only diploma recipients. The average freshman graduation rate only included diploma recipients; it did not include other high school completers or those receiving a GED-based equivalency credential (Tang & Stable 2009).

The caution for school districts in understanding what the data were reporting was simple; data reflected only a single number of graduates and did not include those graduates who take longer than four years to earn a diploma (Bracey, 2009). The representation left out numerous students who did not follow traditional pathways to graduation. Not only were dropouts miscounted, early graduates were not tabulated to reflect true graduation status of each graduation class.

Social Justice

Social justice and the rights of all students should also be taken into consideration when discussing dropouts. Failing subjects in school is merely a symptom of the bigger problem in the overall education system where students feel they have no voice and may not see how education can help improve their lives. Paulo Freire (2008) is a philosopher who recognized education as a science, argued for the importance of teaching media literacy to empower individuals against manipulation and oppression, and uses the most appropriate media to help teach the subject matter in question (Freire, 2008). Educators must continue to focus on oppression and not lose sight of the role that poverty plays in education. There is no question that middle-class values are the standards to be emulated in school (Fayden, 2005). Often in classrooms a teacher will talk about reality as if it was motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. The task of the teacher is often viewed as "filling" the students with the contents of the teacher's narration including contents that are detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them, and which could give them significance (Freire, 2007). At-risk students' experiences with education and what is presented as reality will then become parallel to

those of the teachers who endorse the social norms of the white middle class--creating a homogeneous social system within the schools.

Education is the single most effective way to integrate the burgeoning population of Latinos into the U.S. economy and society (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Thus if high dropout rates are not turned around, society will have created a permanent underclass without hope of integrating into the mainstream or realizing their potential to contribute to American society (Gandara & Contreras, 2009).

Schools must meet the learning needs of all students, especially those who do not fit the four-year completion norm. There are policy disincentives for truly addressing the achievement gap and social justice. Each year, schools are given a state report card from the Department of Education called the School Accountability Report (SAR) that reflects graduation data from the previous year. Along with other pertinent data, SARs record a school district's graduation rate without adding the completers who take longer to graduate. If a school does make the effort to support students who do not meet the "one-size-fits-all" mantra, there is no state acknowledgement that the effort ever took place. It is then understandable why schools do not make retrieving non-completers a priority. If the student returns to school and is unsuccessful yet again, another dropout or non-completer is tabulated for that school. Consequently, schools are "punished" for trying to retrieve and support students who do not fit the four-year completion mold.

Social justice education is both a process and a goal (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet students' needs. Social justice includes a vision of society where the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically

and psychologically safe and secure. An ideal society is envisioned as one wherein individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole (Adams et al., 1997). Unfortunately, students continue to be left behind in society because social justice is not fully understood or practiced by educational leaders (Vogel, 2011).

Graduation Criteria

A factor that affects the completion rate and dropout numbers is the seat-time needed to complete credits in a timely fashion. However, many at-risk youth have a variety of factors that may interfere or prevent their regular attendance of classes. The reasons range from a variety of systemic problems within the student's life activities, i.e., a death in the family, a feeling of hopelessness in class sizes of 30 or more students, or desperation in social events that have left the student paralyzed to function in a high school setting. A high school student may not be able to recover from credits lost during a school year. Traditionally, students who fall behind become dropout statistics; typically, their only options for recovering the credits needed for graduation are summer school or online learning where students receive little or no support.

Course-credit requirements have changed little in recent years; however, the life circumstances of many subgroups of youth have changed in ways that make school attendance and completion of a high school program in four years more difficult. For the average student in the class of 2010, earning a diploma requires accumulating a total of 21 credits, typically including four credits in English/language arts, three each in both

mathematics and social studies, and two or three in science (Swanson, 2010). The

number of credits needed to graduate with a high school diploma is sometimes so

daunting that a student would never be able to recover from a significant deficit in

credits.   Yet again, school districts continue the one-size-fits-all approach with the

expectation that the student will need to "figure it out" if he/she wants to graduate.

Early Identification and Support

Organizations that are joining forces with school districts in an attempt to

overcome dropouts in high school include the National Center of School Engagement

(NCSE). The organization has worked with researchers from Johns Hopkins University

to assist educators and leaders in basic education practices in the hopes of reducing the

number of dropouts in high school. Colleagues at Johns Hopkins University are pushing

for the development of an early warning system based on the ABCs that consist of

attendance, behavior problems (suspensions), and course failure (Seeley, 2009); the

ABCs are solution-focused on attendance, attachment, and achievement, which makes for

a powerful intervention for schools. Educators do not need to wait for high school to

prevent students from dropping out. The intersection of these three problems can be seen

as early as sixth grade and can predict 60 to 90% of the high school dropouts. Schools

can see the signs of dropping out early when warning systems are in place (Seeley, 2009).

Attendance and truancy often predict a potential school dropout. This view has been

reinforced in NCSE's recent collaboration with the Center for Social Organization of

Schools at Johns Hopkins University.

In Colorado, Governor Bill Ritter's promise to cut the dropout rate in half was the

beginning of the initiative to lower dropout rates in Colorado. Compared to students in

the past, students in the 21st century require more intensive instruction to transition into society. The ABCs may serve as indicators to assist educators and school leaders when evaluating student success.

Changing Academic Expectations

National pressure stemming from NCLB (2002) for all students to demonstrate proficiency in basic subject areas such as literacy and numeracy has led to 51 states and territories adopting the Common Core Standards--the latest and most widely embraced iteration of outcomes-based education that may hold hope for non-traditional students. Outcome-based education is a model of education that rejects the traditional focus on what the school provides to students in favor of making students demonstrate that they "know and are able to do" whatever the required outcomes are for them (Education Commission, 1995). Although outcome-based education has been around for more than a couple of decades, schools have seen very slow progress in its development. With encouragement from the Race to the Top national educational policy, standard-based education is climbing to the forefront and leaders across the country are embracing its effectiveness with students (Vogel, 2010). As this new direction continues to support students and their pace of learning and because of the individuality outcome-based education offers, teachers and administration may see more and more students staying in school instead of choosing to drop out of high school. Continuing to move toward standards-based education and student-centered curriculum may support students who take longer to graduate. By holding students accountable for a common essential curriculum versus one school's interpretation of standards, students may be able to focus on the goal of graduating--knowing the learning they must demonstrate rather than the

hours they must be in their seats. State standards have supported this philosophy for several years; the No Child Left Behind legislation has merely forced states to comply. The winners will hopefully be the students who benefit from a focused curriculum that emphasizes demonstration of knowledge rather than seat time.

Significance of the Problem

Fortunately, there is hope. A growing body of research and an overwhelming chorus of anecdotal evidence show that all students, even those who are often labeled as slow, lazy, or troubled in traditional schools, can be productive and successful in creative educational settings that provide a personalized approach (Hoye & Sturgis, 2005). Alternative schools of all kinds are expanding across the country as part of the effort to re-enroll dropouts, create successful charter schools, and provide student-centered curricular choices. These schools are learning what it takes to effectively support youth in crisis, engage them in meaningful learning, and prepare them for successful futures in college and work (Hoye & Sturgis, 2005).

The Colorado Department of Education (2010) recently created the Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement to advance and coordinate efforts to support dropout prevention and student engagement across the state. This office is part of the Prevention Initiatives Unit and is supported by state fiscal stabilization funds through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 from the office of Governor Bill Ritter. The office was established in accordance with Colorado Revised Statue 22-14-101 and builds on the state's commitment to ensure graduation, school success for all students, and re-engagement of out-of-school youth (Colorado Department of Education, 2010).

Changes to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 that encourage a Response to Intervention (RtI) method of dealing with struggling students, supported by pressures to meet NCLB requirements, have prompted many schools to focus on classroom interventions for students who are not making adequate learning progress. However, limited resources may prevent full support of all students, particularly those who fall significantly behind at upper grade levels. Reliance on classroom interventions may also mean that before a student is tested for a learning or emotional disability, they have already dropped out (Villa & Thousand, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, options for students who want to obtain their high school diploma are limited to the GED, which is not considered as desirable by employers or online schools of varying degrees of quality. These alternatives provide classes for students but are held to different standards of success than public schools. For online schools, the business aspect of running the school becomes the focal point by which success is measured rather than the actual success of each student (Education Commission, 1995). Online, as well as charter and specialty schools, are not held accountable for keeping record of dropouts and non-completers. When records are kept, only four-year cohorts are tracked, leaving either huge gaps in the data or inaccurate data.

The following section provides the purpose of this qualitative study that examined why a student would fall behind in credits and drop out, only to return as a fifth-year senior to complete a high school diploma. This study hoped to shed light on the challenges and barriers that a student confronts when trying to make up for lost credits and obtain a high school diploma. The study also examined the issues of motivation and resilience of the student to continue work on a diploma and what supported this endeavor.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the journey a fifth-year high school student took as he continued his education toward achieving an accredited high school diploma after being labeled as a high school dropout by the state of Colorado. Qualitative and quantitative studies can each provide unique contributions to the body of knowledge on this topic; however, qualitative research provides a rich contextual description that might reveal new insights and assist in later quantitative research with more generalizable findings. A student's experience could provide insights into what school districts can do to modify curriculum and establish deliberate methods of management to returning fifth-year students while supporting the education of the student beyond the traditional completion age of approximately 18 years of age.

Although the literature has shown multiple influences that contribute to high school student dropout rates, little attention has been given to specific qualitative rationales as to why students drop out of high school and, perhaps more importantly, why they return to school. This qualitative portraiture case study presents a clear view of the central question--"What are the perspectives of a fifth-year student as he makes his journey toward a high school diploma in a Colorado alternative high school?"

Research on dropout retention is also needed to help educational leaders develop models for evaluation of program effectiveness and to inform change. Qualitative studies can provide unique contributions to the body of knowledge along with new insights and understanding that emerge from qualitative research. The unique value of this study consists of a deeper individual understanding of the struggles of a Latino male in America's school system. Perhaps the achievement gap can be more fully understood

from the perspective of an individual student who has lived and is trying to bridge that gap.

Studies such as the one detailed in this dissertation have the potential to influence future policy, practices, and research aimed at leaving no child behind. More importantly, this inquiry honors the sacrifices and efforts a dropout student makes in achieving a high school diploma. Systems in schools across the country are similar and researchers continue to seek answers to questions educators ask regarding bettering education for all students. Below are the research questions this study sought to answer. The answers could change the way society educates students in the 21st century.

Q1   What is the life perspective of the educational experience of a fifth-year high school student?

To gain a deeper understanding of the problem, three sub-questions were also raised:

Q1a   What is the student's perspective of why it takes longer to graduate?

Q1b   What is the student's perspective of the education system and how it relates to his educational experience?

Q1c   What does the student feel he needs from the educational system in order to graduate?

Study Overview

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding and construct meaning. Therefore, a qualitative approach provided the best fit for addressing the research problem. The participant in this qualitative inquiry is a Latino male who lives in a suburban community located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. To provide a prospective of the average high school experience, the participant was purposefully selected (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The rationale for selecting a Latino male is evident in the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) scores. The scores

show a significant, overall achievement gap in test results for Latino males. The gap in

CSAP scores between White males and Latino males is significant and has been so for

several years (Colorado Department of Education, 2010). The No Child Left Behind

(NCLB; 2002) resources and funding continue to support special education and English

language learners, attempting to boost scores in those groups. When examining the

Colorado Growth Model data, significant indicators show Latino males' scores are

declining in both the ninth and tenth grades (Colorado Department of Education, 2010).

Explained in more depth in chapter III, this study used case study (Creswell,

2007) and portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) methodologies to collect data

over a one-month time period from multiple sources: interviews, student drawings,

school records, and journal entries. To capture yet another angle of the student's school

life, a camera was given to the participant to record daily events that represented

meaningful experiences in school. Through the pictures, journals, and interviews, the

student was able to give voice to the story of his graduation journey.

Summary

Graduating from high school is a significant predictor of adult success (Wormeli,

2006). No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation has been implemented and still numerous

students nation-wide continue to fail or drop out of school. In this chapter, the definition

and recording of dropouts, attendance criteria for graduation, structural challenges faced

by students who fall behind, and the concept of social justice were discussed. Support for

dropouts may be possible given the advancements in quality education--both through

early identification and support and the development of a focused curriculum that

emphasizes learning rather than seat time. This qualitative study might contribute to the

body of knowledge currently known about dropouts by gaining new insights and understandings that emerge from a dropout's perspective. Studies such as the one detailed in this dissertation have the potential to influence future policy that supports students in standards-based learning at a pace appropriate for each learner and possibly until the student reaches the age of 21. Such students would not be considered dropouts as they currently are in the traditional four-year track to graduation. Most importantly, this inquiry honors the sacrifices and efforts dropout students make in achieving a high school diploma. The focus in this inquiry centered on the student's view of the struggle to graduate from an accredited high school.

In the following chapter, a history of dropouts and literature is presented. The literature reviewed was with a specific vision of a student who struggles with the current system of education in America. The gaps in the literature are identified to justify the purpose of this inquiry.

CHAPTER II

STUDENT DROPOUT HISTORY AND LITERATURE

Over one million students who enter ninth grade each fall fail to graduate with their peers four years later (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009). In fact, about 7000 students drop out every school day (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009). Perhaps this statistic was acceptable 50 years ago, but the era in which a high school dropout could earn a living wage has ended in the United States (Miller, 1995). Dropouts significantly diminish their chances to secure a good job and a promising future (Miller, 1995). Moreover, not only do the individuals themselves suffer, but each class of dropouts is responsible for substantial financial and social costs to the communities, states, and country in which they live (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009).

Approximately 1.2 million students fail to graduate from high school each year and more than half are from minority groups (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008). Every year, close to one-third of 18-year-old students do not finish high school. The dropout rates for minority students, students from low-income families, and students with disabilities are even higher (Dryfoos, 1987). In addition, high school dropouts commit about 75% of crimes in the United States and are much more likely to be on public assistance than those who complete high school (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008). The cost to the public for those crimes and welfare benefits is close to $200 billion annually (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008). Dropouts earn only about 60% of what

high school graduates earn and only about 40% of the income of college degree holders, resulting in about $50 billion dollars in lost state and federal tax revenues each year (Editorial Projects in Education, 2008). Dropouts are also much more likely to have health problems than non-dropouts. A 1% increase in the high school completion rate would save the United States $1.4 billion annually in health care costs (Dryfoos, 1987). This is not just a problem affecting certain individuals and schools; it is a nation-wide problem that affects everyone.

In 2007, 87% of 25- to 29-year-olds had received a high school diploma or equivalency certificate (Planty et al., 2008). Although this percentage increased seven percentage points between 1971 and 1976, the high school completion rate has remained between 85 and 88% over the last 30 years (Planty et al., 2008). Graduation rates are a fundamental indicator of how schools are ultimately performing. Only recently have those rates been rigorously scrutinized and the extent of the crisis in America's high school been revealed. For decades, schools and districts published misleading or inaccurate graduation rates. As a result, the American public knew little of the scope and gravity of the problems faced by far too many of the nation's high schools. Reputable and independent research has exposed alarmingly low graduations rates that were previously hidden behind inaccurate calculations and inadequate data (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009). Nationally, about 71% of all students graduate from high school on time with a regular diploma but barely half of African American and Hispanic students earn diplomas with their peers. In many states, the difference between White and minority graduation rates is stunning; in several cases, there is a gap of 40 or 50 percentage points (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2009).

For dropouts and for society, the consequences of this crisis are severe. Typically, a high school diploma is a prerequisite for the majority of jobs. In 2005, a high school dropout in the United States earned approximately $10,000 less annually than a high school graduate. On average, those with no high school diploma earn $260,000 less over the course of a lifetime compared to those who graduate from high school. Moreover, high school dropouts are far more likely to be tax consumers rather than taxpayers, use welfare and public health services, and commit crimes. Researchers estimate that each high school dropout costs society about $209,000 over the course of his or her lifetime (Wise, 2008).

At this point in history, the United States faces a crucial choice. Fundamentally, little has been done to change the way students are educated in their high school years, guaranteeing a continuing educational decline and a weaker nation. Education institutions must choose a path that will secure a qualified workforce, thriving economy, and vibrant, democratic society by summoning the political will to transform secondary school into thriving institutions of learning (Conner & McKee, 2008).

There is growing evidence that dropout rates are continuing to increase but little is known regarding how to fix the problem once the student has dropped out of high school. Several programs claim to prevent dropouts and schools are putting in place programs to identify at-risk students. NCLB legislation (2002) has focused on low achievers. They have employed support networks such as counseling and social workers to assist students with staying in school. Many alternative programs assist students once they have dropped out of school and are seeking to return. However, the refined question of how programs can improve, or even better, meet the four-year timeline of graduation does not

exist. If educators are going to successfully lead schools that are both equitable and

excellent, we must first believe excellence is possible (Scheurich & Skira, 2003).

Educational leaders today face hundreds of decisions daily but none is more important

than that of graduating children from high school.

NCLB (2002) has brought the problem of dropout and non-completers to the

forefront of education leadership. New legislation of NCLB should now reflect the use

of data from the last decade to launch programs and policies that correct issues previously

hindering students in the education system. The stakeholders in education include the

student, the family, teachers, administrators, and society. Human beings are moral

agents; they are responsible for their choices and have a duty to make choices in a

morally responsible way. This is especially important when individuals have power and

influence over the lives of others (Strike, Haller, & Soltis, 2005). On February 26, 2005,

Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and one of the richest people on earth, addressed

governors, CEOs, and leading educators at the National Education Summit on high

schools held in Washington, D.C. In his address, Gates referred to college graduates as

the next work-force of the 21st century. He recommended that high schools be reformed

so all students will be ready for college. In his speech, Gates noted, "We have one of the

highest high school dropout rates in the industrialized world" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 135).

In a world of chronic scarcity, diversity, and conflict, the astute manager has to develop a

direction, build a base of support, and learn how to manage relations with both allies and

opponents (Bolman & Deal, 2003).

State Tabulation of Graduates

Each state keeps a tabulation of their graduates. The states need to decide two

things--what counts as a diploma and who counts them? The states may differ slightly in

the definition of a diploma but in terms of the latter, some researchers have relied on the

Common Core of Data (CCD) from the National Center of Education Science (NCES)

and some on the Current Population Survey (CPS) from the Census Bureau (2006) or its

more recent, more accurate creation--the American Community Survey. A few studies

have tried using the various longitudinal studies of students as they move through school

and into adulthood (Bracey, 2009). CPS data invariably produces higher estimates of

graduation rate than the NCES data (Bracey, 2009). Different methods for data keeping

by states across the country could lead to skewed versions of data that do not accurately

reflect differences among school districts and across states.

The Common Core of Data (CCD) is an annual collection of elementary and

secondary education data administered by the National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES) and its data collection agent, the U.S. Census Bureau (2006). To tabulate the

number of dropouts each year, schools follow a formula that puts students in a cohort

early in their high school education. A student stays in the cohort until graduation or if

the student drops out, the number of successful completers is less than the original cohort

number. Data for the CCD surveys are provided by state education agencies (SEAs)

(Sable & Garofano, 2007). The dropout rate reports the percentage of public high school

students (grades 9 through 12) who leave high school between the beginning of one

school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its

equivalent (e.g., a GED). They also do not meet any of the following exclusionary

conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state or district approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or death (Tang & Stable, 2009). The state needs to account for every student who started in the original count.

Types of high school completion credentials available to students vary from state to state, which also makes determining the number of students who drop out more difficult. For example, in some states, the only type of high school completion available is a regular diploma; in other states, transferring credentials of completion are awarded-- from a regular diploma to a certificate of attendance. For this reason, caution should be used when comparing state totals of diploma recipients (Sable & Garofano, 2007). In other words, high school diplomas mean different things in different states. In addition, a few states still have varying degrees of diplomas that promote students based on attendance. However, Colorado schools do not use attendance as a sole determination for high school graduation status.

Ninth grade serves as a bottleneck for many students who begin their freshman year only to find that their academic skills are insufficient for high school-level work. Up to 40% of ninth grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat ninth grade; only 10 to 15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Balfanz & Legters, 2006).

During the 1950s, state laws defining compulsory school attendance varied widely. Children between the ages of 14 and 16 who had legal employment typically were allowed to quit school. In 21 states, a student could leave after reaching the eighth grade and in 12 states after reaching the sixth or seventh grade. In 1955, the National Education Association (NEA) called for mandatory attendance until graduation from high

school or age 18. However, the issue fell under states' control; each state had to debate

the issue and pass its own law (School Dropouts, 2006).

Record keeping of transcripts and enrollment history are typically completed by

the registrar in a high school. When a student drops out of school, the registrar records a

reason for leaving from a predetermined dropdown menu provided by the enrollment

office within the district. This list of reasons is predetermined by the state recording

office; subsequently, this is how the state department of education tabulates the school

district's year-end reports. For example, to eliminate duplication of student records, if a

family relocates to another city within the state during the school year, the record keeping

reflects the absence of that student and the student is then registered in another school in

the same state. However, each time a student truly drops out of school without a

receiving school, the student is registered as a dropout. The school of record for the

student who dropped out is then accountable for the data of that particular student. The

Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has post-collection edits that instruct the

original district to code the student as a dropout unless they verify the student's

attendance in a valid educational environment after exiting the school district (Tombari,

2009).

The dropout number is also associated to poverty. Poverty is often thought of in

terms of African American, Hispanics, and Native Americans. Perhaps this is because,

from a percentage point of view, these ethnicities tend to be more concentrated with

statistics of poverty (Williams & Carroll, 2008). Poverty for Hispanics tends to be more

scattered in rural areas, mountain regions, and trailer homes. It should be noted that

White children represent the largest number of children in poverty in the United States

(Williams & Carroll, 2008). However, children from other racial groups represent the largest percentage of children living in poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2006) and reported by Kunjufu (2006), data regarding 40 million Americans who live below the poverty-line break down as follows. White Anglo-Saxons account for 20 million people; 10% live below poverty. Of the nine million African Americans in the United States, 25% live below the poverty level. Two million Asian/Native Americans (16%) live below poverty. Of the nine million Hispanics in America, 25% live below poverty.

In 1971, only 59% of Blacks completed high school compared to 82% of Whites. Between 1971 and 1982, the gap between Blacks and Whites decreased 15 percentage points to 8 percentage points. However, since 1982, the gap has remained between 4 and 10 percentage points. In 2007, the high school completion rate for Blacks (88%) was still below that of Whites (93%). The high school completion rate for Hispanics increased between 1971 and 2007 from 48% to 65%. Unlike the gap between Blacks and Whites, the gap between Hispanics and Whites fluctuated but was not measurably different in 2007 than it was in 1971 (Planty et al., 2008). The achievement gap with Hispanic students appears to be staying constant with no significant movement or improvement. Students of all ethnicities struggle to graduate and at a variety of rates. However, little information is known as to why students begin to struggle and ultimately drop out of school.

Why Do Students Drop Out?

While there is no single reason why students drop out, research indicates that difficult transitions to high school, deficient basic skills, and a lack of engagement serve

as prominent barriers to graduation. Most dropouts are already on the path to failure in the middle grades and engage in behaviors that strongly correlate to dropping out in high school. Various researchers have identified specific risk factors, e.g., low attendance or a failing grade, which can identify future dropouts; in some cases, this is evident as early as sixth grade (Jerald, 2006). Academic success in ninth grade course work is highly predictive of eventual graduation; it is even more telling than demographic characteristics or prior academic achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Unfortunately, many students are not given the extra support they need to successfully make the transition to high school. As a result, over one-third of all dropouts are lost by ninth grade (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007).

Research on school dropouts has examined a myriad of factors that predict why some students fail to complete high school. These factors fall into two distinct perspectives. The first perspective focuses on individual factors associated with dropping out. The other is based on an institutional perspective that focuses on contextual factors found in students' families, schools, communities, and peers. Both perspectives are useful and necessary to understand this complex phenomenon. In addition, research has examined the proximal factors to dropping out-- those associated with experiences and backgrounds of students before they enter high school that may contribute directly or indirectly to their early withdrawal from high school (Rumberger, 2004). A number of studies suggest that children with poor social skills and emotional control have more difficulty getting along with peers and with adults. They experience early academic failure that leads to later academic and social problems and, eventually, early school withdrawal (Rumberger, 2004).

The six million secondary students who comprise the lowest 25% achievement group are 20 times more likely to drop out of high school than students in the top-performing quartile (Carnevale, 2001). Both academic and social engagements are integral components of successfully navigating the education pipeline. Research shows that a lack of student engagement is predictive of dropping out, even after accounting for academic achievement and student background (Rumberger, 2004). Once a student drops out of high school, chances of making a living are diminished. The cost of dropping out is even more expensive for the state in terms of unemployment and health care.

The Costs of Dropping Out of High School

Dropouts suffer from reduced earnings and lost opportunities. There is also a significant social and economic cost to the rest of the nation. Over the course of his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns about $260,000 less than a high school graduate (Rouse, 2005). Dropouts from the class of 2008 alone will cost the nation more than $319 billion in lost wages over the course of their lifetimes (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2008). Not only does dropping out of high school hinder the student from earning a respectable living, drop outs economically cripple the nation's economy.

The gap in prosperity between high school graduates and dropouts has been increasing (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Dropouts are twice as likely to be unemployed; for those who work, advancement is limited and the pay is low. The average high school dropout earns just 37 cents for every dollar earned by a high school graduate and health insurance is not readily available (Ream & Rumberger, 2008). Therefore, not only is our society affected by dropout data, students themselves are left

with no health insurance, which could potentially be disastrous for both the student and assets related to health care.

If U.S. dropouts from the class of 2006 had graduated, the nation could have saved more than $17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for uninsured health care over the course of those young peoples' lifetimes (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2006b). If high schools and colleges raised the graduation rates of Hispanic, African American, and Native American students to the levels of White students by 2020, the potential increase in personal income would add more than $310 billion to the U.S. economy (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2006a). In the United States, increasing the graduation rate and college matriculation of male students by just 5% could lead to combined savings and revenue of almost $8 billion each year by reducing crime-related costs by saving futures (Alliance for Excellence in Education, 2006c). Given that there are increasingly more data to predict which students are potentially "at risk" in dropping out, there should to be a parallel increase of strategies to support those students who require more assistance to obtain a high school diploma.

Strategies to Support Struggling Students

As the industrial age gave way to corporate society and then into the postindustrial era, fewer unskilled blue-collar workers were needed so schools held more students in school longer. Preventing dropouts became a goal. Money was put into programs for young people judged to be "at risk" of leaving school too early and possibly becoming a burden to society (Tye, 2000). According to Meier (1996), "If we don't intend to educate all children well, it's cruel to keep pretending" (p. 34). This is when school systems made it a goal to have students graduate and when the graduation rate was

really looked at by society. Shortly after this period, former President George W. Bush implemented No Child Left Behind (2002); hope emerged to educate all students and prepare them for the work force, military, or college. Education and the goal to graduate could be attained by all students. It was mandated to every state that a non-funded initiative could make all the differences. Ten years later, school districts still continue to struggle to figure out how to educate "all" students.

Early warning system research shows a clear link between course failure as early as sixth grade and eventual high school dropout(s). Any school district that can reduce the rate of course failure will likely increase their graduation rate. Fairfax Public Schools (Seeley, 2009) in Virginia implemented a new strategy: they de-linked attendance from grading and instituted alternative attendance-related incentives and sanctions. The school linked with this study removed "Ds and "Fs" from the grading scale and has moved toward standards-based grading (SBG).

To assist states in streamlining curriculum and ensuring that all students receive a guaranteed and viable curriculum (or are not left behind), Common Core Curriculum was recently introduced. Common Core Curriculum is a nationwide effort to expect curriculum to be uniform across the country. President Barack Obama's stimulus package went so far as to financially support states that were in complete compliance of Common Core curriculum. Several states in the east were the recipients of the funding. In the fall of 2010, the Colorado State Board of Education adopted Common Core academic standards in math and language arts by a 4-3 margin. Colorado's failure to secure an expected share of federal Race to the Top (RTTT) funds has resurrected the concern of mandating Common Core Curriculum state-wide (Ed is Watching, 2010). In

Colorado, Marzano's (2008) guaranteed viable curriculum (GVC) is observed in many

Colorado school districts. It has been widely accepted as an excellent way to streamline

schools and districts in the curriculum taught to students and is in line with the Common

Core Curriculum. Common Core Curriculum is the version and terminology used on a

national level. As an example, if a student takes a biology class in California and the

student moves to Texas, the student can expect to get the same standards and education in

the biology class from both states. The same is true for classes in English and

mathematics. As mentioned before, Colorado has currently adopted both language arts

and mathematics Common Core Curricula. The common core expectation is the same for

science curriculum, which will be adopted in 2013. The implementation of such

standards and associated curricula may provide consistency and focus in learning goals

while allowing flexibility for struggling students to demonstrate their learning.

The implementation of standards-based education may be a method of supporting

student achievement and positively impacting the dropout problem. Standards-based

education is a process for planning, delivering, monitoring, and improving academic

programs; clearly defined academic content standards provide the basis for content in

instruction and assessment. The vision of the standards-based education reform

movement is that every student will receive a meaningful high school diploma that serves

essentially as a public guarantee that they can read, write, and perform basic mathematics

at a level that is useful for what an employer is seeking. To avoid a surprising failure at

the end of high school, standards trickle down through all the lower grades with regular

assessments using a variety of means (Worldlingo, 2010). No student by virtue of

poverty, age, race, gender, culture or ethnic background, disabilities, or family situation

will be exempt from learning the required material. However, it is acknowledged that individual students may learn in different ways and at different rates (Zagranski, Whigham, & Dardenne, 2008). Standards are chosen through political discussions that focus on what students will need to learn to be competitive in the job market instead of by textbook publishers, education professors, or tradition. Standards are normally published and freely available to parents, taxpayers, professional educators, and textbook writers (Zagranski et al., 2008).

The litany of alignment is familiar. In fact, it was encoded in federal law under the administration of former Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Standards were to be developed to establish the learning goals or central direction of the system. (Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994). The curriculum, assessment, and teacher professional development were to be aligned with those standards. Regular assessment of student learning was intended to keep districts on track toward the standards by creating a district that hums with machine-like precision in pursuit of learning nirvana. Under the provisions of No Child Left Behind (2002), this was to be achieved by 2014 (Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, Harvey, & Koff, 2005). The same explanation alignment existed in the interpretation of standards-based education and how to measure growth. This made it imperative that teachers develop instruction that supports the learning of all students, particularly those traditionally at-risk for dropping out of school.

A curriculum defines the knowledge and skills schools are to impart to students. According to Cornbleth and Waugh (cited in Marshal & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005), "Different values and interest are sustained or modified depending on which curriculum knowledge is selected" (p. 176). The "hidden curriculum" is often difficult to detect but is clearly

defined by the White dominant culture, which is social injustice in itself. Background knowledge for students has become more diverse as America continues to grow and be more mobile. Gone are the days where communities are completely homogeneous in heritage (DeFour & Eaker, 1998). An exemplary school district should provide a diverse and balanced curriculum that includes a core which specifies the knowledge and skills all students are to attain. The district designs its curriculum and instruction to enable all students to acquire these outcomes through their student educational plans (DeFour & Eaker, 1998). Furthermore, if balanced and diverse, the curriculum should enhance learning for all students.

In Colorado, current and past curricula have failed to address the Latino culture change seen in many communities (Kranick & Hargis, 1998). Hence, the achievement gap continues to widen. Kranick and Hargis (1998) believe that the student dropout should be viewed as a curriculum casualty rather than a form of self-suicide or an individual casualty. By placing the blame squarely on the shoulder of the school system, they argue that the responsibility and accountability of student failure rests with educators. They blame the structure of the curriculum for the child's failure. The implication is that if the curriculum is adjusted to fit the child, then the child would be successful. What is not so obvious is that to make the necessary corrections to the curriculum, school leaders must be able to not only recognize what is wrong, but they must know what corrections are needed. Then they must be willing and skilled enough to make the necessary corrections (Kranick & Hargis, 1998). Continued evaluations of curriculum and alignment with cultures in communities could substantially support students in accessing curriculum.

Teachers are learning to differentiate curriculum to connect with students and better configure lesson plans to reach students (Wormeli, 2007). Teachers who use differentiation of curriculum to assist students seem to be able to target student needs better then teachers who do not use differentiation. Teachers want help within the classroom, both formally and informally, by designing lessons that are flexible enough to shift gears to achieve different student learning needs while moving about the room with a large repertoire of responses ready to apply at any moment (Wormeli, 2007).

Assessment is also part of instruction and can heavily impact a student's motivation (Covington, 1993). Current grading policies have a tendency to be punitive in nature (Wormeli, 2006). For a student struggling with a mathematical concept, the course grade could potentially plummet to reflect failure of that one concept. Then, if the student grows in knowledge and is able to apply other newly learned skills, the failing grade is still irreversible because the grade dipped too low to recover with one or two assignments. The mathematical number of "zero" can be too big a hurdle to overcome. The stakeholders in grading policy transformation are clearly the students and their efforts to learn without penalty of a failing grade due to an unfair grading policy. The responsibility of implementing a fair and equitable curriculum, the measurement of success for students, and fair grading policy rest with the educators. The change to a standards-led system must then be an evolutionary process that does not concentrate only on the alignment of curriculum, assessments, and instruction. As important as alignment is, the development of a learning environment is another and equally important core task of schools and educators (Vogel, 2010).

It is assumed that schools across America are continuing to move toward educating all students and changing the way education is delivered in order to engage and graduate all students (Senge, 1990). According to Senge, learning organizations are places where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patters of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. The basic rationale for such organizations is that in situations of rapid change, only those who are flexible, adaptive, and productive will excel. It is argued that for this to happen, organizations need to discover how to tap people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels (Senge, 1990). The actions of districts and schools can have a profound impact on student achievement and dropout figures. Yet historically, districts and school have been so loosely coupled that they have had little influence on what occurs in individual classrooms; consequently, they have had little influence on student achievement (Marzano, 2008).

Several strategies may support at-risk students staying in school, completing a meaningful curriculum, and earning a diploma: standards-based curriculum and instruction, a greater emphasis on formative assessments, alignment of all elements of the learning process, and the establishment of a learning organization mindset in schools. These reforms hold hope in supporting struggling students as they face personal and educational challenges and barriers.

Coping Skills and Self-fulfilling Prophecy

To examine the rationale behind why a student would dropout, it is imperative to consider the individual student and how the student "feels" about education. Typically,

self-esteem is defined in terms of how a person evaluates him/herself and his/her characteristics--the personal judgment of worthiness expressed in the attitudes the individual holds toward him/herself (Kohn, 1998). Someone with high self-esteem would presumably expect to do well, thereby setting into motion an "auspicious circle" as distinguished from the vicious one that traps individuals who are consumed by self-doubt. Theorists and therapists, to say nothing of teachers and parents, have been saying as much for decades (Kohn, 1998). What is true of sticks is also ultimately true of carrots; when subjects expect rewards for attaining a specific level of competence, the incentive for success or failure of performance becomes a moot point for students and interferes with intrinsic interest. In other words, performance is properly regarded as a by-product of motivation (Kohn, 1998).

Educators and those who support them ought to make their top priority the creation of a school environment that preserves and enriches students' desire to learn (Kohn, 1998). In a learning environment, teachers need to help students engage with what they are doing to promote deeper understanding (Stiggins, 2007). Students' interests may therefore help shape the curriculum. A growing capability with words and numbers derives from the process of finding answers to their own questions. Skillful educators tap students' natural curiosity and desire to become competent. If students perceive the learning as meaningful, then the pursuit of knowledge becomes worthy of their time and effort.

Students come to school as blank slates but possess a wide array of understandings and perceptions related to norms, stereotypes, gender roles, and the means for survival and advancement (Adams et al., 1997). These must be utilized by teachers to

make learning meaningful and provide students with additional skills to advocate for themselves and have a voice in society. Understanding students' backgrounds then becomes imperative for teachers to motivate students and provide a socially just and culturally responsive classroom environment that supports the at-risk student's success.

Socio-Economics of Students

Students who are in their fifth year of high school often find themselves in financial straits that add to the frustration of developing a plan for graduation. Parents become reluctant to help the student and romances and friends come to the rescue. Under the McKinney Vento Act (2002), homelessness can be defined as living in Colorado with persons who are not recognized as the legal guardians. If a school is privy to the living situation of a homeless student, financial supports can be put in place for that student; however a school must first seek to become aware of such a situation or have the student volunteer such information.

The McKinney Vento Act (2002) is a federal law designed to increase the school enrollment, attendance, and success of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The McKinney Vento Act was passed in 1987 and was reauthorized as part of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (NCLB; 2002). It is the only federal law dedicated specifically to supporting the educational success of students in homeless situations. The cornerstone of the McKinney Vento Act is school stability. Students who are McKinney Vento eligible can remain eligible due to their circumstances or until the end of the school year in which they find permanent housing and remain in the same school (Julianelle, 2007). Due to their mobility, one enormous impediment for homeless students is frequent changes in enrollment. Youth in care and those experiencing

homelessness confront profound instability in their school placements. For example, 28% of homeless children go to three or more schools in a single year (Julianelle, 2007). Mobility and homelessness can only lead to a larger gap in high school graduates and dropouts (Julianelle, 2007).

As educators join forces with sociologists, behaviorists, and researchers, the question has been raised, "Is it culture or poverty that creates the discrepancies in achievement among groups that are in the classroom today?" Studies indicate that it is not culture or poverty; rather, it is culture *and* poverty (Williams & Carroll, 2008). When we know and understand the precious knowledge of students, we can then incorporate differentiated instruction that best fits the learner and the culture from which they come. Then motivating the student through learning experiences that are meaningful and increasing the learner's cognitive and emotional ability to attain a diploma become possible. Society needs to stop looking at the deficits a student brings and start looking at the gifts and life experiences each student brings to the classroom (Williams & Carroll, 2008). One core area of study is the process of learning. What are the stages of the learning process? How do children of poverty process learning best? In her research on resilience, Benard (1996) refers to autonomy as one of the characteristics needed for children to engage in the learning process. She identifies in this way:

> Autonomy has to do with a sense of one's own identity, it involves an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one's environment, and it includes a sense of task mastery, internal locus of control, self-agency, and self-efficacy. The development of resistance (refusing to accept negative messages about oneself or one's culture and of detachment, distancing oneself from parental, school, or community dysfunction) serves as a powerful protector of autonomy. (p. 99)

If schools do not have some knowledge of children's lives outside of the realms of paper and pencil work, and even outside of their classrooms, then teachers cannot know their strengths. Not knowing students' strengths leads to "teaching down" to children. Teaching down can be detrimental to students and their motivation to graduate from high school within the traditional four-year time period (Delpit, 1995).

Time Factor

The time factor that surrounds the high school diploma process is a barrier for both the student and the educational system. Four years is the traditional number of years dedicated to educating a student. School systems do not promote education beyond the traditional four years of study except when dealing with special education--a federally funded program. However, some students do return to school and alternative high schools exist to assist those students in earning a diploma. By law nationwide, a student can be educated through the semester of turning 21 years of age (Wormeli, 2006).

Culture of Education

Patchen (2004) believes that positive relevant classroom experiences are critical to a student's motivation and learning. He notes that the following factors have an impact on student success: (a) the educator's motivation and skills, (b) the school's curriculum along with other aspects of the academic program, (c) the school's climate, and (d) the various pressures exerted on the school from outside the school. According to Patchen, schools are learning laboratories where students learn academically, socially, personally, and morally on a continuous basis. Given those dynamics, students who attend types of schools are ripe for learning. He further suggests when teachers and school-based leaders provide warm caring environments for students, students will respond accordingly.

Structure and culture are inextricably intertwined in school; successful changes in both tend to be concurrent. Culture is not easily defined because it is largely implicit and unseen. A newcomer to a school usually discovers the school culture when he or she breaks one of the culture's norms. Among these are observed behavioral regularities including being espoused by an organization. The unique personality of each school is a function of, among other things, its history; the community of which it is a part; and internal factors such as the quality of its adult relationships, the number and intensity of its problems, and the climate of most of its classrooms (Tye, 2000). Students face culture shifts within their day from home and school life.

The clash between school culture and home culture is actualized in at least two ways. First, when a significant difference exists between the student's culture and the school's culture, teachers can easily misread the student's aptitudes, intent, or abilities as a result of the difference in styles of language use and interactional patterns. Secondly, when such culture differences exist, teachers may utilize styles of instruction and/or discipline that are at odds with community norms (Delpit, 1995). To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of children's lives outside of school so as to recognize their strengths (Delpit, 1995).

Alternative Schools

Students who need additional time to finish high school will often seek out alternative methods to achieve a high school diploma. Larger school districts have alternative schools or programs in place to assist students in getting back on track to graduate. Student retention is extremely challenging for these programs (Conner & McKee, 2008). Their mission is to provide a second chance to students who could not

succeed in a traditional high school setting. Alternative schools must regularly deal with academically low-performing students, pregnant or parenting youths, or students with disciplinary problems. One study points out that these particular categories of students are at higher risk of dropping out of school (Conner & McKee, 2008).

When students fail to complete high school in four years, they may want to return to school as a fifth-year student. There are alternative high schools that exist to assist students in their endeavors to succeed. The time constraint of being able to catch-up on a year of academic loss due to a variety of circumstances looms for school districts as they continue to "figure out" what can be done differently to aid students in the education process. As stated previously, school districts' data reflect only a single number of graduates; that number does not include those graduating early and those who take longer than four years to earn a diploma (Bracey, 2009). If a student returns to school after dropping out, the data do not reflect the longer period of time taken to graduate. The student is merely not counted in the graduation rate for the district.

School Size Matters

Early studies by the Consortium of Chicago School Research (CCSR; Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010) suggested that school size acts as a facilitating factor for improvement of dropout rates. These CCSR findings were consistent with a larger body of evidence about the positive impact of small school size on several factors, but most importantly student engagement in learning (Bryk et al., 2010). In addition, prior research suggested that small school size might contribute indirectly to the development of essential at-risk student supports by facilitating the formation and maintenance of relational trust across a school community (Bryk et al.,

2010). The social network of a small school is typically less complex, allowing personal communications to flow more readily than in a larger school (Bryk et al., 2010).

In general, as trust grew in schools, so did improvements in teachers' work orientation, the school's engagement with parents, and the sense of safety and order experienced by students (Bryk et al., 2010). However, the opposite was also true. Schools with deteriorating trust experienced significant declines in these three core indicators of organizational functioning. The only exception to this overall pattern occurred with the curriculum alignment indicator where no change relationship was found (Bryk et al., 2010). Graduation rates and culture could then be correlated and studied by the sheer fewer numbers of students.

Sergiovanni (1994) claims that schools are now seen as organizations rather than learning communities. Dividing content areas into departments, separating students into grade levels, and designing explicit instructional delivery vehicles are all ways to convince the public that the school knows what it is doing; creating rules and regulations and monitoring programs convey the message of control. However, Sergiovanni claims that such directives over time separate organizations from the people for which they were created and end up serving their own organization goals. If schools are allowed to continue to be organizations rather than learning communities, the goal of decreasing the graduation dropout rate is going to continue to be a goal with no expectation of improvement.

Summary

The reason the problem of dropouts exists is that systems are not in place to support a student through difficult times in education. The barriers of a strict four years

to graduate along with numerous teaching strategies that fall short of meeting the student where they are in education is a brief look at why a student drops out. Educators must make changes that will ensure that schools can meet public expectations, become places where students are more successful, and where leaders must attempt to change the culture. Schools must become places that focus on lesson plans that engage students and build community. Leaders must envision new systems resting on beliefs that can support these goals (Schlechty, 2001).

Moral purpose is about both the ends and means. In education, an important end is to make a difference in the lives of students (Fullan, 2001). Policies for education that center around NCLB (2002) must certainly look at efforts to complete the requirements for a diploma despite the four year time factor. Cohorts of students should not be measured by the length of time taken to complete high school but rather the completion of the educational plan. Standards-based education has been set in motion and its purpose and effectiveness with teachers and school districts across the country are strong; however, it has not yet reached the state level of enforcing policies that support standards- based education. The true value of changing grading policies that would support student learning is a true equity access issue that deserves the full attention of state legislation.

Despite a surge in dropout research in the past few years, students' own perspectives remain largely hidden and perceptions of youth who leave school as delinquents, social deviants, and "losers" are prevalent (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p. 258). Likewise, the role of schools remains vastly unexplored. A theoretical framework that supports the development of such understanding is the structure-culture-agency

framework (Brown & Rodriquez, 2009). When a school system can drill down to the very core of the issue, only then can a resolution reset the forefront.

       Lacking in the literature are studies that examine individual cases of the struggle to earn a high school diploma. Most nationwide and state data focus on numbers of graduates or a non-completed graduate. Often what is known about a student is along autobiographical paths that look back after the fact rather than insight of the circumstances while high school is occurring. Little is known of the individual story that brings a student through the struggle to attain a diploma when the odds are against them. A qualitative study that looks deeper into an individual case-study could broaden the knowledge needed to change education policies that currently hinder students from seeking a high school diploma if more than four years is necessary. The following chapter presents the epistemology, theoretical framework, methodologies, and methods used to address the research problem and the questions raised to study this phenomenon.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The research questions provided the overall design and research questions for the

research. In the following section is the plan followed for this research using two

methods: case study and portraiture. The following subdivisions define the purpose of

the study, participants, setting, make-up of participating school, theoretical perspective,

data collection and analysis methods, and trustworthiness. To address the research

problem, the following research question was raised by this qualitative case study

inquiry:

Q1   What does a Latino male student experience as he journeys through a
       fifth-year of high school continuing his education toward achieving an
       accredited high school diploma?

To gain a deeper understanding of the problem, three sub-questions were also raised:

Q1a   What is the student's perspective of why it takes longer to graduate?

Q1b   What is the student's perspective of the education system and how it
        relates to his educational experience?

Q1c   What does the student feel he needs from the educational system in order
        to graduate?

Purpose of the Study

As harmonizing methodologies, case study and portraiture align well with the

epistemology and constructionism framework of this inquiry. Epistemology deals with

the nature of human knowledge and embodies how we know what we know (Crotty,

1998). Constructivism, the epistemology most often cited in qualitative studies,

interprets that the meaning cannot be discovered or created; rather, it can only be

constructed by humans as they engage with the world (Crotty, 1998). In the following

sections, these two methodologies are explained from the researcher's view of inquiry

(Merriam,1998).

Case Study

A case study is expected to catch the particulars and complexity of a single case

and to understand its activity within important circumstances (Stake, 1995). The design

of a case study includes extensive data collection from multiple sources such as

interviews, observations, documents, artifacts, and audiovisual materials (Creswell, 2005;

Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). Case study may be used in either

quantitative or qualitative research (Yin, 2009); however, the exploratory and descriptive

nature of qualitative case methodology has particular value for the field of education

(Merriam, 1998) where the cases of interest are usually people and programs (Stake,

1995). Merriam and other notable qualitative researchers refer to a case being

"bounded." This reference lets the reader know that there is clear beginning, middle, and

end to the time and place of the study. The particular setting is predetermined for

purposes of the study to gain the best results.

Portraiture

Like case study, portraiture is another qualitative research methodology used to

"capture the richness, complexity and dimensionality of human experience in social and

culture context, conveying the perceptive of the people who are negotiating those

experiences" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). A portrait is the bridge from the

arts, music, and poetry that connect to the science of rigor and discipline (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The passage below describes the relationship between the portraitist and the portraiture.

> Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions-their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. The drawing of the portrait is placed in social and cultural context and shaped through dialogue between portraitist and the subject, each one negotiating the discourse and shaping the evolving image. (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv)

Like all researchers working within the phenomenological framework, portraits find context crucial to the documentation of human experience and organizational culture. This documentation includes physical, geographic, temporal, historical, culture, and aesthetics details within which the action takes place for the participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Epistemology: Constructionism

Epistemology is the study of knowing how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998). The epistemology of constructionism is the view that knowledge is contingent upon human practices and transmitted through a social context (Crotty, 1998). Within that context, meaning is born (Crotty, 1998). My epistemological stance was focused on constructionism and the belief that we all engage and interpret the world with different meanings about the same phenomenon (Crotty, 1998). With regard to this study, the Latino male might construct meaning differently around the perception of his fifth year of education than what the researcher might interpret from the interviews and data. Crotty (1998) noted that "different people may well inhabit quite different worlds. Their

different worlds constitute diverse ways of knowing, distinguishable sets of meanings, and separate realities" (p. 64). Constructionists believe we are all introduced to a world of meaning through the complex and subtle processes of the cultures into which we are born (Crotty, 1998). Based on this definition, constructionism provided the epistemological foundation for this study.

Theoretical Perspective

In this study, I used a constructivist approach as defined by Crotty (1998) using multiple subjective and socially constructed realities. The researcher's subjectivities on this topic are from a traditional leader approach. The thinking was that this dilemma or dropout retrieval was a systemic problem that could be corrected by merely changing a policy. The reality was that it might be a deeper issue that required several levels of change for schools and school districts. Interpretive research, which is where qualitative research is most often located, assumes that reality is socially constructed and that there is no single observable reality (Merriam, 2009). According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), constructed meanings by critical theorists historically engage in objective description and attempt to raise awareness of positive change.

Creswell (2006) defines constructivist perspective as one that includes multiple views, complexities, and realities of particular worlds. While critical inquiry helps to make meaning of a student's feelings, a constructivist approach was used to interpret that meaning (Charmaz, 2005). The participant can be open and frank with views about his educational journey. There are undoubtedly several reasons for the complexity of the situation for which the student is now a part of in working toward a high school diploma.

Participant

The subject of this case study was purposefully selected to encompass several at-risk characteristics including Latino ethnicity, male gender, and having dropped out of school on at least one occasion for at least two months and then returned to school after the graduation of his cohort class. The participant for this case study was a Latino male, 21 years of age, had been labeled as a dropout, but who returned to school and obtained his diploma after the graduation of his peer cohort. Although the participant is now 21, he has only recently graduated from high school. It should be noted that he tends to address answers as a young adult would at this stage in his life.

The reason for selecting a Latino male was that Colorado Student Assessment Programs (CSAP) scores for the school showed a significant decline in test results for Latino males. According to CSAP data, every Latino male's scores showed a variety of academic concerns. Also, examining the Colorado Growth Model data, there were significant indicators of Latino males declining in both the ninth and tenth grade.

The fact the former student was 21 years of age was significant to the study because he was now reflective of his high school years. He could be more objective of his behaviors and was able to be insightful of what could have been.

Setting

The setting for the initial personal interview with the participant took place in a conference room within the school where the student attended high school; a local Mexican restaurant was the location of the second and third interviews. A neutral setting where the participant felt comfortable and relaxed was paramount for data collection. A relationship of trust was developed between the researcher and student during the intake

process and daily one-to-one encounters while he completed his diploma requirements.

The participant was informed of the case study purpose and process and was given a

consent form (see Appendix A) describing the details of participating in this study. Since

the participant was over age 18, no parental consent was needed.

School Context

A few ninth grade students, 10 sophomore students, 25 junior students, and 165

seniors and super seniors were the makeup of the participating school. A "super senior"

is a colloquial term used to describe a student who has completed four years of high

school but has not yet received a diploma.

The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) has declared the school to be a

turnaround school for the 2010-2011 school years. This is a division determined by the

CDE to assist the school in making a plan for approaching success in the next five years

as measured by CSAP scores. The school has since applied and received alternative

school status from the CDE. The status prevented the publishing of school test scores but

still used CSAP scores as a reference point for student and school success.

The researcher obtained the necessary permission to conduct research through the

proper channels of the school district. The attendance and discipline data used were

obtained through Infinite Campus, an internet based program used by a majority of the

school districts in Colorado. While managing records of the student who was

interviewed, ethical consideration was of the utmost importance because I am principal of

the school where the student attended and received his diploma.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

I used emergent design once I had collected all data. Emergent themes arose out of layering of data when different lenses framed similar findings (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The interview process changed as the data were analyzed and additional interviews were necessary to clarify perspectives, feelings, and beliefs. This was not to have an emphasis that pointed toward weakness rather than strength, uniformity rather than diversity of standards, undermining rather than supporting the subjects of inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983). In this section, I describe how data were collected and then how data were analyzed to achieve results that were trustworthy.

Interviews

Interviewing is the most common form of data collection in qualitative studies in education (Merriam, 1998). To conduct a good interview, the researcher must be interested in what people have to say and believe that thoughts and experiences of the person being interviewed are worth knowing (Patton, 2002). The utmost respect for the person being interviewed is paramount (Patton, 2002). The researcher demonstrated respect by establishing a professional respect for the interviewee's time and responses to 10 open-ended questions. Three separate interviews were conducted with the Latino student: the first six interview questions consisted of questions that addressed education in general and mostly centered around his elementary education experiences; the second 10 interview questions were specific to high school completion and dropping out of school; the third interview consisted of three questions discussing the results of the first two interviews, clarification around the researcher's interpretation of the data, and

discussion of photos and journal entries related to the participant's high school experience.

Qualitative researchers commonly speak of the importance of the individual researcher's skills and aptitudes. The researcher, rather than the survey or the questionnaire, is the "instrument." The more honest the researcher, the better the possibility of excellent research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). As the administrator of a school where relationships are emphasized and students feel welcomed, my hope was to gather information that would be significant and meaningful in perceiving how dropouts see their education and graduation. Using a male Latino student for my study shed light on findings due to similarities and patterns of dropouts from other high schools across the county.

A research interview is based on the conversations of daily life and is a professional conversation. One form of a research interview is a semi-structured, life-world interview. It is defined as an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale, 1996). A phenomenological perspective includes a focus on the life-world, openness to the experience of the subjects, a primacy of precise descriptions, attempts to bracket foreknowledge, and a search for invariant essential meanings in the descriptions (Kvale, 1996).

As a result of interviewing the student, a story line emerged that revealed who the student really was and why the student chose to return to school to finish his diploma. At this point in the analysis, the researcher hoped to use "selective coding" to formulate a "story-line" that made connections to the relationships between the literature, the data,

and any proposed conclusions (Creswell, 2007, p. 67). I was anxious to hear and record the details and particulars that defined a story-line for the participant. The hope was to support the student in his continued journey and to also benefit educators in continuing to define and redefine education in the 21st century.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). In applied fields such as education, professionals must be confident that research is conducted ethically; they must also be able to trust the results (Merriam, 1998). In qualitative terms, this means research results must be trustworthy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) established four useful strategies for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, and dependability.

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the true value of research methods and how research findings tie to reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An underlying assumption of qualitative research is that "reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered" (Merriam, 1998, p. 202). The goal of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the day-to-day dealings of a typical Latino student who faced a journey to graduation. To make credibility possible, data were collected and evaluated to support the theories of a variety of reasons and body of evidence referred to as triangulation.

Triangulation includes gathering data from multiple sources using a variety of methods (Stake, 1995). Data triangulation then provides a means of validating trustworthiness by comparing data with other evidence to cross-check data, confirm emerging findings, verify accuracy, and discover alternative explanations (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2003). In this inquiry, I compared data from interviews and school records to see if emergent ideas or patterns indicated pivotal turning points for the Latino male that could have prevented the extended time in earning his high school diploma.

Another technique used to ensure credibility is that of member checking (Stake, 1995). Member checking improves credibility because when participants are included in determining the findings in the research process, it helps ensure that the participant's perspective and voice are accurately portrayed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The concept of member checking was important to this research because the cultural background of the participant was different from the researcher (Freire, 2008). Hence, there was a need to constantly check and recheck for accuracy of the interpretation of interviews and school records.

The reliability of the data gathered in this case study gave the school an example of the needs of students who re-enter public school after four years of high school. By using three in-depth interviews, the student was able be able to give reasons for returning to school and any obstacles that impeded his progress toward graduation. As a school administrator, I was interested in methods or procedures to make returning for the fifth year barrier free for students. When there is student failure or a lack of progress, blame is directed to society and the student's lack of respect for authority. My interest in exploring the underlying nature of respect was motivated by more than personal memories. I was also drawn to the concept because it holds increasing importance for public and private life today. When we worry about the deterioration of civility, street violence, the lack of decorum and safety in our schools, the invasions of privacy by the

press, harassment in the workplace, the dirty language, and offensive gestures that fill our daily encounters, researchers often cite a lack of respect as the reason our social fabric is tearing (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000).

The student's transcript, records of attendance, and grades were used to view trends that occurred during his high school years. There were patterns in the lack of attendance data, e.g., the frequency of a particular period, and patterns that developed in mornings, lunchtime, and afternoons. External validity or transferability is essential for schools that want to address the issue of educating fifth-year students in earning their high school diploma. I looked for clusters of failing grades during specific time periods within the student's records dating back to kindergarten. I also noted the enrollment history and number of school transitions for the student.

Limitations

Trustworthiness was built with this particular student over a period of time. As an administrator at the school in which the named student attended, a rapport was built and trust was felt; the interviews were an enjoyable event for me. As a result of our years of building a relationship, I had confidence that Miguel was being honest and forthright as he reflected on his education in high school. The student kept a journal of daily events he remembered feeling during high school--both positive and negative. Writings from the student played an interesting part in the evaluation process of truly "listening" to what the journey entailed for a fifth-year student. The student's transcripts were used in the study to reflect grades and time duration in attempting to complete the high school diploma. Enrollment history reflected a pattern that played a role in the student's behavior prior to attending an alternative high school. Midterm and final grades were also a reflection of

the efforts in attaining a diploma. CSAP and ACT scores were viewed to reflect the participant's efforts in progress towards graduation. Lastly, the participant took pictures that represented his high school experience. These pictures were analyzed by means of discussion between the participant and the researcher. This practice, coupled with the student's journal, gave me a more in-depth look at the motivation strategies of the fifth-year student. I was able to access each interview, set of field notes, and document identified notations as needed in both the analysis and write-up of my findings (Merriam, 2009).

Subjectivities Statement and Researcher Stance

The theoretical perspective I took in this research was justice-seeking. This subjectivity area related to my research in that I believed the perception that society has regarding a fifth-year high school student is negative. Often fifth year students returning to high school comment that employers will not hire workers unless they have earned a diploma. Society condemns the student rather than looking at the educational system as a whole and determining the problem within the system. The conditions that led a student to become a fifth-year student and how education systems fail students are issues that mandate answers.

As a researcher, I have been involved in education all my life. My father was a college professor and department chair for the business department in Dickinson, North Dakota. My mother was a high school family and consumer science teacher. Both my maternal grandparents were educators and my grandfather was both a superintendent of schools and the mayor in Grafton, North Dakota. My paternal grandparents were not directly involved in education but my father's grandfather started the first school in the

Dakota Territory located in southern South Dakota. Later, the territory was divided into

North and South Dakota. The original schoolhouse of the Dakota Territory is located in a

museum at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion.

I was raised in North Dakota by my parents; then as an adult, I raised my own

children with my husband in South Dakota. I received my undergraduate and graduate

degrees from South Dakota State University. My mother earned her master's degree in

Family and Consumer Science from North Dakota State University. My father earned his

master's degree in Business from the University of South Dakota. All three of my own

children have earned bachelor's degrees. Early in my marriage, my husband completed

his associate's degree in Business Administration. I have been entrenched and supported

education since I can remember and I cannot seem to stop learning about learning. I am

inquisitive as to why so many students struggle to earn what is their constitutional right in

education. As a 15 year veteran of teaching and eight years in administration, I continue

to wonder what educators can do differently to assist in the journey for fifth-year students

who make the decision to return to high school for a diploma.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the qualitative design of case study linked to

portraiture and case study and included the primary research question: What is the

journey a fifth-year high school student takes as he continues in his education toward

achieving an accredited high school diploma after being labeled a high school dropout by

the state of Colorado? The participant was a Latino male dropout purposely selected

because of his socio-economic status along with CSAP data that supported a decline in

test scores for Latino males, specifically from ninth to tenth grade. Data were collected

over a two-month period. Personal interviews were conducted with that student along

with personal journals and personal photos taken by the participant. Data analysis

consisted of a combination of case study and portraiture research. To ensure

trustworthiness within the findings, it was expected that the reader would understand and

empathize with a student who had little support both psychologically and financially in

preparation for earning a high school diploma.

CHAPTER IV

THE STORY

"She got her degree in cosmetology and half that diploma is mine." Miguel smiled as he proudly declared that education had always been important to him and his mom. He was only 10 when his mother attended beauty school in Mexico City. Back then, it was just the two of them and they both understood that education would give them the life they so desperately wanted. Recently separated from Miguel's father, Maria did whatever it took to put food on the table. Together, they hoped for a better life.

Maria knew there had to be a better way to live and she was going to do whatever it took to provide for her beautiful son, Miguel. Maria kept in close touch with her brother in Denver, Colorado. She had spoken to him about her concern of living in Mexico and she was anxious about the conditions, fearful of what could happen with the corrupt government and poor living situation. On more than one occasion, her brother had recommended that she and her young son move to America. Maria wanted a better life for both she and Miguel, which included an education for Miguel. In Mexico, an education is very expensive past eighth grade. Maria truly knew the value of education and what doors could be opened as a result of being educated. Maria and Miguel would spend the next year in a three bedroom apartment with first cousins and Miguel's aunt and uncle: the three cousins in one bedroom, the aunt and uncle in another room, and Miguel and Maria in their own room.

Miguel remembers waiting a couple of weeks before attending a bilingual grade school in Denver; the class size was 29 students. He smiled as he remembered the days of attending school with all Latinos in a classroom. "Everyone spoke Spanish, it was great! Even the teachers were bilingual! I was ahead of everybody in math. I was ahead in science, I liked school back then." Miguel attended that particular school for one year. He then transferred to another school in Denver but only attended that school for a month before transferring to a school north of Denver.

Memories of Miguel's father are vague, but he does have a picture of him that he keeps safe. The three of them lived as a family until Miguel was eight-years-old. His parents separated and shortly thereafter, Maria left with Miguel for America. The divorce did not become final until years later when Maria met a man and remarried. "Doing the right thing has always been important to my mom and me," said Miguel, with much deliberation.

When the mother and son moved to America, Maria began working at McDonalds. "If you know someone, you can get a job," Miguel stated quite confidently. "She knew my uncle, so she got a job." Both Maria and Miguel began working on their citizenship when they arrived in America and have continued that process. I asked Miguel how long the process takes; he was not sure but did not expect a green card for quite some time. "It takes years," he said. Miguel is now 21 years of age. There is little hope either of them will gain citizenship in the United States but Miguel remains optimistic.

Maria often helped Miguel with homework. "She is smart!" said Miguel. "She went to middle school in Mexico and received a good education." Miguel remembers his

dad being smart with numbers. His dad had been a salesman and his mother had cut hair when they lived in Mexico. "Friends would come to the house and she would cut their hair." That was before Maria had her license. It was later that Miguel remembers his mom going back to school to earn her license to cut hair: "She was 20 when she had me. My mom always wanted me to go to school and to become someone important in life." Bringing him to America was the first step to ensure the education and opportunities for her son, Miguel.

Education: The Middle

"It takes three to four thousand dollars to start the process to get a green card," said Miguel. "My mom paid it… that is the price to move here." The memory Miguel had was that Maria's brother had told the government Miguel and Maria were both single. A few years later, Maria had to pay another two thousand dollars to get divorced. "Luckily, we could do everything from here," sighed Miguel. "I have a step-dad now; she wanted to marry him." This was yet another change Miguel worked through while attending public school.

Miguel was in the seventh grade when his mom accepted a job in north Denver as a housekeeper and nanny for two young girls. The girls' parents both practiced medicine. Maria was responsible for daily chores, house cleaning, and preparing the evening meal. She and Miguel moved into the basement of the family's home and shared a room for the next four years of Miguel's education. During that time, the support for education came from the doctor and his wife, along with the never-ending support of Maria. During his eighth-grade year, a new woman surfaced as a light onto Miguel's education. Her name was Debbie and she was the administrative assistant for the K-8 school Miguel attended.

"I still didn't know much English," said Miguel. "She helped me." Miguel had moved from a mostly Mexican classroom to being one of four Mexicans in his class.

Debbie, the latest education entrepreneur in Miguel's life, suggested he attend a school that could support his language needs and start him on a path for learning a trade at the technical school while at the same time, he would be earning his high school diploma. The doctor agreed and the plans were put in motion. The one thing neither of them had anticipated was Miguel's yearning to attend a traditional school where his newly found friends were attending high school. So, much to everyone's chagrin, Miguel began high school in a traditional setting. He was lost at first and struggled to find classrooms, just as any freshman in high school would do in the same circumstance. The problem was that Miguel did not recover from the move to a bigger high school. David, the SRO (school resource officer), would find him in the halls and gently escort him to the class where he was supposed to be at the time. "He was my friend," said Miguel with a smile.

Miguel had one required class and the remaining classes were electives: "I would water the plants in the school and get mail for the teachers." The beginning of this year was a turning point for Miguel. Miguel was able to get a fake identification that led to drinking frequently after school. Most of the time, Miguel did not attend classes; when he did, there were few expectations in place to promote his high school education.

"One month later, the decision was made to move me back to eighth grade," Miguel states. There was no discussion; Miguel did not remember whose idea it was, only that it seemed the best thing to do to further his language development in English.

"I'm not sure which diploma is right," says Miguel when reflecting on his eighth grade graduation. "I have two diplomas."

Returning to middle school was difficult. "Classmates made fun of me, the way I talked." Miguel remembers one day turning around in class and saying, "I'm not going to fight you. I have the gift to speak two languages and I'm doing better then you." This remark was the defining moment for Miguel and his social life. Friendships began to blossom and English became easier and easier.

The following year, a second attempt at high school was even more disastrous than the first. Miguel struggled one month at yet another high school. He remembers being lost in the halls of a giant, comprehensive high school. This time, there was no friendly SRO to take him to class. He was put into a Spanish class and promptly began failing due to lack of attendance. He did, however, make some money in that class. Miguel completed his classmates' homework in exchange for cash. Debbie, the kind administrative assistant from the middle school, resurfaced once again in support of Miguel's education. Debbie made some phone calls, contacted Maria, and the actual high school journey began.

Education: High School

I recall my first recollections of Miguel; he was a well-dressed, beautifully spoken, adorable 15-year-old. He was polite and painfully shy. His doctor advocate was adamant in making sure Miguel was provided a good education. His mother used our translator who doubled as a registrar. She too was firm and expressed a concern that the school needed to know she meant business when it came to her son's education.

When asked if there were obstacles he remembered as being problematic to overcome while attending school, Miguel reflected on his cousin in Denver who dropped out of school and how that prospect seemed enticing at the time. Times were not easy as they once had been. When times were tough and Miguel would skip school, the doctor friend would remark on Miguel's laziness. Miguel stated,

> He had a role in making me who I am today. He and his family had a life-style that I liked. They were always doing things, like playing soccer, dancing, and going to concerts. They lived in a nice house and it seemed like they didn't have to work hard for what they had. I knew that education had given them the life they enjoyed.

Respecting the fact that working hard was going to be a factor in Miguel's life began to take shape. There would be numerous times in the future when Miguel's role model, pseudo father would step into Miguel's life situations and offer support.

One summer day, Miguel had his mom's car. He was driving over the speed limit and was pulled over by a police officer. When Maria was unsure how to come up with the money to pay the speeding ticket, she turned to her boss, the doctor. Without hesitation, the doctor paid Miguel's ticket and asked for nothing in return. The gestures of caring and concern for Miguel started to accumulate and ever so slowly, Miguel was influenced by a family who would seal his fate and future of education.

Unfortunately, the influence of friends and classmates also had a strong hold on Miguel's future. He began drinking before and after school; it was not long before drinking in school was an easy escape from the reality of difficult classes. Since all habits inevitably become expensive, stealing and selling goods for profit became second nature. A school locker served as a venue for high-end shoes and clothing. Teachers and administration commented on Miguel's appearance regularly. He looked like a "good

kid," commented the attendance supervisor. Yes, Miguel certainly did a beautiful job of hiding the turmoil of a typical high school boy struggling with identity, family, and finances. To the educators who worked with Miguel on a daily basis, he outwardly appeared to be "doing fine." When he began to struggle in math and science, the remedy was to try harder, attend more frequently, and self-advocate--common phrases teachers and administration often articulated to students and families.

The spiral had begun. School, the once safe place for Miguel, had become the battleground for numerous arguments with teachers and administration. Attendance was bleak and grades plummeted. When Miguel came to school, he was confrontational with peers and pushed the buttons of teachers who were used to a respectful, polite student. Looking back, Miguel most regretted the deterioration of a beautiful mother-son relationship that dwindled and was shaken by an uncontrollable force. Gang behavior, which consisted of stealing from Macy's and Nordstrom's to driving drunk, became the norm for a school night. "I knew that my mom wasn't happy but I kept on doing what I thought was fun," Miguel stated. To this day, there is no explanation for why Miguel continued on such a dangerous, self-destructive path. "I don't know" was a common answer to questions about that time in his life. Miguel now seems reflective and hungry for an answer that will remain hidden as he moves ahead in adulthood.

The Graduation Journey

"I was looking at my diploma yesterday," Miguel said with a smile. "It took me five years to get it." That sum did not take into account one extra year of middle school spent learning English at a higher level of proficiency. "On the first day of school, I remember being late. The doctor took me to school and my mom took me every day after

that." Maria was committed to making education work for her son. She believed her son was an Indigo-Crystal Child, which is based around the belief that there are children born in the last 20 years who will potentially change the world. The characteristics of these children include an intense ability to detect lies and who are extremely insightful of situations. It is a label given to children who possess special, unusual, and/or supernatural traits or abilities.

Unfortunately, during the next years of high school, Miguel continued his alcohol use and even dabbled with cocaine and pills. When he was clean and sober, school was easy. Miguel was well-liked by students and was frequently known to gather a group of students to "ditch" school by walking off the campus for a day in the park--a pied piper of sorts with students, both male and female. His teachers adored him and he was rarely in trouble. He most certainly knew the expectation of adults and adhered to school and social norms, at least on the surface. To get money, Miguel would steal clothes and shoes from exclusive clothing stores and sell the goods to classmates from his school locker, something he was not proud of admitting but said he just did it for fun and to earn a little money: "It was fun and we never got caught." As an adult, Miguel would never think of doing something like stealing.

Miguel's ability to be well-liked, smart, and free of any school trouble allowed him to breeze through high school with little or no problems. However, Miguel was not earning credits at a rate that would allow him to graduate with his entering cohort. All the ditching had finally caught up with him and Miguel knew something would need to change for him to graduate. At that point, he dropped out. Feeling hopeless, he put himself to use, so he thought, as a caretaker for his girlfriend's daughter. He moved back

to Denver; whenever possible, he spent time in clubs drinking and dancing; that stint lasted about four months. Miguel found himself wanting more from life. He kicked the girlfriend out and moved back in with his mom. He promptly re-enrolled in school. His mother was having difficulty even speaking to him, knowing he was throwing away his education by living with the girlfriend. Each time Miguel and Maria were at odds, it seemed to center around Miguel's education. "I used my education as a weapon toward my mom." And he did that most successfully.

Looking back, Miguel saw no options to success beyond dropping out of school and trying life. He admitted that perhaps the Latino culture of *family* was what drove him to drop out of school and then live with his girlfriend and her daughter. It was something that was familiar to him and he knew he was a good person. Why not do what he knew best?

"I remember when the principal put me on half days. I guess he thought that would help," Miguel stated. Returning to high school after a full semester off brought problems Miguel had not foreseen. Not only had he dropped out and lost a full semester of credits, the credits he had earned prior to dropping out had been dismal at best. Standards-based grading has helped. He had earned a few credits in the required classes but now school would be about credit recovery for several of the classes that were required for him to graduate. Miguel reflected on what kept him going in school. He said, "It's simple, my religion got me through."

Miguel's Catholic Religion

"Prayer and more prayer is what I relied on to get me through high school," Miguel stated. Maria had always made sure Miguel had a powerful foundation of

Christianity in his life. He was born Catholic and continues to follow his faith as an adult. The following photo was taken by Miguel as a reminder of what his religion does for him.

Figure 1. Miguel's Catholic religion.

Miguel's Mother

The second important variable in Miguel's life is his mother. According to Miguel, "The one person that I always tried to please is mom. After I came back to school, I tried to remember what the most important person in my life, my mom, would want me to do. She is such a great person and all she wanted for me was to get my high school diploma." As an adult, Miguel continues to have a great relationship with his

mother and her husband. The two men plan to start a business in Denver selling used

tires. Miguel also aspires to attend Emily Griffith, a technical institution that would give

him his auto-mechanics certificate--something he has dreamed of since middle school.

Miguel's Dog Mac

Another variable in Miguel's life is his dog, Mac:

This may sound weird but my dog was really important to me. The semester I came back to school, I found Mac; I found him on the street. He was lost, just like me and he was named after my initials. He still means a lot to me and I love coming home after work to see him waiting for me.

There were times that last senior year when Miguel did not think he would make it. The

diploma and graduating seemed miles away. Yet, with the support of various employees

in the school, Miguel trudged on.

Figure 2. Mac.

Rosa

There was a lovely woman in the school lunch program who smiled and coaxed

Miguel to attend class whenever she saw him. She would often offer lunch for free, or so

Miguel thought. She would scold Miguel in Spanish as only she could do. Since the

school was small, Rosa prepared and served the meals, and ran the register for the lunch

program. When Miguel visits the school now, Rosa can still be found working hard in the school cafeteria.

Miguel's Goals for His Education

"You have to keep on going, no matter what," Miguel stated. "You need something to start with…education can give you that." When asked what motivated Miguel in finishing high school, he quickly responded that it was about having hope: "I wanted a car and I wanted a house. So far, I have the car. That's not bad for 21, right?" Below are two pictures Miguel took when choosing to capture "things" that made a difference for his education.

Figure 3. The American dream.

Athletics

"When I was in school, I liked it when we had time to play soccer," Miguel

stated. As a small alternative school, there were often opportunities to form intermural

teams that would scrimmage during lunch periods. The soccer matches became

competitive and were well liked by the students. The teacher who added the extra-

curricular programming was also well liked by Miguel and the students.

For various reasons, primarily around funding, the soccer matches only lasted one

year at the alternative school. As an attendance site for alternative education, extra-

curricular sports and activities were not a focus. Miguel spent a lot of time with me

explaining why having sports and the arts would benefit students who struggle to attend

school.

Figure 4. Soccer.

"I watched all the opportunities that the doctor gave his daughters and I wanted something I could call mine," Miguel stated. Perhaps Miguel's experience is unique; he literally lived in a home where there were the "haves" and "have-nots." For him, it was motivating.

Art

Miguel was artistic as well as athletic. His charm seemed to come naturally and his gifts were plentiful. The sketch in Figure 5 is one of his favorites.

Figure 5. Artistic talent.

Journal Entries

During the research period, journal entries were submitted by Miguel in an attempt to capture some of the "good times" in high school and some of the 'bad times."

Good Times

- I loved it when my classmates from other countries told their stories about life and how moving to American has been the same or different from my experience.

- Being involved in school activities such as helping new students find their way around the building. I also enjoyed helping other students with homework.

- I enjoyed learning. It seemed like every day there was something that one of the adults would share that I was interested in.

- One time my mom came to school for lunch and we had a guest dance troop. My mom and I actually danced in front of everyone!

- Looking back, I am most grateful for being able to attend a school like this one.

Tough Times

- I shouldn't have gotten involved in gangs. A lot of bad decisions were made when that part of my life was happening.

- When I was drinking every day, I had problems concentrating and I paid for the consequences.

- When things were tough at home, it made it difficult to concentrate at school. If I was fighting with my mom, everything seemed to go wrong.

- A life lesson was learning to get along with others. That process involved learning people-skills. I have a really hard time developing those skills which landed me in the "office" plenty of times.

- When math and science became difficult in high school, I wanted to drop out. It seemed like I would never be able to pass the classes that I need to graduate.

The above journal entries reflect a serious minded educated student who recalls the good and bad times he had in high school. Miguel is now a man and the reality of high school is forever branded in his mind. It is a time in his life he will never forget and a journey that was most eventful. Miguel moved through his education with a few "bumps" in the road but he conquered the obstacles life handed him. He is grateful every day for the opportunity to be educated. Miguel's hope now for his life might include furthering his education in auto mechanics. He is currently employed full-time laying tile for a corporate business in Greeley, Colorado. Miguel has a serious girlfriend. A common pastime consists of quiet evenings with his mother and step-father in south Denver.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Research for this project began with three interviews with a Latino male named Miguel. The former high school graduate journeyed through high school after making the trek as a young boy with his mother from Mexico City. Miguel dropped out of school as a senior, returned to school after a gap of one semester, and was able to graduate the spring of his fifth year in high school. He was given a camera and a journal to reflect on what motivated him to finish high school and what barriers were present in returning to earn his high school diploma. School records were used to triangulate evidence from the interviews.

Difficulties arose from the initial intent to meet with Miguel; he and his mother had moved a significant number of miles away from the school attendance area. However, with hopes of supporting future students in similar situations, Miguel's excitement to share his story outweighed the complications in conducting the interviews in a timely manner. Time was also a variable that impeded the interview process because Miguel held a full-time job with varying hours and days of the week. Questions that were prepared prior to the interviews seemed pertinent to the findings but became a distraction when Miguel began to tell his story. As a researcher, I found myself veering from the carefully designed script and delving into questions that would assist him in deepening the reflection and details of his high school experience. Some of what was

revealed was heart breaking to hear as an administrator. The ultimate goal of educating and supporting the process of graduation became clouded with daily details of family, friends, drugs, alcohol, and language challenges.

This chapter is the summary of results and data gathered from a qualitative portraiture study. Two main subdivisions emerged from the study: the areas of education that went well for the student while he attended a public school and the areas of concern related to the student's overall education.

The following paragraphs reflect the extrapolated ideas that supported the findings of the cumulative data. The first subdivision contains eight topics identified by the student that were conducive could serve as a vehicle to success in school: art, soccer, positive school climate, small classes, block scheduling, second language acquisition, diversity, and a variety of enrollment opportunities. The topics were talked about by Miguel numerous times throughout the interview process. Information was triangulated whenever possible.

Strategies and Tactics That Supported
Miguel's Education

Miguel was adamant in requesting that all aforementioned variables be present for a high school diploma to become a reality. It is enlightening for an administrator to hear from a former student about elements that were crucial in achieving success. After numerous hours spent fine-tuning these elements within a school community; the validation is reassuring.

Art and Soccer

The necessity to educate the whole child, or to both the physical and psychological needs of the student, were apparent when Miguel emphasized the need for a school to provide support in areas such as the arts and physical activity. Numerous studies in education have supported the value of physical education and the arts in the classroom. This portraiture qualitative study also supported those findings. Although a cost would be associated with providing these elements, Miguel rated the arts and physical education extremely high on the daily high school regimen.

Guaranteed viable curriculum (GVC; Marzano, 2008) has been observed in many Colorado school districts, has been widely accepted as an excellent way to streamline curriculum in schools/districts, and is in line with the common core curriculum. If the *common core craze* continues, schools will find it even more challenging to offer classes that stretch their budgets. School districts will be forced to operate in a one-size-fits-all system to qualify for funding rendered ineffective at reaching students at risk for dropping out. These students previously were referred to as "left behind."

Small Class-Size, Block Scheduling,
and a Positive School Climate

The small school and class size factors led the interview process directly into a discussion of relationships among adults and students within the school community. Miguel articulated precise character traits needed for support staff to assist students daily. The support staff included the attendance clerk, the cafeteria "lunch lady," the registrar, the administrative assistant to the principal, the nurse, community liaison, librarian, and the list goes on. Not only were those specific persons mentioned, but Miguel detailed support beyond anything that could have been suspected by an administrator within the

same building. The support staff--in this case, all women--was literally responsible for

Miguel earning a high school diploma. Each support staff, unbeknown to the others,

worked with him in daily rituals that reinforced attendance and a "can-do" attitude that

was ultimately the survival gear for completing the diploma process. The culture and

climate of a school can greatly determine the satisfaction and success of each student.

The findings from this study have changed the hiring of support staff. My goal

will be that of building a community for students that consists of ALL employees being

educated on their role in the overall school climate. Not only are support staff important

to the operation of the school, they are the essence and foundation of school success.

Second Language Acquisition
and Diversity

Miguel has always had a gift for learning English. Grammatically, there is no

evidence in his conversational language that English is his second language. The

findings from this research confirm that more support in English language development

would have benefited Miguel in both math and science. His schedule and transcripts

reflect one quarter of ESL II (English as a second language) in his freshman year of

study. There were no other language supports in place beyond that one class. In this

case, it appears that Miguel benefited from total emergence only to realize too late that

supports would have possibly prevented a fifth year of high school.

Education is the single most effective way to integrate the burgeoning population

of Latinos into the U.S. economy and society (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). School

appears to be the one constant that supports student diversity in a healthy and helpful

manner. Miguel's story began in Mexico City, Mexico and then he moved to the United

States with this mother. In grade school, he felt comfort in being with students who had a

similar language and background. As his education progressed, he found himself in a

mostly White school district. At the time, he did not realize this hindered his self-esteem

and ability to perform at the level he had previously been achieving in grade school.

Now when he reflects back on the struggles, he realizes how lonely he had been. Miguel

was later redirected by a school official to attend an alternative high school. He was once

again among familiar peers who shared a common background and language.

In the case of male Latinos, the findings point toward allowing students to choose

the school of their choice; in this case, the choice supported a healthier school culture

with diversity among the student population.

In summary, Miguel was able to articulate a variety of strategies and tactics of

learning that benefitted his educational journey. The reality of success is in the eyes of

the beholder. So many endeavors that school officials spend time supporting are often

the "nuggets" that carry the student through the difficult and uncertain times on the

journey toward graduation. I have a vested interest in Miguel and I understand his

situation. However, the results of this study still leave gaps as to why Miguel chose to do

what he did in high school. He had numerous supports and still was unable to complete

high school in four years. There are still things about Miguel's journey that I do not

know and was unable to uncover through the interview process.

Strategies That Hindered or Were Barriers to Miguel's Education

During the interview process, Miguel expressed various barriers to earning his

diploma. Four areas were teased out of the interviews and data compilation that were not

conducive to supporting a successful school experience:

- Second language acquisition: Miguel was promoted and then reassigned to a lower grade level for English language deficiencies.

- Misjudged support: Miguel was granted a half-day schedule to help off-set employment demands and attendance issues.

- Scheduling of classes: The lack of a consistently scheduled math class resulted in gaps in learning.

- School rules: Rules that were enforced supported a laissez-faire attitude toward completion: no immediate consequences for attendance and nonexistent hall passes for clarity of the student's whereabouts.

Each subject area was mentioned numerous times throughout the interview process and was triangulated with data from Miguel's school record. Each point is explained in the following paragraphs.

Second Language Acquisition

When Miguel completed eighth grade, he was a part of a graduation ceremony that frequently takes place at the completion of middle school. The following fall, one month into high school, he was removed and placed back into the beginning of eighth grade. As Miguel told his version of the story, there seemed to be confusion regarding why the school system did what it did. Miguel did not blame anyone; over the years, he decided it was for the best. He felt that the move back to eighth grade strengthened his English proficiency and gave him a whole new set of friends. By adding this year to the total number of high school years served, Miguel actually spent six years in earning his high school diploma. Academic success in ninth grade course work is highly predictive of eventual graduation; it is even more telling than demographic characteristics or prior

academic achievement (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). Unfortunately, many students are not given the extra support they need to successfully make the transition to high school. As a result, over one-third of all dropouts are lost in ninth grade (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007). The turbulent transition for Miguel definitely hindered his progress toward graduation.

Ninth grade serves as a bottleneck for many students who begin the year only to find their academic skills are insufficient for high school level work. Up to 40% of ninth grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat ninth grade; only 10 to 15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Balfanz & Legters, 2006).

As an administrator who leads a 52% Latino population, I am concerned with the philosophy behind the action taken in this occurrence. If Miguel was able to pass core curriculum classes, which he did with mostly "As" and "Bs," it seems unethical and counterproductive to return the student to the previous year of study. Although Miguel did below average work in ESL (English as a second language) classes during the two years of middle school, he was successful at core curriculum, earning passing grades; retention has traditionally been used for students who lack a core understanding of grade level curriculum. Children who are considered English learners, and therefore placed in some kind of special program, seldom receive the kind of specialized language instruction and support they need (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). A number of researchers have argued that the type of language instruction to which most English learners are exposed is inadequate to allow them to perform at high levels of achievement in an English curriculum (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). The consequence of a failed social policy results in a student who cannot progress through a public education.

Misjudged Support

During Miguel's second year in high school, attendance began to be a problem. He missed frequently; he often left school after starting the day with full intention of attending throughout. To no avail, meetings were held with the parent, student, and administration. Miguel had found a job and was enjoying the benefits of working and receiving a paycheck. Unfortunately, that benefit outweighed the desire to stay on track in school. The administration at the time made the decision to shorten the school day for Miguel. Upon reflection, he wished the decision had not been made. It only put him that much further behind in his studies. Being over-age and under credit added to the dropout momentum (Planty et al., 2008). As schools continue to make decisions that prolong graduation, the gap will remain and high school dropout rates will continue to grow.

Scheduling of Classes

When examining the continuity of classes throughout Miguel's transcript, it is obvious now that there were scheduling gaps that may have caused some of the anxiety the student had toward school. He commented once that he would not have made it through math had it not been for support he received from a volunteer college tutor who frequented the class.

Another obvious trend in Miguel's transcript was the repetition of science classes over the five year period of time. There were a few consistencies of teachers within those classes; more often, a variety of teachers taught this student science. It appears that no one was seeing the obvious, which was apparently a language-based deficit. Reflection on the comment that the tutor helped with math might be an indicator of how science could have been better supported. Science is considered demanding academic work.

Being a second language learner could definitely have played a role in the struggle

Miguel had in achieving credits in this area. It should be noted that Miguel felt confident

in both math and science when entering the American education system. In the earlier

years, his grades reflected that both subjects were easier in which to obtain passing

grades as he progressed through the educational system.

Teachers are learning to differentiate curriculum to connect with students and

better configure lesson plans to reach students (Wormeli, 2007). Teachers who use

differentiation in curriculum to assist students seem to be able to target student needs

more effectively than teachers who do not use differentiation. Teachers want help in the

classroom, both formally and informally, with designing lessons that are flexible enough

so they can shift gears while moving about the room with a large repertoire of responses

ready to apply at any moment (Wormeli, 2007). As teachers continue to implement

effective learning strategies, students will continue to benefit. The responsibility of

implementing a fair and equitable curriculum, the measurement of success for students,

and grading policy remain with educators. The change to a standards-led system must

then be an evolutionary process that does not concentrate only on the alignment of

curriculum, assessments, and instruction. Curriculum alignment is important to the

student's learning but the development of the learning environment is an equally

important core task of schools and educators (Vogel, 2010).

School Rules

Miguel also became an in-school dropout; he would ask to go to the bathroom or

office, leave the classroom, and then not return to class. He often spent time

unsupervised in the bathroom. He would meet up with other students who were asking

their teachers at the same time to go to the restroom. The combination was never

productive. This was when Miguel began doing drugs and drinking on school premises.

Unbeknownst to the adults on the campus, the problem became an epidemic for the

students involved.

The importance of supervision and discipline follow-through became evident

upon this revelation from the interview. The discipline records from that period reflect a

time when Miguel was extremely argumentative and often confronted other male students

in an aggressive manner; these were all signs that should have prompted the adults in

Miguel's world to recognize that something else was going on in his life. Knowing the

student now and reflecting on his actions then, I wish I had seen the signs. My years as

an administrator have definitely shaped the leader I am today. I would like to believe that

the very actions and behaviors that went unnoticed years ago would now be considered

red flags.

"Leaving for lunch" in school terms meant that a group of students would pile

into a car, go to the local fast food establishment, eat, and then frequently not return to

school. Miguel was no different than several of his peers. Since then, the administration

has closed the lunch period so students cannot leave the campus during lunch--a simple

solution for attendance problems across the country.

If the school is small, management becomes doable. Early studies by the

Consortium of Chicago School Research (Bryk et al., 2010) suggest that school size acts

as a facilitating factor for improvement of dropout rates. These CCSR findings are

consistent with a larger body of evidence about the positive impact of small school size

on several factors, most importantly on student engagement in learning (Bryk et al.,

2010). In addition, prior research suggests that small school size might contribute

indirectly to the development of essential at-risk student supports by facilitating the

formation and maintenance of trust across a school community (Bryk et al., 2010). The

social network of a small school is typically less complex, allowing personal

communications to flow more readily than in a larger school (Bryk, et al., 2010). In

essence, small schools can better manage students while building on the complex social

networking needed to support student success.

Summary

This chapter summarized the data and results of the qualitative study to examine

the journey a fifth-year Latino male takes while earning his high school diploma. Two

main subdivisions emerged from the study: the areas of education that went well for

Miguel while he attended a public school and the areas of concern that the school system

had control of during his years of education. The previous paragraphs reflect the

extrapolated ideas that supported the findings of the cumulative data.

The first subdivision covered eight topic areas mentioned by Miguel as conducive

to serving as a vehicle toward succeeding in school. The second division reflected areas

of concern that surfaced through the interview process; these areas reflected decisions

made by the school system that hindered the graduation process. Variables that were

controlled by the school outnumber the variable that could be controlled by Miguel or his

family. In essence, the only variable from the previous data he could control himself as a

student was school choice.

The Challenge

When a male Latino enters high school, he has already beaten the odds of advancing his education in the United States. What is the "job" of educators and administrators to fulfill the yearning for a high school diploma? The challenge to administrator is: What can we do differently for Latino male students that will address the achievement gap and decrease the dropout rate?

From this qualitative study, I learned that the hiring of support staff, who are engaged in the education of students, is the leading most influential action I can do for my students. The next influential action I can control as an administrator is that of putting supports in place that provide parameters for students in their day, i.e., hall passes, closed lunch, no partial days, and a strict adherence to rules of drinking and drugs. I challenge all administrators to implement tougher consequences when confronted with students caught drinking or doing drugs. It seems obvious that the students are desperately asking for help from the adults in their world.

This chapter reflected the story of a Latino male in his journey toward earning his high school diploma. Direct quotes were used to emphasize the innocence and beauty from which his story originates. During the interviews, I experienced a warmth and genuine appreciation for the work I do as an administrator. The student reached deep into my soul and was able to stir the passions of my educational foundations for learning and becoming an educator and now administrator. I hope to share these findings with educators and colleagues to further support the students who do not yet have a voice in our education system.

I challenge educators to consistently monitor class schedules to assure that each student is being offered opportunities in both common core and the arts to ensure a well-rounded education. A schedule that focuses a student in the direction of a successful journey to obtaining a high school diploma is paramount. This dissertation was completed in hopes of unlocking the key to what can be done to support at-risk students in graduating from high school. What I learned was that there was no one single action or element that can guarantee the process; rather, a variety of educational strategies need to be implemented for all students who pass through our doors each day.

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APPENDIX A

**INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
IN RESEARCH**

UNIVERSITY *of*
NORTHERN COLORADO

Informed Consent for Participation in Research
University of Northern Colorado

Project Title: VOICE OF A FIFTH-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT: AN
EXPLORATION OF THE JOURNEY TO ACHIEVING A DIPLOMA

Student Researchers: Joan Bludorn
Contact Number: 303.842.3843
Email: blud3271@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisors: Dr. Linda Vogel, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
                     Dr. Martha Cray, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, (970)
                     351-2960

The current length of time that a student typically takes to finish high school is four
years. This study will examine details of a former high school student's life to better
understand the journey of the fifth year in an alternative high school. The student is now
21 years of age and the perspective will be that of reflection of the school years leading
up and including the fifth year for completion of a high school diploma.

I am conducting a qualitative portraiture case study to examine the experiences a fifth
year high school student has had as he continued his education to obtain a high school
diploma. The research will take place in a coffee house or restaurant. Care will be given
in choosing a location that will allow for accurate recording and conversation.

As a participant in the research, you will be asked to participate in three face-to-face
interviews consisting of open-ended questions about the perceptions of surroundings
during your school years. I anticipate the interviews will last sixty minutes. Your name
will not be stated in the recording or in the written transcript. Your identity will be known
only by me as the researcher along with any names of teachers, administrative staff, or
school employees that you may mention. The three interviews will be taped and I will
also take notes while the interviews are in progress. Once the tapes are transcribed they
will be kept in a locked location for one month and then destroyed. I will be the only
person that has access to the locked files. The written transcript will be filed for one year
and then destroyed. You will also be asked to record ten journal entries that will include

memories of high school and reflection of what motivated and or hindered you while you were in high school.

You will be given a camera at our second meeting with instructions to take pictures in your present community that represent what motivated you after returning to school after dropping out. Discussion of both the journal entries and pictures will occur during the third and final interview. Both the original photographs and journal entries will also be destroyed one year from the interviews.

I will also be using your transcript, records of attendance, and grades to view trends that may have occurred during your years in school. There may be patterns in the attendance data such as frequency of a particular period, or patterns that develop in mornings, lunchtime, or afternoons?

Risks to you are minimal. You will be asked to share your perceptions about your educational journey in obtaining your high school diploma in a Rocky Mountain school district. The benefit to school administrators will be an increased awareness of the impact that schools have on the success of students' completing their high school diploma.

A PowerPoint will be prepared with data from the literature review, interview answers, journal entries, and photographs as a defense for my dissertation which will take place in March 2012. Publication of quotes, photos and journal entries will be published in the dissertation.

The participant and any school employees or specific school names mentioned in the interviews will be references with a pseudo name to protect their identity.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Sponsored Programs and Academic Research Center, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.

Participant's signature

_____

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns about this research and please retain one copy of this letter for your records.

Thank you for assisting with this research.

Sincerely,
Joan Bludorn

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONS FOR THE THREE STUDENT INTERVIEWS

The following questions will asked of the participating former graduate:

Questions for the First Interview

- Talk about your first memories of attending school.

- What positive influence did your mother have on your education?

- If you could change one thing about your elementary school experiences, what would that be?

- What would you have liked the teachers to have known about you, prior to coming into the classroom?

- What events in your life motivated you to continue onto middle and high school?

- What unique challenges did you have in your childhood that influenced your schooling?

Questions for the Second Interview

- Talk about your first experiences in high school.

- What brought you to an alternative high school and what were you looking for in your educational needs at that time?

- Talk about what school attendance meant for you.

- Was high school easy or difficult? Discuss details.

- What could the teachers and administration have done to make things easier for you?

- Why did you drop out of high school? What brought you back?

- How did feel each time you returned to high school to continue your education?

- What drove you to complete your diploma and why?

- How did you feel once you completed high school and received your diploma?

- What advice would you share with current students that are in a similar situation as you were in your fifth year?

Questions for the Third Interview

- Please explain each picture and what it means to you.

- How is each picture related to returning to school after you dropped out?

- Explain your journal entries.

- How can the findings from this study be used to improve the academic success of future fifth year students?

- What insights or suggestions would you give to administrators in supporting students like you in their journey to graduate from high school?

APPENDIX C

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION
AND APPROVAL**

University of Northern Colorado
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

**Application for Exemption from IRB Review
Guidelines**

Provide the application narrative description sections I – IV in the order given below. Use as many pages as necessary; however, strive to be concise and to avoid unnecessary jargon.   Attach documentation as required in Section V.

Section I – Statement of Problem / Research Question

The mantra for public education could be "one size fits all." Unfortunately, some students struggle under the current education system or find learning difficult and master content at a slower rate. Educational leaders today face hundreds of decisions daily but none is more important than those that support the graduation of children from high school. No Child Left Behind has brought the problem of graduation rates to the forefront of educational concerns but previous reforms have had little effect. This qualitative inquiry seeks to add to the understanding of dropouts and non-completers by examining barriers to receiving a diploma, such as the traditional thinking that a student must take only four years to complete high school. Grounded in an epistemological foundation built on constructionism, this inquiry is guided by critical theory framework and is driven by case study and portraiture methodologies.

In my literature review, I was able to find research that focused on dropout data that reflected possible reasons or trends for students dropping out of high school, but no research appears to have been done in a qualitative portraiture method that could transferred to other similar cases based on a student's personal journey.

What did a Latino male student experience as he journeyed through a fifth year of high school continuing his education toward achieving an accredited high school diploma?

Section II – Procedure

The subject of this case study was purposefully selected to encompass several at-risk characteristics including Latino ethnicity and male gender and who has dropped out of school on at least one occasion for at least two months and then returned to school after the graduation of his cohort class. The participant for this case study is a Latino male who is twenty-one years of age and has been labeled as a dropout, but who returned to school and obtained his diploma after the graduation of his peer cohort.

The current length of time that a student typically takes to finish high school is four years. This study will examine details of a former high school student's life to better understand the journey of the fifth year in an alternative high school. The student is now 21 years of age and the perspective will be that of reflection of the school years leading up and including the fifth year for completion.

I am conducting a qualitative portraiture case study to examine the experiences a fifth year high school student has had as he continued his education to obtain a high school diploma. The research will take place in a coffee house or restaurant. Care will be given in choosing a location that will allow for accurate recording.

As a participant in the research, the student will be asked to participate in three face-to-face interviews consisting of open-ended questions about the perceptions of surroundings during his school years. I anticipate the interviews will last sixty minutes. His name will not be stated in the recording or in the written transcript. His identity will be known only by me as the researcher along as will any names of teachers, administrative staff, or school employees that may be mentioned by the participant. The three interviews will be taped and I will also take notes while the interviews are in progress. Once the tapes are transcribed they will be kept in a locked location for one month and then destroyed. The written transcript will be filed for one year and then destroyed.

The student's transcript and records of attendance, and grades will be used to view trends that may have occurred. There may be patterns in the attendance data such as frequency of a particular period, or patterns that develop in mornings, lunchtime, or afternoons? I will include this request in the student permission letter. External validity or transferability is essential for schools that want to address the issue of educating fifth year students in earning their high school diploma. I will look for clusters of failing grades during specific time periods within the student's records dating back to kindergarten.

The participant will also be given a camera to take pictures to reflect feelings and the emotional state that was prevalent during high school. The pictures will represent the positive things in the participant's life that motivated him to continue to work on his diploma. He will also be given a journal to record memories good or bad that stand out when reflecting on the journey through high school. The third interview will center on a conversation about the pictures and journal entries and what they mean to the participant. Conversations between the researcher and the participant will clarify the meaning of the pictures taken. The pictures and journal entries will be used in the final report and dissertation defense to reflect the participant's passions and thoughts while in high school.

Section III – Disposition of Data

The three interviews will be conducted by the researcher; and confidentiality. Teachers and or staff that are mentioned in interviews will be given pseudo names for reporting and every attempt will be made to keep the participant, staff and school district private.

A PowerPoint or Prezi will be prepared from data compiled from the literature review, interview answers, journal entries, and photographs as a defense for my dissertation which will take place in March 2012.

Section IV – Justification for Exemption

This study qualifies for exemption because the participant is an adult. The school district for which the student attended has been notified of the intended research. Permission has been granted as long as the interviews take place outside of the school buildings. The data will be collected in a coffee house or restaurant, and no identifiers will directly tie individual identity to specific responses. The participant and any school employees mentioned in the interviews will be references with a pseudo name to protect their identity.

Section V – Documentation

- Attached is a copy of the informed consent document.
- Attached is a copy of standardized interview questions. Additional probing clarifying questions may be asked.

Informed Consent for Participation in Research
University of Northern Colorado

Project Title: VOICE OF A FIFTH-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT: AN
EXPLORATION OF THE JOURNEY TO ACHIEVING A DIPLOMA

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UNIVERSITY *of*
NORTHERN COLORADO
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

November 28, 2011

TO: Mark Montemayor
           School of Music

FROM: Megan Babkes Stellino, Co-Chair
           UNC Institutional Review Board

RE: Expedited Review of Proposal, *Voice of a Fifth Year High School Student: An
           Exploration of the Journey to Achieving a Diploma,* submitted by Joan Bludorn
           (Research Advisor: Linda Vogel)

First Consultant: The above proposal is being submitted to you for an expedited review. Please
review the proposal in light of the Committee's charge and direct requests for changes directly to
the researcher or researcher's advisor. If you have any unresolved concerns, please contact
Megan Babkes Stellino, School of Sport and Exercise Science, Campus Box 39, (x1809). When
you are ready to recommend approval, sign this form and return to me.

I recommend approval as is. _____ January 30, 2012
                            Signature of First Consultant   Date

Please see additional materials and communiques, enclosed.

The above referenced prospectus has been reviewed for compliance with HHS guidelines for ethical
principles in human subjects research. The decision of the Institutional Review Board is that the project
is approved as proposed for a period of one year: 7 Feb 2012 to 7 Feb 2013.

_____ 2/7/12
Megan Babkes Stellino, Co-Chair   Date
GARY HEISE

Comments: emailed 2 Feb 2012
            GDH - Revisions & email reply attached