UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

URBAN SCHOOL DROPOUTS:
A CASE STUDY

BY

BOB FISK

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING 1994

ISBN 0-612-11208-X

Canada

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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DEGREE:	DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
YEAR THIS DEGREE GRANTED:	1994

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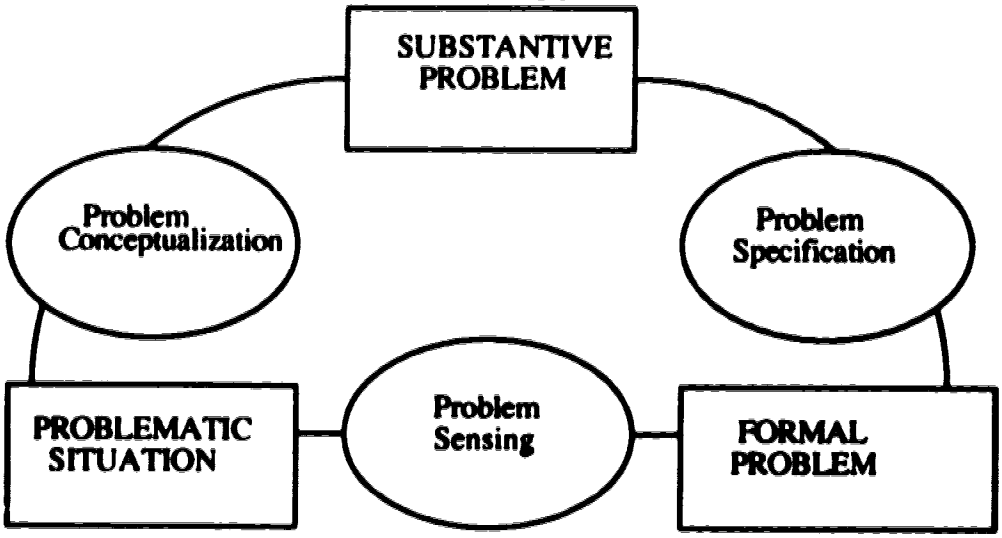

Figure I-1: The subprocess of problem structuring

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Abstract

This descriptive exploratory study examined high [illegible] in a large urban middle class high school in Alberta. The data was collected from student portfolios, student questionnaires and student interviews.

Both home and school factors appeared to be important influences regarding the decision to leave school. Salient home factors included having at least one parent that did not graduate from high school, coming from a single parent family, being abused or having parent hassles at home.

School characteristics revealed that dropouts are four times as likely to have repeated, they have triple the number of absences, and their grades are 12% lower than the graduates. Dropouts have poor study habits, are vocationally naive, and question the relevance of their studies. Males outnumber females by roughly two to one. The dropouts interviewed were not hostile towards the school, and because they planned to return to school, they did not consider themselves as dropouts.

Three quarters of these dropouts had significant work commitments, with half of them working full time, and another quarter working an average of 19 hours per week. The most frequently cited reasons for leaving school were financial and doing poorly in school.

Of interest were the recommendations dropouts made to improve the high school retention rate. There was a call to make the material more relevant to the workplace, to provide an alternate program for struggling students, and to provide caring teachers.

Included is a discussion of reflections presented by the researcher. Suggestions include standardizing the definition of dropouts, early tracking of potential at-risk students, creating alternative programs, and initiating new forms of delivery and assessment. The debate in alternative programming would suggest that higher academic standards could increase the number of dropouts.

There appear to be no guaranteed predictors that describe dropouts. However, the more of the characteristics described one possesses, the greater the likelihood that they would drop out of school.

Dropouts are not a problem that the schools alone can solve. It is a multifaceted and intractable problem that will require the concerted resources of parents, social agencies, industry, business and school systems.

Acknowledgments

It is with a feeling of satisfaction to finally come to the stage where one wishes to acknowledge others that have made this enterprise possible. Such an undertaking does not occur in a vacuum, but has several players, all of whom played important roles in making this happen. Accordingly, there are several people to whom I am indebted and I wish to thank the following:

My thanks go to: Carl Carlson for encouraging me to apply for a sabbatical and for suggesting I develop my interest in working with dropouts. To the County of Strathcona for releasing me from my duties to pursue my studies and thus facilitating this study. To the counsellors in the schools where the study was conducted, for they made the dropouts aware of the study and invited them to participate. To the administrators and counsellors who provided feedback on the questionnaire and on the transcript codes. To the dropouts for volunteering their time and for being so candid in their comments. Without them, there would be no study.

To Dr. K. Ward for guiding me into the program initially, for being patient with my impatience, and for trusting me to design the study. To the committee members, Dr. L. Beauchamp, Dr. A. MacKay, Dr. D. Richards, Dr. G. McIntosh, and Dr. F. Renihan, for taking the time to read and critique the study.

To Rita Haugh who actually volunteered to edit the rough copy and who removed countless "commas," and to Ralph Schienbein who fielded countless "urgent" concerns regarding what my computer would now not do.

Finally, to my family, Lou, Keltie and Sarah, who willingly tolerated my hours of toil and sacrificed our family time so this project could happen. Now I eagerly anticipate "family time."

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Index of Figures and Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Introduction

The issue of high school dropouts is not a new one. Dropout rates have declined steadily throughout the twentieth century ,yet the issue is receiving increased attention by the public and by the media (Rumberger, 1986). Perhaps this is because the issue is so pervasive - it involves not only the students, but also their families, the schools, and society in general.

Madak (1988a) echoed the often heard refrain of "gone are the days when...". He noted that no longer can students drop out of school, find a job and support a family until retirement. Nor can students, with a few basic skills, find a job and work their way to the top. Today a high school diploma is considered to be the minimum requirement for survival.

Education has come under increased scrutiny and criticism in the past decade for a number of reasons. First, there is a perceived need to attend to worker productivity in today's workplace. North America, if it wishes to remain in contention for today's markets, must become more productive and to this end, the public education system has received increased attention (Barber and McClellan, 1987).

A second reason education has come under scrutiny is associated with the Minimum Competency Test movement which began a decade ago in response to what some saw as a decline in the quality of instruction in schools. The 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (National Commission on Excellence in Education) recommended that grades reflect academic growth rather than effort and, also, that standardized tests serve as benchmarks of achievement. These recommendations fueled the reform movement which dominated educational literature for several years (Archer and Dresden, 1987).

Third, the number of dropouts coupled with the decrease in birth rates has led to a concern that there might not be enough literate citizens to operate the future information-age economy (Armstrong report, Edmonton Public Schools, 1988). Additionally, Neufeld and Stevens (1992) noted that today's socio-economic order is knowledge-based and those without high school credentials are seriously disadvantaged. Canada, it is suggested, is losing ground in the international economy due to a shortage of educated people. Fortune, Bruce and Williams (1991) similarly concur that in our technology-driven society, a high school diploma is necessary for survival.

Finally, there is a widely accepted belief that education is the vehicle which enables one to achieve success. Students graduate to improve their lot and the more education one has, the greater one's occupational attainment. Conversely, the lower one's educational level, the less favorable one's vocational opportunities. The casualty of this relationship between education and opportunity is the high school dropout (Williams, 1987).

Many researchers have documented the costs of dropping out of school. There are costs to the individual, such as diminished economic gains and fewer employment prospects. In addition however, there are social, economic and psychological consequences (Afolayan, 1991). Cato (1988) referred to the social and economic costs as "staggering." He cited that two-thirds of inmates in Canadian correctional institutions have no more than a grade nine education and suggested a link between dropouts and criminal activities. Additionally, he cited higher demands on unemployment insurance benefits and higher health care costs due to more frequent use of the health care system. Conant (1992) reviewed the costs of dropping out and, in addition to those listed, reported a deceleration in growth and potential associated with lower cognitive skills, a restricted social network along with a reduced sense of control over one's life due to an external locus of control.

Additionally, there is the loss of tax revenue based upon lower projected lifetime revenue. Catterall (1985) attempted to calculate the societal costs of dropping out. He cited an earlier study conducted by Levin (1972), who found that "...the costs of addressing the

problem suggests that a dollar of public investment, if effectively spent, might have brought society nearly five dollars in national income" (Catterall, 1985, p. 10). Catterall maintains that there is a loss to both the individual and to society. He cautioned however that calculating dollar figures of societal costs is an arduous and speculative activity due to the "...connections between education and a variety of behaviors. This in turn requires coming to grips with and incorporating a wide-ranging body of social science and behavioral evidence" (p. 8). He calculated that the foregone earnings exceeded $200,000 per individual dropout and $200 billion dollars for each school class of dropouts. Catterall (1985) asked whether substantive prevention efforts might not yield significant payoffs and concluded with a perplexing question. "Have dropouts been written-off because they may be too expensive or too troublesome to serve?" (p. 19). Conant (1992) discussed the economic costs and cited Hodgkinson (1991), who stated "...it is seven times more expensive to maintain someone in the state pen than it is to maintain someone at Penn State." (p. 5). Mann (1986) supported this idea when he stated, "...a year in jail costs three times as much...as a year in college" (p. 316).

Not all researchers however have found that dire economic consequences necessarily follow from dropping out. McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci and Davis (1992) cited a 1.47 ratio of earnings for graduates compared to dropouts, and stated "...dropouts did not seem to meet with the dire economic consequences so often predicted as resulting from dropping out" (p. 205).

Purpose of the Study

The major purpose of the study was to determine the nature of the dropout situation as it currently exists in a select Alberta urban high school and to suggest possible solutions that might be offered to school officials dealing with dropouts. Specifically, the purposes of the study were as follows: (a) to determine what information should be considered for problem structuring in the area of dropouts (b) to determine whether the dropout

characteristics found in the literature pertain to this study (c) to examine the histories of dropouts and identify common reasons for them to dropout, and (d) to identify suggestions dropouts offer on how to increase the holding power of schools.

Significance of the Study

Today there is increasing attention paid to the educational system and, consequently, to the dropout situation. As DeBlois (1989) stated "More research has been done on this topic in the last two years than in the previous 20, and understandably so. Dropouts are the most glaring failure of our schools" (p. 6). There is a heightened concern over dropouts in the educational literature and in the eyes of the public. It is common to find articles on the topic in daily newspapers, in popular magazines and in academic journals. The topic is a current one, and is often discussed at educational conferences. Dropouts have become a "hot" topic.

Despite this growing awareness and concern regarding this problem, there is a dearth of Canadian research on dropouts. The vast amount of research conducted in the last decade comes from the United States, and a considerable volume of this research is derived from studies investigating the poor, those in ghettos and the racial minorities. In Alberta, research on dropouts is embryonic. There is no consensus on a definition of dropouts, and consequently no reliable means to assess the extent of the problem.

In addition, it seems appropriate to determine the reliability of some of the results found in the literature, and to determine how applicable the conclusions of the American studies are when applied to a Canadian context (Sullivan, 1987).

The findings of this study could be of use to a variety of groups, such as school officials, parents, dropouts themselves, and potential dropouts. The recommendations could provide educational policy makers with a suitable framework for policy decisions in this area. Action based upon such information could facilitate positive decisions regarding this issue.

In addition, the information from this study could improve the awareness of teachers on how dropouts perceive the educational system. Such information could indirectly benefit the students if they had teachers who were not only aware of their situation, but more sensitive to the role teachers play in the overall process.

Statement of the Problem and Subproblems

The major research question for this study may be expressed as follows:

What is the nature of the dropout situation in a selected Alberta urban high school and what are some of the perceived reasons for dropping out?

To obtain information relevant to this and related questions, the perceptions of dropouts were solicited.

More specifically, information was sought regarding the following subquestions:

1. What common characteristics can be identified from the educational histories of dropouts (e.g. Is there a higher incidence of repeated grades or special education placements among the dropout population)?
2. Is peer influence a contributory variable in predicting dropouts?
3. What factors shape a student's decision to leave school?
4. What factors, within the influence of a school, contribute to a student's decision to leave?
5. What recommendations can dropouts offer to increase the retention rate of schools?
6. What are the dropout's perceptions of the increased academic standards required to obtain a high school diploma?
7. Do the perceptions of dropouts used contribute to the problem structuring process regarding policies for this population?

Justification for the Study

Concern over the dropout situation seems to escalating. There is an increased concern regarding what is described as a multifaceted and complex problem (Hahn, 1987, Afolayan, 1991).

LeCompte (1987) pointed out that prior to the 1950s, dropouts were absorbed into the economy. Madak (1988a) noted, however, that today a high school diploma is considered by many as the minimum requirement for economic survival.

The literature on dropouts has well documented the profile of the dropout. There are several characteristics that this population shares and, one associated with schools, is low academic achievement (Cato, 1988; Madak, 1987; Whelage, 1989). Dropouts have poorer attitudes toward school (Tidwell, 1988), may feel disconnected or isolated (Valverde, 1987; Archer and Dresden, 1987), have been behavior problems (Armstrong Report, 1988), have poorer attendance (Soulis, 1988), have lower grades (Madak, 1987), and have repeated grades (Tidwell, 1987; Hahn, 1987). Hartnagel, Krahn, Lowe and Tanner (1986) conducted a study on dropouts in Edmonton and found that a major reason offered for leaving was problems at school. Accordingly, it is considered appropriate to explore the school related factors which may contribute to the decision to dropout.

While school related factors may not be causal in the decision to drop-out, they may certainly contribute to the decision. It therefore seems germane to examine some of the factors which are within the school's control to determine how they might contribute to the situation.

The study also contributes on conceptual as well as practical grounds. The study evaluated the use of problem structuring as an approach for developing policy recommendations. It is also hoped that this study will generate recommendations which may be of use to both schools and the students they serve.

Problem Structuring

Because this study was intended to generate recommendations to guide policy decisions, a policy analysis was used. Dunn's (1981) presentation of problem structuring offered a useful framework for conducting investigations in the policy area, and this framework was used to gain an understanding of the problematic situation regarding dropouts.

As Dunn (1981) explained, "*problem structuring* is that phase in the process of inquiry where the analyst, confronted with information about the consequences of some policy, begins to experience a "troubled, perplexed, trying situation..."(p. 39). Problem structuring allows one to speculate about potential solutions to problems. It is also the most critical phase of policy analysis (p. 98), as its focus is identifying the right problem for solution.

While the foregoing may appear obvious, policy problems tend not to present themselves as discrete or atomistic problems having an agreed upon method of analysis. On the contrary, such problems are often interdependent "messes," with the "solution" depending upon the perspective or "world view" attached to the problem.

Characteristics of Policy Problems

Dunn (1981) stated that policy analysts not only produce "facts," but "...seek also to produce information about values and preferable courses of action" (p. 36). The analyst deals then not only with empirical approaches, but also evaluative and normative approaches in making recommendations. A policy problem is not an objective situation which can be verified by facts.

Dye (1978) noted that policy analysis deals with "subjective" topics which require an "interpretation" of the results. He states that, "social science research cannot be 'value-free.' Even the selection of the topic for research is affected by one's values about what is "important" in society and worthy of attention" (p. 15).

The subjective element is thus a part of policy formulation and, necessarily a component of defining the problematic situation. Problem structuring, defining what the problem entails is the most critical phase of policy analyses, for as Dunn notes, "policy analysts fail more often because they solve the wrong problem than because they get the wrong solution to the right problem. The fatal error in policy analysis is to solve the wrong formulation of a problem" (p. 98).

Dunn (1981, p. 99) discussed four characteristics of policy problems: interdependence, subjectivity, artificiality and dynamics. Interdependence of policy problems means that problems in one area affect policy problems in other areas. He stated " in reality policy problems are not independent entities; they are part of whole systems of problems best described as *messes*, that is, systems of external conditions that produce dissatisfaction among different segments of the community" (p. 99). Subjectivity of policy problems recognizes that policy problems are filtered through human experience and judgment. Artificiality acknowledges that policy problems are the product of subjective judgment. As Dunn (1981) stated " problems have no existence apart from the individuals and groups who define them, which means that there are no 'natural' states of society which in and of themselves constitute policy problems" (p. 99). The dynamics of policy problems states that "there are as many different solutions for a given problem as there are definitions of that problem" (p. 99).

Recognition of these characteristics alerts one to the possibility of the unanticipated consequences that may result from policies based on the wrong problem (Dunn, p. 100).

It is important to note that most policy problems, in addition to the characteristics discussed above, are ill structured:

> ...because they are really complex systems of problems that involve high levels of conflict among competing stakeholders. It is unrealistic to assume the existence of one or a few decision makers with uniform preferences; consensus on goals and objectives is rare; and it is seldom possible to identify the full range of alternative solutions and their consequences" (Dunn, 1981, p. 133).

Ill-structured problems do not lend themselves to resolution by conventional methods. Rather, they require the analyst to take an active part in defining the problem. It is also a characteristic of ill-defined problems that they are elusive and appear to be the personal creations of their creators (Mitroff and Mason, 1981). Well-defined problems are 'consensible,' that is, consensus can be obtained regarding the nature of the problem. Ill defined problems however defy such objective formulations.

As Hansen (1987) noted, messy problems can be structured in many ways and the aim is to create solutions which specify the formal problem underlying the situation (p. 192).

The process of problem structuring

Dunn (1981, p. 135-136) pointed out that problem structuring is a process which consists of three basic steps: (1) problem sensing - "a phase of problem structuring where the analyst perceives or experiences conditions which give rise to a problematic situation" (2) problem conceptualization - "a phase of problem structuring where the analyst uses conventional (native) language to conceptualize a substantive problem in its most basic and general terms", and (3) problem specification - "a phase of problem structuring where the analyst develops a formal (usually mathematical) representation of a substantive problem." Dunn (1981) also noted that "although the process of structuring policy problems may begin in any one of these three phases, a prerequisite of problem structuring is the recognition or 'felt existence' of a problematic situation." (p. 107). See Figure I-1 for an outline of the problem structuring process.

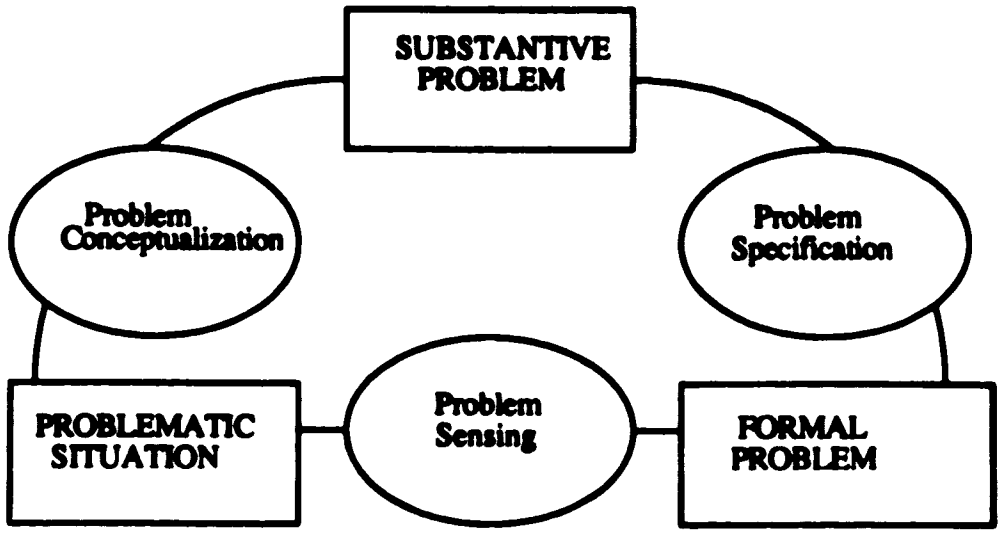


Figure I-1: The subprocess of problem structuring

Adapted from Dunn, 1981, p. 107. Figure reprinted with permission of Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

This study involved the problem sensing phase, since it assumed that there is a "felt existence" of the problem, and progressed to the problem specification phase to define the formal problem. In moving from the problematic situation to the substantive problem, the analyst defines the problem in its most basic or general terms, such as whether it is a pedagogical problem, a sociological problem, or an economic problem. This involves one's conceptual framework or view of reality, for this world view determines the approach taken in identifying the problem. It involves defining the problem from a macro perspective, not from an exact, detailed, micro one" (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1987, p. 117). The underlying assumptions or world view one holds is often so implicit that one is unaware of its influence (Mitroff and Mason, 1981). Once the problem has been conceptualized, a more detailed formal problem may be constructed. The process of moving from a substantive to a formal problem is accomplished via problem specification. Here the main task is to define the nature of the problem itself (Dunn, p. 107-109).

The phase of problem sensing identified to structure "messy" policy problems is used to organize the overall process and describe and specify the substantive and the formal problems.

Application to this study

Using Dunn's analysis, this study is concerned with the phases of problem structuring; problem sensing, problem conceptualization and problem specification. Collectively these phases yielded information regarding the problematic situation and the substantive problem, which in turn lead to a definition of the formal problem.

This study addresses problem sensing since it is assumed that there is a "felt existence" of a problematic situation (Dunn, p. 107). The dropout situation has received increased attention, by educators and by the public at large.

Bottas (1988) suggested that the problem is conceptualized through its qualitative approach and the multi-case study. It is submitted that in moving from a problematic situation to a substantive problem, the perceptions of the dropouts will define the problem in its basic terms. If policy problems "...have no existence apart from the individuals and groups who define them ..." (Dunn, 1981, p. 99), it was felt necessary to survey the perceptions of those who actually make the decision to dropout.

After a substantive problem has been identified, the process then moves to problem specification to define a formal problem. As Bottas (1988) observed, " When the problem has been conceptualized, then a formal problem may be created. Problem specification is the vehicle utilized to move from a substantive to a formal problem" (p. 79). The conclusions of the study used the problem specification process to identify the problem.

Specifically, the study addressed problem structuring by analyzing the perceptions of a segment of the dropout population. The views of this group were viewed as critical to the identification of the policy problem under investigation and their outlook allowed the researcher to arrive at an interpretation of the problem being investigated and aid in

generating alternatives leading to problem specification. Their views were synthesized into general observations which contributed to the conclusions of the study.

Organization of the Study

An introduction to the study has been presented in this chapter. Chapter 2 provides a framework for the study through a review of the literature and the presentation of a conceptual model. Because a significant part of this study concerns the perceptions of dropouts, Chapter 2[b] is included to examine psychological constructs associated with discouraged learners. In Chapter 3, the research design and methodology employed in the study are discussed. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are devoted to an analysis of the record search, the questionnaires and the interview data. In Chapter 7 a synthesis of all the data is presented, and in Chapter 8, a summary and conclusions and recommendations of the study are provided.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Dropping out has long been considered a serious problem. It is probable that the lay person reading the "statistics" would assume that the problem is escalating (Hahn, 1987). Rumberger (1987) observed, however, that this is not the case. He noted that in 1940, more that 60% of all persons 25 to 29 years of age had not completed school. By 1980, that percentage had fallen to about 16%. However, educators are now devoting more time and resources to understanding the problem. Rumberger (1987) offered a number of explanations for this increased attention.

First, demographic trends have shifted and, as LeCompte (1987) noted, minority groups in the United States have grown such that by the year 2000, it is estimated that they will comprise one-third of the population and their dropout rates are increasing.

Second, many states and provinces have mandated increased academic requirements to earn a high school diploma. This may help motivate some students, but many (McDill, Natriello and Pallas, 1985; Archer and Dresden, 1987) have expressed a concern that this may serve to further alienate those who are borderline regarding academics and school.

Third, there is an expectation that the new technologies of the future will require increased educational skills. It is suggested that dropouts will be even more vocationally disadvantaged as the gulf between their skills and those demanded widens. As Madak (1988a) observed, with growing technological advances, the outlook for one to survive without a diploma is bleak.

Finally, as a result of the effective schools movement, several governments now use a variety of "indicators" to assess school effectiveness. High school completion rates have become one of these indicators. This has prompted increased attention, not only on how to define dropouts, but also on how to reduce the dropout rate and therefore alter this indicator of school performance (Rumberger, 1987).

The problem of dropouts is complicated. It is a multi-faceted problem (Hahn, 1987). It is almost intractable, and problems of this nature may be referred to as "wicked," as they are invariably interconnected, complicated, uncertain and ambiguous (Hargroves, 1987).

Defining "Dropouts"

The problem of defining the term "dropout" is elusive. The Calgary Board of Education's recent report (Ferguson report, 1989), cited the Phi Delta Kappa Center for Evaluation Development and Research:

> We simply cannot agree what a dropout is. In some districts, death, marriage, taking a job, entering the Armed forces, entering college early, being expelled or jailed, going to deaf school, business school, or vocational school classes causes one to be considered a dropout. In another district, none of these acts would be considered... (p. 4).

In writing his report for the Ontario government, Radwanski (1987) defined a dropout simply as "Any student who leaves school before having obtained his or her Secondary School Graduation Diploma. In practical terms, that means any student who leaves high school before having successfully completed Grade 12" (p. 66). He went on to acknowledge that this definition does not differentiate between those who leave and return, and those who simply leave. Radwanski maintained that a dropout is a dropout, whether they returned or not.

The definition of the Planning and Policy Secretariat of Alberta Education (cited in the Ferguson Report, 1989, p. 50) was as follows:

> Early secondary school leavers in Alberta are defined as: 14-18 year old students, registered September 30, not in school the following September 30th. These students did not receive a diploma, and did not complete other school programs. Slight adjustments are made to account for: age; specific interprovincial and international migration; and mortality rates.
>
> Note: dropouts are referred to as "early school leavers."

What appears to be a relatively straightforward task, in fact, proves to be a quagmire. There is no single dropout rate, but rather several types of rates. Johnson (1990) identified two types of rates, one being the rate of dropouts over a year and the

other being the percentage who dropout before graduating. Frase however (1990) identified three types; event, status and cohort, and Burkam and Lee (1990) defined these as:

> The event drop out rate is the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school. The status drop out rate is the proportion of the population who have not completed high school. The cohort drop out rate is the proportion within a single group of students who have not completed high school (p. 24).

Most researchers who comment on this dilemma agree that the problem is twofold. There is the problem of definition and the problem of methodology or data collection and record keeping. Regarding the former, what does one do with "no-shows?" Are they to be counted as dropouts or not? As Olson (1990) observed, it may be impossible for a system to account for all the no-shows and the result is a spuriously high dropout rate. Does one count dropouts separately from pushouts from stopouts? How does one count transfers? Further, rates based on a cohort or longitudinal basis yield higher rates than those based on annual counts and because dropout rates tend to increase with age, high school rates are higher than district rates.

Ligon, Stewart and Wilkinson (1990) addressed this topic in a thorough discussion and identified 11 terms that are critical to the definition alone. Were it possible to arrive at some consensus of a definition, one has the dilemma of choosing the "best" method of calculation, and the authors here identified four major categories, some with subcategories. The calculation of a single year rate, for example, has five possible variations. They conclude that there is no one correct answer, but suggest an alternative might be to report the inverse of the longitudinal dropout rate, as it would give people an opportunity to report on the successful students for a change. Hafner (1990) suggested that researchers consider the following carefully: definitions, methods of calculation, length of time required for one to be counted a dropout, and finally, comparing definitions and rates across surveys to determine reasons for differences.

Regardless of the definition and methods used, it seems fair to conclude that the press tends to report the highest figures, which in turn are interpreted as an annual rate. In addition, as Hoffman (1990) held, there is no single "right" definition. Different definitions and different methods of calculations answer different questions, but caution is needed in examining any dropout figures. When a longitudinal rate is compared to an annual rate, gross discrepancies will be observed. As Ligon, Stewart, and Wilkinson (1990) concluded:

> Without some standardization, in terminology if not in method, the public and decision makers (school board members, legislators, and parents) will continue to be confused about the actual extent of the problem. They will unwittingly continue to make laws and policy grounded in misunderstandings and ignorance of the true nature of the phenomenon (p. 12).

Canadian Statistics

Cato (1988) quoted the Canadian government's Ministry of Youth, who estimated that the British Columbia dropout rate was 34%. This figure represents young people between 15 and 24 who have not graduated from high school and who are in the labor force or are unemployed.

In Ontario, Radwanski (1987) cited an overt dropout rate of 30% to 33%.

In Alberta, the Director of the Planning and Policy Secretariat for Alberta Education, G. Zatko, indicated that Alberta's dropout rate of 30-33% (based on a five-year period following entry into grade 9) is in line with that of other provinces (Ferguson Report, 1989).

Madak (1988a) estimated the Canadian dropout rate to be approximately 25%.

It is important to note that the dropout rate is commonly calculated by a number of different methods. One common approach is the longitudinal procedure which involves counting the number of students in grade 9 and then counting the number of graduates four or five years later, accounting for deaths and transfers. A second method is a cross-section procedure, where the number of students who report to school each year represent the base

which is then compared to the previous year's enrollment. These two methods can yield radically different results. The longitudinal method typically yields dropout estimates of about 30%, compared to cross-section estimates which may be closer to 8% or 9%.

Several researchers have discussed the problems of definitions and accounting procedures associated with dropouts. As Morrow (1986) stated, "the lack of ...uniformity in a definition has kept policy and lawmakers from understanding the nature, scope and dimension of the dropout problem." (p. 342). School districts may use various time frames in calculating their data. Districts may use a 10 month time frame and report noncontinuous enrollment, where dropouts are counted from September to June. Those who dropout over the summer are not included in the dropout count. Other districts may use a calendar year to report an annual dropout rate and still other districts employ membership in a class or in school from date of entry until withdrawal, a cohort rate.

Additionally, one may employ different baseline populations (denominators) in calculating the rate. If one uses K-12 students, a markedly different result will occur than if one uses grade 10-12 students.

Morrow (1986) described some of the landmines one encounters in this area. Some schools do not count special education students in their figures. Some do not count those who complete the Graduate Educational Development (GED) award. Schools and districts use different time frames and formulas to compute their dropout figures. Do schools subtract those "stopouts" who return to school from their statistics? Hammack (1986) added that some include all students enroled in any type of program, while others included only full time day students. How long can a student be truant before becoming classified as a "dropout?" What does one do with those who transfer, or enrol in vocational training? An additional problem involves what Hammack (1986) called "data integrity." This is a political problem as it may be in someone's best interest to minimize or exaggerate the statistics. Schools may intentionally mis-code students "not found" to obscure their dropout rate and enhance their performance evaluations.

All of these problems taken collectively may be summed up by what Natriello, Pallas and MacDill (1986) referred to as "...the shifting sands of data collection" (p. 438), or what Mann (1986) called "the notoriously wobbly nature of dropout data" (p. 316). Perhaps the bottom line, however, is not the size of the numbers, but rather how the policymakers feel about them.

Causes

The literature on dropouts is saturated with explanations thought to contribute to the dropout picture. It is important to keep in mind, however, that pupils dropout for a variety of reasons, some of which may be interrelated. Cato (1988) suggested the following factors:

- low socioeconomic status
- single-parent families
- low academic achievement
- pregnancy/early marriage
- a negative feeling towards school

He also suggested that, in the most commonly cited reasons, there is an implicit general dislike of school. Madak (1988a) extended this list and added:

- belonging to a language minority group
- overage for grade level
- a history of poor attendance
- low self-esteem
- poor classroom behavior
- social isolation
- family problems
- a lack of an appropriate school program

To this list Whelage (1989) added:

- single parent homes
- high residential mobility
- homes where abuse of children is frequent
- personal problems, such as drug and alcohol abuse
- learning disabilities, physical and mental health problems

Ferguson (Calgary Board of Education, 1989) noted that while there is general agreement regarding the contributing factors, there is no consensus regarding the relative importance of the indicators. There is a feeling however, that the strongest determinants of dropping out may be one's economic and educational background.

Madak (1988a) warned that most of the studies in the area have been correlational in nature. Though the factors identified are *associated with* dropping out, they do not document *causes* for the behavior. Bloch (1991) extended this observation and noted that no factor or combination of factors clearly predict dropouts. He also maintained that the current emphasis on "why" students are at risk tends to blame the students, the home, or society, but not the schools. Whelage and Rutter (1986) also supported the consention that the focus on characteristics may excuse schools for their lack of success with dropouts and Fine (1986) expressed the view that looking for individual explanations not only blames the victim, but perpetuates the illusion that there is something wrong with the individual, not the institution.

In spite of an apparently thorough list of factors which are thought to contribute to the problem, no one really knows what causes students to drop out of school (Rumberger, 1987). The deciding factor in dropping out may be a combination of problems, the severity of a particular problem, and the students' perception that there are a lack of alternatives (Ferguson Report, Calgary Board of Education, 1989).

Characteristics of Dropouts

The most significant characteristics according to the Edmonton Public Schools report (1988) were: family and economic background, psychological and emotional factors, and academic factors. This list of factors is similar to the findings of McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1985) who attributed dropping out to three causes: (1) school experiences such as failure and truancy, (2) family factors such as pregnancy, single parent homes and marriage, and (3) economic considerations such as having to work, or preferring to work. Svec (1986) suggested that in addition to academic and family factors, one should consider individual personality factors which suggest a uniqueness for the dropout population.

Many authors discuss "at-risk" youth, and according to Egginton, Wells, Gaus and Esselman (1990), "at-risk" students are those characterized as having a history of low grades, high absenteeism, course failure, discipline problems and/or retention.

Family and Economic Background

It makes intuitive sense that family situations have a significant impact upon students. Socio-economic factors have consistently been a powerful predictor of dropout behavior (Madak, 1987, Radwanski, 1987; Sparkes, 1987; Tidwell, 1988; Whelage, 1989). Hahn (1987) noted that the disadvantaged are three times more likely to drop out.

Students of low socio-economic backgrounds may need to work, either to supplement family incomes or to compete with their more affluent peers. Radwanski (1987) suggested that those who work in excess of 15 hours per week were at risk. Rumberger (1987) stated that about 20% of dropouts report that they left school because they either wanted to help out their families, or felt they had to for economic reasons.

Another family related factor is the parents' educational level. The parents of dropouts often have not completed school themselves and, although many attempt to convince their children to complete school, they are not always successful. There is a

positive correlation between the educational levels of parents and their children (Tidwell, 1988).

In addition, dropouts often come from homes where there are unsatisfactory domestic relationships. It is estimated that at least 20% of dropouts come from homes characterized by divorce, separation, remarriage, death of a parent, sexual abuse or family violence (Cormany, 1987). Conant (1992) discussed dysfunctional families and defined abuse as being physical, verbal, spiritual, sexual or emotional.

Academic and School Characteristics

Coupled with socio-economic status, past academic performance is a strong predictor of dropout behavior (Hahn, 1987). Whelage (1989) supported the importance of academics and suggested that course failure is the single best predictor of dropping out. Regardless of its rank, it is fairly well documented that poor academic achievement is closely associated with dropping out. Madak (1988a) observed that dropouts tend to have lower grades, do less homework and be more frequently involved in disciplinary actions than those who stay in school. Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock (1986) found behavior problems and lower grades to be major determinants in dropping out, and McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1985) cite poor academics and truancy as strong predictors of dropouts

Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman, and Kaplan (1987) stated that entry age into high school is another indicator of dropouts. Students who are overage for their grade level when they enter high school are more likely to dropout. In addition, students who repeat a grade actually score worse on achievement tests than similar students who are promoted. Further, many retained students have lower opinions of themselves and have fewer friends than those who have been promoted. Hahn (1987) reported that students who are older than their peers are four times as likely to drop out. Tidwell (1988) noted that grades one and two, and eight and nine are critical to dropping out. Given the high correlation between entry age and dropout behavior, retention policies may need to be carefully assessed.

Radwanski (1987) observed that many of the dropouts felt that they had been rejected by the education system before they rejected it. They had become alienated and bored. Alienation and the feelings of rootlessness, hopelessness and estrangement are common to many dropouts. Tidwell (1988) found that dropouts did not feel connected to the school, home, neighborhood or society in general.

It is fairly well established that dropouts have a higher incidence of behavior problems, such as absenteeism, tardiness and discipline problems. Many dropouts dislike school because they are frequently disciplined or suspended (Hahn, 1987). Suspensions and conflict with teachers and peers contribute to the students' view that school is a hostile environment (Whelage, 1989). In addition, delinquency rates are higher among dropouts than among those who remain in school (Tidwell, 1988).

In 1986, Hartnagel, Krahn, Lowe, and Tanner conducted a study of dropouts for Edmonton Public Schools. The major reason offered for leaving school was problems at school. When asked for specific reasons, the dropouts cited poor relations with teachers and a dissatisfaction or boredom with what was being taught. Some also mentioned an inability to keep up with the school work.

These factors are associated with the school itself. Only a small proportion (40%) reported poor academic success to be a cause. Many, however, acknowledged skipping classes to be a factor.

Tidwell (1988) found that the most frequently cited school related reason for leaving was boredom. Dropouts complained that teachers were boring and uncaring, and the students saw little reason to stay in a "boring" school when they could be working and earning money.

While a considerable proportion of studies have focused on the characteristics of the dropout, as Whelan, Torbet and Teddlie (1990) observed, "although researchers can point to a variety of general causal influences that impact the decision to dropout, it is much more difficult to determine why a particular student drops out at a particular time" (p. 2).

The Debate in Alternative Programming

Alternative programming is currently a controversial topic in educational circles. Central to the debate is the issue of raising the academic standards of schools. According to Radwanski (1987), the most important reasons for dropping out were school related, followed by work-related and then personal reasons for dropping out. Sharman (1990) contended that Radwanski's report implied that schools were not effective in meeting student needs.

Radwanski (1987) is one proponent of raising the academic standards and stressed that all but the most seriously handicapped students should be required to complete a basic academic course of studies. Advocates of this viewpoint recommend that all students be required to take a basic academic curriculum, that social promotions be eliminated, that testing programs be established to monitor that students have met the objectives of the curricula, and that program options be reduced at the high school level. It is felt that only by raising standards will students be adequately prepared to meet the demands of the future. According to Madak (1987), a key element in reducing the dropout rate is encouraging student achievement. Alternate programs, according to Oineck (1989), are merely holding students in school without providing them any cognitive gains.

However, many educators who work with at-risk students feel that more academic standards will have dire repercussions for many of the at-risk population (Barber and McClellan, 1987). Opponents to increased standards feel that universally raising the requirements may further frustrate students who are already 'close to the edge' and increase the dropout rate. According to Madak (1988a) these educators feel that programs must meet the individual needs of the students and maintain that schools should offer a wide variety of programs which will prepare students for the world of work, as opposed to future post-secondary program. McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1986) felt that more options, not less are needed to meet the needs of at-risk students. They feel that schools should

adapt to the needs of the student rather than force the students to adapt to the needs of the school. Madak (1988a) summarized this position:

> Programming which places increased pressure on students to perform, when they have already experienced failure within the school system, and who are experiencing added social pressure, such as holding after school jobs, will most likely choose to leave school in order to reduce their stress levels. (p. 19).

Archer and Dresden (1987) stated that while raising standards may be appropriate for some low-achieving students, such strategies may not encourage the at-risk student. The negative effects of raising standards without providing substantial additional help to the socially and academically disadvantaged would likely increase their frustration, failure and the possibility of dropping out. They stated that rigid adherence to such requirements may well frustrate borderline students to the point where they quit school.

Resolving the issues involved in this debate is difficult. The educational community is divided on the issue. Part of the difficulty lies in a dearth of data supporting the effectiveness of alternate programs. Do such programs provide the students with the skills which allow them to gain meaningful employment? As Collins (1987) stated, "questions regarding the efficacy of alternative school programs as a means to reduce student dropout rates remain to be answered definitively" (p. 292).

Advocates of raising educational standards also offer inconclusive evidence. They have not identified strategies indicating how they would assist students who were unsuccessful in attaining the increased standards. Radwanski (1987) at least acknowledged that although remediation is costly, it is necessary if there is to be a genuine commitment to helping students graduate. However, the mechanics, delivery and funding of such remedial programs were not discussed.

It would appear that considerably more data are needed from both camps in this debate.

Conclusion

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from the literature is that this is an extremely complex issue about which we know very little. It is a truly "wicked" problem. There exists an inter-connectedness between students, their families, schools and society at large. As Baker (1991) observed, the interaction of school experiences and family background factors are not well understood. Schools are central to the problem, but there are many critical variables beyond their control. It appears that the factors associated with dropping out vary from student to student, and that the final decision to leave is probably a result of an interaction of variables which has occurred over time. Cairns, Cairns and Neckerman (1989) noted that a combination of factors had the strongest relationship to dropping out, and described dropping out as a developmental cycle rather than a specific event. Natriello, Pallas and McDill (1986) support the view that a combination of student characteristics and the school contribute to the dropout process. They submit that simply linking student characteristics to the process is unlikely to ameliorate the problem.

What becomes apparent is that the whole issue is not going to be resolved with any expediency. As the Ferguson report (Calgary Board of Education, 1989) stated, the issues are too large to be handled by the school alone, and will require collaborative efforts involving the student, the home, the schools and the policymakers in government.

Chapter 2[b]

Review of the Psychological Literature

Public schools work with many difficult students. These include the learning disabled, the slow learners, the mentally handicapped, the emotionally dysfunctional, the behaviorally disordered, and those who are victims of contemporary lifestyles. By virtue of their numbers however, dropouts are among the most difficult for teachers to work with. Teachers are frustrated in coping with the values, attitudes and behaviors of these young people. Why do "at-risk" students behave as they do? This chapter examines the psychological factors thought to contribute to the discouragement of the dropout.

Psychological, Emotional and Behavioral Characteristics

Many school dropouts have lower levels of self-esteem and less sense of control than their counterparts who remain in school (Radwanski, 1987; Armstrong Report, Edmonton Public Schools, 1988). They may have poor attitudes toward school, as well as low academic and vocational aspirations. Such individuals are thought to be more susceptible to peer pressure, and are influenced by others similarly alienated from school (Rumberger, 1987). Many dropouts are unable to make peer associations that allow them to achieve success (Valverde, 1987). Many dropouts feel isolated, disconnected, and rejected. They do not feel assimilated into the school culture (Williams, 1987).

In addition, dropouts take part in fewer school activities than do their counterparts (Tidwell, 1988). They are often not involved in school activities (Archer and Dresden, 1987). Many appear to feel alienated from school, and feel less popular than their classmates. This may be due, in part, to their isolating themselves from the mainstream activities of the school. It may also be due to a heavy commitment to a part-time job (Madak, 1987). While dropouts tend to isolate themselves from school activities, they do tend to associate with friends with similar behavior, with dropouts. Finn (1989) stated that through such contact one not only learns of this possibility, but also may receive group

support for this decision. Cairns, Cairns and Neckerman (1989) suggested that affiliation with peers who had dropped out makes students more vulnerable to making similar decisions.

Dropouts are more likely to have been behavior problems and more frequently at odds with the school discipline policies. Some leave because they perceive a lack of fairness regarding school discipline policies (Armstrong Report, Edmonton Public Schools, 1988).

Dropouts are more frequently absent than their peers, which drastically diminishes their chances for school survival. In the Edmonton Public Schools District (Edmonton Public Schools, 1988), two-thirds of those who dropped out had missed between 30% - 59% of their classes. There is a strong relationship between poor attendance and dropping out. Those who dropout typically have had a history of sporadic attendance.

Cassel (1985) observed that impulsivity is both the excitement and enemy of youth, as it ignores consequences. While this may be one characteristic of almost all youth, it seems to be especially true for the dropout. Adolescents are typically focused on short-term situations and according to Cross and Darby (1990) are less likely to see a connection between completing school and obtaining a better job. But impulsivity alone does not account for the behavioral repertoire of the dropout. Smey-Richman (1988) discussed the behavioral characteristics of poor achievers and preferred the term "high risk" to describe the individual's attitudes and behaviors related to education. When describing the behavioral characteristics of "high risk" individuals, one encounters a host of pessimistic descriptors. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) contend that terms often attached to alienated children, such as aggressive, attention disordered, unmotivated or unteachable only serve to maintain the tradition of blaming the victim. Rather than focus on such traits, they maintain that it would be more helpful to examine the interactions within their lives. They discuss what they call the four worlds of childhood: the family, work, school and peers.

The Family

It is common to hear about the "generation gap." Conventional wisdom holds that this "gap" is due to the special status we accord our youth, that this is a peculiar interval between childhood and adulthood. Adolescence is viewed as a privileged time in growing up. Developmental psychologist Urie Brofenbrenner contends however that the gap between youth and adults in society has reached alarming proportions (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990). He submitted that central to the situation is the family and further noted that parents are often too stressed, schools too impersonal and the community too disordered to meet the needs of children to belong. He suggested that children are therefore estranged and thus become discouraged. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) contended that the breakdown is due to the decline of the nuclear family. Cassel (1985) maintained that family conflict is due to a lack of trust and to child rearing practices which emphasize competition. Competition, it is suggested, leads to antisocial skills occurring within the family which results in the generation gap. Mitchell (1971) felt there is too much concern over specific behavioral issues like family squabbles and dress, and that the "gap" is due to the dilemmas created by generational differences. In families where there is a lack of psychological identification between the youth and the parents, where a child does not have a parent with whom he can identify, a chasm will exist between parent and child.

Child rearing practices have a tremendous impact on the development of the child. Current thinking on child rearing practices suggests that neither permissive nor autocratic methods foster responsibility and moral development as do democratic methods.

Cassel (1985) maintained that in democratic families, problems are openly discussed in social equality, that children feel their opinions matter and they are trusted. Parents have confidence that their children will make appropriate choices in difficult or tempting situations - they trust them. Teens usually live up to their parents' expectations as

part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. She further contended that if teens felt good about their relationship with their parents, they are less inclined to feel a need to "get even" with them. Teens will be less rebellious as they respect their family's values and do not seek ways to abuse their parents.

Autocratic family situations however teach children that the values that count are power, prestige and profit. Autocratic punishment teaches children that power is all that counts. They believe that if you have the right to punish them, then they have the right to punish you in return (Cassel, 1985).

Permissive parenting does not fare any better, according to Cassel. In such situations, the children run wild and when punished, they too punish back. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) extend this by stating that permissive parents may be seen as being indifferent and as such, these adults do not have much influence as children only seek out and respect those adults they see as nurturing and caring. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter and Dornbusch (1989) observed that dropouts were more likely to come from homes with a permissive parenting style and consequently were more likely to make decisions on their own.

Parents have an obvious and powerful influence on how their children view schooling. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter and Dornbusch (1989) reported that parental reactions to student grades were important, in that parents of dropouts were more likely to employ negative sanctions and emotions regarding their child's academics and further, that such parents were less engaged with their child's schooling. Velez (1990) reported a connection between the family, school and student performance. He noted that what parents communicate to children about school is critical to understanding the student's performance in school. McCracken and Barcinas (1990) stated that the decision of students to enter college was strongly influenced by parental expectations. It would appear that parents play a critical role in shaping student attitudes towards school.

Autonomy

As children grow, they have a greater desire for autonomy. The role of student becomes a critical role as one begins junior high school and in this context adolescents begin to seek increased control over their school environment (Fenzel, 1990). Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) observe that the need for autonomy increases most rapidly between the ages of 10 - 14 years, but there is no commensurate increase in autonomy. As the gulf between autonomy gained and autonomy desired increases, so does generational conflict. Mitchell (1971) commented that during the teen years, most individuals are not capable of contributing to the well-being of the society, so adolescents are confronted with a dependency that is at odds with their growing sense of autonomy. The adolescent has strong needs for both independence and dependence, which creates a conflict that appears to peak between 15-17 years.

The degree of autonomy parents grant to their children is related to parenting practices. There is a feeling among many adults that children must be extrinsically controlled or they will behave in immature and destructive ways. By adolescence however, autonomy deprived youth develop a negative counter-culture and adult control becomes self-perpetuating. The more one controls, the more one needs to control. At this age, adults may manage only surface behavior (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990).

Coopersmith (1967) asserted that "children need autonomy within a structure." Youth are in a safe environment where adults can still exert an influence and the youth can develop their independence. Such youth who develop a reasonable sense of autonomy tend to believe that they control their lives and they develop an internal locus of control.

Cassel (1985) felt that youth who get in trouble with the law tend to come from three types of homes: those whose parents are permissive, those whose parents overprotect and those whose parents autocratically demand obedience. Cassel (1985) contended that the most responsible teens tend to come from homes where the parents maintain a caring but not smothering relationship.

The World of Work

It has long been held that work teaches young people responsibility, but this is subject to re-appraisal in an increasingly materialistic society. Many parents reflect upon their own memories of the value of work, not realizing that the work place and work ethic have changed. Teens today tend not to save for future expenses or for their education. Instead earnings tend to go for cars and recreation (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990). Income is spent on a variety of self-indulgent areas which the adolescent enjoys for their own sake as well as the diminished parental dependency implicit in such purchases. Spending tends to reflect a self-centered life style. The jobs available to many entering the workforce are not the closely supervised crafts, but rather what Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) refer to as "McJobs," which are often unchallenging and dominated by uncommitted part-time employees.

Teens with money are tempted into a level of conspicuous consumption in a materialistic world. They do so at a risk to their education and to more developmentally appropriate activities. Thus they may be economically well-off, but psychologically poor. Affluent teens with disposable income are now vulnerable.

> Research demonstrates that the greater "net worth" of a youth (value or possessions acquired with his own money), the more the youth is at risk for these destructive activities. The work ethic has backfired as money brings consumptive power but not social responsibility." (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, p. 28).

Teens long to feel important and to feel that they are making a valid contribution to the world. As Mitchell (1971) stated however, "adolescents do not contribute to the *essential* work of society: they provide neither brain power nor physical energy for the construction activities of society; they have almost no voice in the legal machinery which regulates society" (p. 50). Little is asked of them, except that they be consumers. Many entertainment and service industries focus on the teen as their target audience. As well, there is little opportunity for youth to produce any goods and services of any real value to

others. They have little opportunity to feel productive, and instead are led to believe that their role is that of a consumer, so they come to feel powerless. They develop an external locus of control (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990). They are not in charge. Cassel (1985) submitted that they are tempted by a commercial world and elevate their self-esteem by buying it.

The Me Generation

Perhaps the societal focus on materialism is reflective of the pursuit of individual goals. Cassel (1985) maintained that the ages between 13 and 15 are the most selfish years of life, which would account for much of the egocentric behavior one observes in junior high schools. Our society also emphasizes the importance of the individual. A sense of mutual caring is secondary to the pursuit of individualism. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) maintained that this selfish preoccupation is legitimized in many current psychological theories. They submit that Freudians, behaviorists, those who pursue altruism and even humanists can sacrifice the greater good to the needs of the individual. If people help others, it is for reinforcement, to satisfy an underlying pleasure principle, or because they feel guilty. It is common to hear "Be the best you that you can be." Nowhere in this suggestion however is there any direction or suggestion that such a pursuit might involve helping or even considering any other person. Psychologists are not alone in accentuating the individual.

Schools similarly encourage selfish strategies by fostering competition and accentuating individualism. The emphasis in many classrooms is on getting the "right" answer, and not upon the process used to arrive at an answer. Teachers spend a considerable portion of their encouragement on the best students. Whether they overtly intend to or not, schools can be very competitive environments. Smey-Richman (1988) contended that the competitive structure of traditional classes is especially damaging to low achievers.

Professional Pessimism

This focus on the individual is seen again in the literature on dealing with difficult youth. It is the individual who "owns the problem." It is his or her deviance that becomes the focus. The literature is negative and pessimistic. It involves targeting blame and then combatting the individual. As Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) stated:

> Negative theories of behavior...employ demeaning and blaming labels which lead to negative feeling and actions towards a youngster. Positive theories of behavior... employ esteeming and empathizing labels which foster positive affect and action. Certainly one cannot accurately communicate without resorting to some negative labels. However, successful youth workers are those who can reframe cognitions to foster the positive feelings and actions essential to the helping process. (p. 18).

Schools

Mitchell (1971) observed that not only are adolescents isolated from making any real contributions to society, but also that the only real function they have is to attend school. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) however portrayed schools as cold bureaucracies demanding compliance and obedience. They maintain that it is not human nature to be inherently obedient, but charge that our culture reveres authority and obedience. It is submitted that schools advocate the traditions of coercion and punitiveness, and further, that they reflect bureaucratic impersonality by replacing human relations with elaborate systems of rules. To support this position, they noted that the American Association of School Administrators endorses a formal code of conduct for the control of student behaviors. Mitchell (1971) stated:

> The primary characteristic of all schools is that they are essentially institutions with few things being more sacred than the timetable, the hierarchy, and the authority of those in power. Even when treated individually, the student realizes he is really not all that important (p. 53).

Traditionally, high school teacher/student relationships are often viewed in an adversarial fashion. Conant (1992) cited Glasser (1990) who addressed this type of relationship and characterized it as a "boss-management" style that does not lend itself to either hard work nor high quality work.

While it is debatable to what extent schools control students via student handbooks, agreement is more likely with the observation that schools do function as bureaucracies. Are student handbooks merely a spin-off of the bureaucracy in action? How did schools come to embrace this bureaucratic model? Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) traced this development:

> Educators have long been intrigued by principles borrowed from business and industry. In the late nineteenth century, school began a major transformation by copying the emerging concepts of Taylor's theory of scientific management. This meant retitling the headmaster as "superintendent" just as in a factory and establishing hierarchial, military-like systems of command and control. Labor (viz. teaching) was specialized in the belief that repetitive tasks could be performed more efficiently and teachers could be interchanged like replaceable parts. The size of schools inexorably expanded in the quest for "economy of scale." Informal problem-solving... gave way to layers of management and formal rules and procedures."(p. 30).

There can be little debate that schools have evolved into large bureaucratic entities. Such a structure may best serve the needs of "public education," but at what cost? Elementary schools, typically the smallest in student population, feed into larger junior high schools, which feed into yet larger composite high schools. At each level, students have less and less interaction with a singular group of students and teachers. This leads to diminished satisfaction for the "at risk" student. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) made the point that:

> Research shows that at each progressive level of the education system, relationships increasingly lack meaning and personal satisfaction. Not surprisingly, students at greatest risk of dropping out of school are those who have never been friends with any teacher (p. 10).

It may be timely to consider that established business practices have come under increased scrutiny due to the challenge from the Japanese model. There is an urgent need to attend to worker productivity in today's workplace, a need dramatically illustrated in the last decade by the rise of Japan as an economic world force. Numerous writers have devoted considerable attention to this situation and the causes for this spectacular rise in Japan's world market share are far from simple. There is however a common denominator

in the discussions. North America, if it wishes to remain in contention for today's markets, must become more productive and to this end, it must consider the relationship between schools and the workplace.

Many schools reflect bureaucratic structures, and as size increases, people orientation tends to diminish. As Mitchell (1971) stated, adolescents dislike being treated impersonally. They dislike being subordinated to an organizational structure and they dislike the arbitrary enforcement of rules and regulations. In short, they are upset when treated in an impersonal or mechanical manner. They have a strong desire for "acknowledgement of self," and when this is not forthcoming, they "turn off."

The literature on organizational climates states that positive climates tend to share certain values, beliefs and rituals. We know that schools can play a major role in transmitting values to the young, especially those at risk.

Cassel (1985) contended that a democratic style is most conducive to learning for the majority of students. A respect for order is developed by teachers who influence, stimulate, guide and encourage students. Autocratic styles develop obedience of surface behaviors and teach that power is what counts.

Futility in the Classroom

The research on effective schools lead to the conclusion that it's important to cultivate a positive school climate. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) offered the following observations. Negative expectations breed only feelings of futility on the part of both staff and students. Pessimistic approaches so commonly associated with at-risk students can become self-fulfilling prophecies. Also, in spite of many cries in educational circles to bring back more discipline, at-risk youth do not respond to punitiveness. In addition, many at-risk youth are not challenged in the classroom. They are bored. Their only physical activities come from seatwork and challenging the authority of the teachers. Finally, we cannot raise responsible students if we do not train them to be responsible.

They want some meaningful tasks they can accomplish and feel good at, but we tend to defer any real responsibility until adulthood.

Competition in the Classroom

Many writers caution against the dangers of competitive classrooms and the damage they can create in developing inadequate feelings and creating at-risk children. Smey-Richman (1988) advised that the competitive structure of many classes is especially damaging to low achievers. Cassel (1985) acknowledged that we live in a competitive society, but contends that the less competitive one is, the happier that person will be. She maintains that less competitive individuals are better able to concentrate on the task at hand and not become overly concerned with what someone else is doing. She cites Einstein who commented "...competition brings death for many and co-operation provides life for all." (p. 53). Cassel (1985) maintained that by eliminating competition one will also eliminate many discipline problems and further, that participation, not competition, is the desired goal to strive for. Competition causes low achieving students to become more negative and to perceive themselves as less capable (Smey-Richman, 1988). Competition then is not a motivator for the low achiever.

Chapman and Boersma (1979) submitted that a student's academic self-concept is formed by the third grade. Observations formed working in elementary schools would suggest that by grade two, many children have already established in their own mind their personal "pecking order." Regardless of attempts by teachers to operate non-competitive environments, the students know how they compare to their peers. For some this is a devastating realization. Competition may bring out the best in those who are in the top one third, but it can be demoralizing to those who struggle to keep up with them.

Low Achievers

Smey-Richman (1988) observed that current research is going beyond analyzing demographic variables and is examining the psychological and behavioral characteristics of poor achievers. This she regards as a significant development because educators can

influence students' perceptions and beliefs about themselves regarding their schooling. Educators can influence the following psychological or behavioral variables: cognitive ability, task performance, and successes or failures.

Cognitive ability has long been recognized as a major indicator of achievement. Task performance, according to Smey-Richman (1988), depends as much upon a willingness to work and upon persistence as it does upon cognitive ability. Poor achievers may have weaker cognitive abilities, but also tend to lack an active approach to problem solving. Such students experience repeated failures which erodes their belief in their ability to control their academic achievements. These two factors, cognitive ability and a low academic self-concept, lead many to see failure as inevitable. They come to believe that no amount of effort will yield success (Smey-Richman, 1988).

Low achieving students lack self direction. They do not plan their work, they do not comprehend their reading, they do not regulate their activities, nor do they evaluate their efforts. They do not have adequate metacognitive skills, but these are skills that can be taught (Smey-Richman, 1988). That such skills can be taught is recognized, according to a recent report issued by Alberta Education: The Emerging Student (1991). It stated, "When students learn comprehensive thinking skills, for example, they develop a view of themselves as more able to control the outcomes of events, through a more internal locus of control" (p. 20).

Success, Failure and Locus of Control

Locus of control is a personality construct coined by Rotter (1966) to describe the beliefs individuals possess regarding control over their experiences. It is felt that the degree to which individuals believe they have control over their future or fate is educationally important.

The locus of control construct describes the degree to which one believes that they are able to control the events of their lives. Simply then, locus of control may be viewed as the degree to which individuals accept personal responsibility for their own reinforcement.

Whether students are markedly internal or external in orientation has important implications for their learning style and behavior. Students who believe they are responsible for their actions are more likely to pursue academic goals and show greater persistence in striving to realize them. Conversely, externally oriented children feel that rewards and punishments are beyond their control and thus they are less inclined to work (McGee and Crandall, 1968). Internal students show better academic performance as they feel responsible for their successes and failures. Externals see little connection between their investment of time and energy, and the outcomes.

Many researchers have found a positive relationship between the internal-external (I-E) construct and academic achievement (Rotter, 1966; Lefcourt, 1966; McGee and Crandall, 1968). It is felt that locus of control does have an effect on academic achievement, and further, that high achievement is associated with internality (Nord, Connelly and Daignault, 1974). Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock (1986) found that "On most of the locus-of-control items, dropouts responded with a significantly more externalized sense of control, indicating that they are more likely than stayers to feel that their destiny is out of their hands" (p. 362).

The I-E pattern does not appear to be fixed for children across ages. Crandall, Katkovsky and Crandall (1965) found that self-responsibility is well established by third grade. With age and experience, most children tend to view their personal actions as being instrumental in determining subsequent reinforcement.

What then is the expected relationship between locus of control and achievement for at-risk students? Given that academic success normally requires a modicum of energy and persistence, and that externals tend to see little relationship between their efforts and learning outcomes, it would seem that externals are caught in a difficult position. Kifer (1975) indicated that I-E scores differentiate quite clearly between successful and unsuccessful students. The successful student tends to be internal and to become more so with age. Unsuccessful students however, tend to remain relatively external with age,

suggesting that the expected developmental trend is slower in at-risk children. If externals do not recognize the relationship between their efforts and reinforcements, it follows that they can become trapped in a pattern of diminishing successes, and find themselves further removed from motivating experiences. Repeated failures establish the external orientation of the at-risk student. It seems plausible that such students would develop strongly generalized negative attitudes about their academic competencies and about themselves (Boersma, Chapman and Maguire, 1979). Negative self-perceptions then come to be associated with an external viewpoint.

Psychological theory suggests that how one interprets the causes of success or failure influences future achievement. If people believe that their successes are due to ability, they are more likely to attempt similar tasks in the future as they are satisfied with their accomplishments and expect to continue to do well. Conversely, those who attribute their achievements to other factors are less likely to make future efforts. As Smey-Richman (1988) noted, ability perception mediates achievement behavior. Whelage and Rutter (1986) found that dropouts projected a more external locus of control than stay-ins, but then commented, "Unless one is very good at doing those academic tasks rewarded by schools, one is not likely to gain a greater sense of internal control through schooling." (p. 388). It is their contention then that self-esteem and an external locus of control are at least partly determined by one's school experiences.

Smey-Richman (1988) observed, people generally tend to attribute their successes to their ability and their failures to a lack of effort. Those with an external locus of control however tend to attribute their successes to external factors such as luck or ease of task, and their failures to an inability. They reverse the roles. What is particularly devastating to low achievers is to invest a significant effort in a task and still fail. This leads to the conclusion that one has low ability, which in turn leads to feeling incompetent, with the resultant feelings of shame and humiliation.

The "Inadequate" Student

According to Smey-Richman (1988), low achievers lack persistence regarding tasks completion. As a result they experience failures which affect their self-concept. They tend to see their failures as being due to a lack of ability rather than to a lack of effort.

> Few experiences of success, along with attributing failure to inability, interact to produce the learned helpless student who perceives failure to be inevitable and adopts failure-avoiding rather that success-seeking strategies. By the time they reach high school, many of these low achievers become increasingly alienated from the school environment, and they either drop out before graduation or turn their interest elsewhere, such as to sports or delinquent activities. (Smey-Richman, 1988, p. 39)

It's frustrating and perplexing for parents, teachers and students to wrestle with the underachieving student who is intellectually capable. Such students often seem to lack the persistence needed to successfully complete tasks which they are cognitively capable of completing. It is almost a label of resignation that is assigned, a "fear of failure," whereby every time adolescents reach for an accepted goal, they puts themselves on trial. Cassel (1985) maintained that such students feel that if you do not demand anything of them, their deficiencies will not be known. They believe that if they don't try, they can't fail. Such persons may be said to carry an inferiority complex, but as the cartoon character Ziggy commented, "I have an inferiority complex, but I'm afraid it's not a very good one."

Inadequate people do not expect anything of themselves, and thus feels that others should not expect anything either. Their goal is to avoid demands in an effort to get others to leave them alone. Cassel (1985) stated:

> He avoids responsibility and is threatened by success because he fears that others will then expect more from him...He was probably an underachiever at school, and had particular difficulty in mathematics. He is likely to have difficulty in handling money. Perhaps he was in Special Education (p. 30).

In the school environment, such students tend to receive little reinforcement, as rewards are in short supply and tend to be handed out to the best students (Smey-Richman, 1988). The feedback they do receive generally tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively inferior, which is tragic given that positive feedback and encouragement appear to enhance

motivation and thus performance. Schools characterized by competition are most difficult for the inadequate student, for competition causes such students to see themselves as being less capable and to reinforce their feelings of inferiority.

Perception may be more important than "reality." If individuals feels inferior, then their performance is likely to be inferior, regardless of ability. Affect plays a central role in cognitive functioning. There exists an interaction between affect and cognition, so it is critical to encourage the at-risk student's feelings of competence.

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) suggested that developing a sense of autonomy, a sense of academic self- concept, an internal locus of control so that students come to believe that they can control and manage their lives, could well comprise the core of educational objectives.

Psychological Needs

Belonging and Peers

It is well accepted that peer pressure is perhaps most influential during adolescence. Cassel (1985) maintained that peer group pressure is the value-forming agent in teens and a fear of rejection the motivating force. It is at this age when they are struggling to develop a sense of belonging, that they use dress, music, behavior and activities to achieve this. They are struggling for self-identity, an identity separate from their parents, an identity they can call their own. They most fear their own inadequacies and group rejection. They desperately want to belong and are willing to reject the values they have learned from their families and from school. The discouraged teen misbehaves, partly in an effort to gain peer recognition and approval. The task of adolescence, according to the authors of the report "The Emerging Student "(Alberta Education, 1991), "is to establish a sense of self-identity, of who they are" (p. 27). It is stated that adolescents attempt to understand themselves in light of their family, their peers and society, and it is the task of juggling these dimensions that causes the adolescent to be so self-centered.

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) suggested that educators tap into this strong need on the part of teens to belong and cultivate a sense of belonging, a sense of shared community as the youth who feel they belong are more receptive to guidance and direction from those who care about them and their needs.

Mastery

All children need to feel competent. Cassel (1985) extended this by suggesting that all children have feelings of inferiority and that normal children attempt to overcome these feelings by means of social goals. Those who are unsuccessful strive for power and resort to either exaggerated feelings of superiority or inferiority.

Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) agreed with part of this observation and stated that those who do not feel competent express their frustration through troubled behavior or through retreating into inferiority. It appears then that a sense of belonging and a feeling of competence are essential in developing healthy individuals.

> Children who lack a sense of power over their own behavior and their environment are developmental casualties whose disorders are variously labelled as learned helplessness, absence of an internal locus of control, and lack of intrinsic motivation. Such young persons are scarred by alienation and school failure, and often seek alternate sources of power through chemicals or membership in a youth counterculture (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, p. 41).

It appears that individuals have a need to acquire a degree of competence, if not mastery, over some aspects of their lives. If such competence is not achieved in the school setting, it may be searched for in other domains, as the individual attempts to define themselves and how they feel about that perception.

Self-Concept

One's perception of self, others, life and the future have always been the guide for decisions. Life is how one sees it. It is not what one is, but what one thinks one is. It is not what happens, but how one feels about it that counts. (Cassel, 1985, p. 13).

According to a report prepared by Alberta Education: "The Emerging Student" (1991), the term self-image is composed of two parts: self-concept and self-esteem. Self-

concept deals with how one sees oneself, and self-esteem is how one feels about that self-concept (p. 26). Self-concept is largely defined by one's interactions with significant others. Battle (1992) considered self-esteem to be a significant determinant affecting behavior.

Parents and teachers play a critical role in developing a student's self-concept. Cassel (1985) considered families to be paramount in determining self-concept, and discussed two factors which she thought shaped self-concept development. First, family atmosphere, that is, the relationship between the parents and the ambitions the parents have for themselves and for their children. Is there a mutual respect found in the family? Is there an open and honest system of communication? The second family contributor involves family values. What is important to the parents? It is contended that conforming children accept and adopt these values, whereas rebellious children reject them as these are sensitive areas where the parents are vulnerable and the youth can gain some control.

Self-concept is a multi-faceted construct, comprised of many of the areas previously discussed. Coopersmith (1967) maintained that self-concept has four basic components: the need for significance, competence, power and virtue. Significance is found in acceptance, in receiving the attention and affection of others. A lack of significance means a lack of belonging. Competence involves mastering one's environment, and chronic failures erode feelings of competence and hence motivation. Power is the ability to control oneself and gain the respect of significant others. Those lacking power feel helpless and insignificant. Virtue is worthiness as judged by significant others. Without worthiness one feels unfulfilled.

When there is a significant gap between the self-concept and the self-ideal, one tends to blame oneself, to get depressed, to blame others or to blame life and to try to escape (Cassel, 1985).

Neufeld and Stevens (1992) stated, "Low self-esteem is a common psychological consequence of dropping out..." (p. 1), and DeBlois echoed the commonly heard refrain

that many dropouts possess a low sense of self-esteem. Conant (1992) suggested it desirable for schools to create conditions that enable students to meet their needs for self-esteem. However, Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock (1986) found no significant difference in self-esteem between dropouts and graduates. Finn (1989) similarly questioned the notion that self-concept and self-esteem measures are related to school achievement. He stated, "The association of achievement with self-esteem is based almost entirely on correlational evidence, however, and does not justify the directional conclusion that poor performance *causes* lowered self esteem" (p. 120). Additional confirmation of this result is provided by Whelage and Rutter (1986) and McCaul, Donaldson, Coladarci and Davis (1992).

As Whelage and Rutter (1986) noted, it seems apparent that one can only speculate about the reasons for these inconsistencies. Perhaps the dropouts feel an elevated sense of self-worth at leaving an environment in which they feel they have failed. Perhaps they are encouraged by their peers to leave school. Perhaps they are quitting to confront adults as Cassel suggested. As Whelage and Rutter (1986) commented however, the relationship of self-esteem may be more complex than delineated in the investigations described (p. 121).

<u>The Alienated Teen</u>

Burkam and Lee (1990) suggested that dropping out of school "...is the ultimate reaction to alienation, discouragement, and dissatisfaction" (p. 3), and Cassel (1985) contended that misbehaving children are discouraged children. Discouragement equals misbehavior, and misbehaving children are discouraged children who want to "belong." They act on the faulty logic that their misbehavior will gain them the social acceptance they desire. Discouraged teens may resort to destructive goals to protest their fear of nonacceptance. Quitting school is done to confront adults. "The maladjusted child feels insignificant and useless. He has given up trying to find his place through constructive contribution and switched to destructive behavior." (Cassel, 1985, p. 57).

Discouraged adolescents tend to become less involved in general, and at times of low involvement may be prone to disengage from their community, school and family (Fertman and Chubb, 1990).

If children feels okay about themselves, they behaves in a co-operative fashion. Discouraged children however becomes negative, hostile or aggressive as they believe that this is the only way to be noticed. After all, getting nagged or punished is better than no attention at all (Cassel, 1985).

Mitchell (1971) contended, however, that within our present social design, there is no real alternative to a certain amount of alienation. Adolescents cannot do the things they are capable of doing. Their increased intellectual skills allow them to recognize the inconsistency and weaknesses of adult society and they tend to challenge such. As Mitchell (1971) stated:

> The adolescent is idealistic: when his ideals are shattered by contradictory information he becomes frustrated, anxious: the greater one's intellectual powers the greater the chance of uncovering information which has a shattering effect: the shattering creates withdrawal and when there is nothing acceptable to withdraw to, there is alienation (p. 60).

The combination of idealism and intellectual powers enables adolescents to see disparities clearly. They may see themselves as the innocent victims, which only fuels their skepticism and resentment towards the larger society.

There are many facets to consider when examining the lives of the dropouts studied in this research, and the psychological constructs discussed play an important part in determining the behaviors of youth. In summary, behaviors are an expression of psychological perceptions, and attempts to understand individuals must consider these perceptions.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Best and Kahn (1989) discuss various types of research and offer the following descriptions. Research usually conducted in a laboratory is fundamental research. They note that most research in education is applied research, and call the study and application of research to educational problems, action research. This is a type of research that focuses on immediate applications and its findings are judged in terms of local relevance, not universal validity. The aim is to improve school practices. They further note that respectable research studies may be simple, descriptive, fact-finding studies which lead to useful generalizations. Such research applies the spirit of the scientific method to a particular setting and does not make any assumptions about the general application of the findings beyond the site studied (Best and Kahn, 1989).

Best and Kahn (1989) declared that descriptive research is a term often used incorrectly to describe three differing types of research activity. These are assessment, evaluation and descriptive research studies. First, assessment, which is essentially a fact-finding exercise that describes conditions that exist at a point in time. No hypotheses are proposed and no recommendations are forthcoming. A survey is an example of an assessment study.

A second type of activity is evaluation, which is concerned with the application of findings and often implies some judgement about a program. It may be concerned with recommendations, but not with generalizations that may be extended to other settings (Best and Kahn, 1989). "To assessment, evaluation adds the ingredient of value judgment or the social utility, desirability, or effectiveness of a process, product, or program, and it sometimes includes a recommendation for some course of action" (Best and Kahn, 1989 p. 77).

Evaluation involves value judgments. It may assess possible future directions, or address desirable conditions and represent desired practice (Best and Kahn, 1989).

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) present a similar method of categorizing qualitative applied research. They describe evaluation research as involving the assessment of a particular program.

According to Best and Kahn (1989), descriptive studies involve hypotheses formulation and testing, the analysis of non-manipulated variables and the development of generalizations beyond the situation evaluated. In such research, only variables that exist or have already occurred are observed. This is known as *ex post facto* or causal-comparative research. In descriptive research, the variables are not manipulated. The events described would have occurred if no observation had happened.

While descriptive research is useful in identifying possible causes, one must be aware that this is non-experimental or correlational research. As such, the results cannot provide solid evidence that one variable actually caused a change in another. This may lead to the post hoc fallacy, the conclusion that because two factors seem to go together, that one caused the other (Best and Kahn, 1989).

All research has in common the fundamentals of observation, description and analysis. In educational research, Best and Kahn (1989) suggested that almost all studies may be categorized as: historical research, which describes what was, descriptive research which describes what is, or experimental research which describes what will be when variables are manipulated.

According to Borg (1981), most research can be placed in one of three broad categories. The first is descriptive research which aims at describing characteristics. The second, correlational research, explores the relationship between variables. The third, experimental, manipulates variables and measures the effect on other variables (p. 129).

Much of the early research is descriptive as it is necessary to know something about the characteristics of subjects before tackling more complex research questions. Borg

(1981) notes that most of the research in education is either survey research or observational research. Survey research often employs questionnaires or interviews. Observational research " ... refers to any objective procedure for recording the characteristics or behavior of your subjects." (Borg, 1981, p. 130). Borg concedes however, that in many instances, there is only a rough distinction between survey research and observation. A questionnaire for example, may be regarded as an observation or as a survey.

What's In A Name?

Not all researchers subscribe to the description presented by the preceding authors. Lincoln and Guba (1985) categorize research in the social sciences as being either quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative research follows the traditional positivistic traditions which have been so successful in the natural sciences and have contributed to the development and establishment of our technological society. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is a relative newcomer in the research tradition. As Merriam (1988) noted, qualitative research became recognized in the late 1960s when it was adopted to study educational practices and proved helpful in forming policy (p. xi). Lincoln and Guba (1985) call such research naturalistic research, and they suggest that it presents an alternative paradigm for conducting research.

In reading the qualitative literature, one encounters a number of terms that are often used synonymously or in close relation to each other. Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to terms such as postpositivistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, subjective, case study, qualitative, hermeneutic and humanistic synonymously with the term "naturalistic." Bogdan and Biklen (1982) noted that other phrases associated with the term "qualitative" include case study, interpretative, ethnomethodological, ecological and descriptive.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) declare that, in education, qualitative research is often called naturalistic because researchers often frequent the site where the events being studied

naturally occur. They use the term ethnographic research synonymously with qualitative research. For the purposes of this review, the term qualitative will be used to describe the research approach that is employed in the investigation.

Characteristics of qualitative research

In ethnographic studies, the emphasis is placed upon understanding how people create and understand their lives, on how they see and describe their world (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p. 37). The observation is on actual behavior in real-life settings (Best and Kahn, 1989). Events and behaviors are described without the use of numerical data and statistical interpretations. Field research is often used as opposed to a controlled setting such as a lab or a research-site (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are two tenets of naturalistic investigations: there is no manipulation by the researcher, and the researcher imposes no *a priori* units on the outcome (p. 8). The theory is expected to emerge. Data gathered in the field are analyzed inductively (that is, from specific raw units to larger subsuming categories) to define working hypotheses. The theory is "grounded," it follows from the data rather than preceding it as in conventional inquiry. This grounded theory is necessary as no *a priori* theory could anticipate the complexities encountered in the field (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Theory is discovered empirically rather than postulated *a priori*. Tacit knowledge plays a role in such investigations.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) present the following as assumptions of naturalistic inquiry:

(1) is defined not at the level of a method but at the level of a paradigm. It is not crucial that such be carried out exclusively using qualitative methods;

(2) presumes a heavy reliance on the human as instrument;

(3) the inquirer has made a serious effort to develop an initial design statement; and,

(4) the inquirer has made every effort to become thoroughly acquainted with the field sites (Lincoln and Guba, pp. 250 - 251).

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) stress that "meaning" is of essential concern to the qualitative approach. "Researchers ... are concerned with what are called *participant perspectives*. They focus on questions like: What assumptions do people have about their lives? ... By learning the perspectives of the participants, qualitative research illuminates the inner dynamics of situations..." (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p. 30 -31).

Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research Methods

Miles and Huberman (1984) stated that qualitative research is becoming increasingly accepted in its own right as a legitimate way of conducting research.

In an exploratory descriptive study, the researcher does not know the dynamics of a setting with any certainty. Thus, front-end instrumentation with determined devices for data gathering are inappropriate. Confirmatory studies with well bounded samples on the other hand lend themselves to well-structured instruments and designs. However, within any study, exploratory and confirmatory aspects can exist side by side (Miles and Huberman, 1984). A basic difference between qualitative and quantitative research is that in the qualitative study, the emphasis is on understanding the perspective of the participant (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982).

Values

The phenomenological position of qualitative research dictates an idiographic interpretation of people or events. Lincoln and Guba (1985) present naturalistic research as being "value-bound." Inquiry is influenced by the values of the researcher and by the assumptions underlying the methodological paradigm. Inquiry, they suggest, is not "value free." The inquirer's values implicitly affect selected aspects of the inquiry process. Such values influence the selection of the problem, the method of data gathering and subsequent analysis, and guide interpretations made from the findings.

Qualitative Research Design

In qualitative research, the study itself structures the research (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982). The design must, of necessity, be flexible. On the site, the researcher engages in continuous inductive analysis so that every act takes into consideration everything learned thus far. The design is continuously emerging and it tends to diverge rather than converge (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Research Considerations

Samples

Nonprobability samples are those that use whatever subjects are available rather than using a specific selection process. Such samples may produce samples which do not reflect characteristics of the general population being investigated, and as such may lead to unwarranted generalizations. They may represent a biased sample, as volunteers may not represent the total population. Rather, they represent individuals who are different and who really represent a population of volunteers (Best and Kahn, 1989).

In naturalistic inquiry, the sample is selected in ways that provide the broadest range of information (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Sample size is determined by research considerations (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It must be large enough to adequately represent the population under study and small enough to be economical (Best and Kahn, 1989). Subject availability and cost factors are legitimate considerations in determining sample size (Best and Kahn, 1989). Sampling is terminated when no new information is generated. Thus redundancy is the driving consideration (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Relevant Types of Studies

A number of studies that have application to this study are described in the literature. First, Best and Kahn (1989) discuss the "follow-up" study, which is concerned with what has happened to individuals who have left an institution after completing some program. The aim is to determine the impact of both the institution and the

adequacy/inadequacy of the program. Early school leavers, for example, may be studied with regard to the holding power of secondary schools.

Another type of study, derived from the qualitative paradigm, is the case study. Case studies analyze interactions in depth. They are often longitudinal and show developments over time (Best and Kahn, 1989). Lincoln and Guba (1985) add that, if the description of the study is sufficiently "thick," the reader is provided with sufficient background to bring their own tacit knowledge to bear.

The case study examines an important part of the life cycle of the individual (Best and Kahn, 1989). If researchers study two or more subjects or settings, then according to Bogdan and Biklen (1982), they are engaging in multi-case studies. Because the study is focused on the thick description of the individual and towards analysis in depth, it is not directed towards broad generalizations (Best and Kahn, 1989).

Document or Content Analysis

Current documents are used and analysis examines the phenomenon of a particular time. This process is descriptive if it involves problem identification, hypothesis formulation, sampling and systematic observation that leads to generalizations (Best and Kahn, 1989, p. 90).

Structure of the study

This study is composed of two parts or phases and contains a hybrid of the types of research discussed above. It would seem appropriate to term the research as a descriptive exploratory study, which is considered to be applied research as it was conducted with a view to the practical utility of the findings (Castetter and Heisler, 1980). The types of information collected and the procedures used lend themselves to an exploratory approach.

This study may be thought of as comprising two distinct phases, each of which addressed specific aspects of the research question or subquestions. Taken together, the two phases adequately addressed the major research problems. Phase one of the study

addressed the nature of the situation as it currently exists in one urban Alberta high school. This phase of the research study was a document analysis intended to elicit detailed information regarding the educational histories of individual students. The literature contains many factors thought to contribute to, or to be associated with the dropout population. One category of such factors includes the educational history of individual dropouts. Accordingly, a document search of cumulative record cards was conducted to determine what characteristics might distinguish the dropout population from its counterpart graduate population. This phase was considered necessary due to the detailed information being sought. It was felt that this specific information was necessary to develop a broad-based picture. Information was collected from the cumulative record folders (also called student portfolios) of students. Included was the following information:

- marks earned in core subjects
- grade and month the student left high school
- grades repeated or special programs
- suspensions/truancy/lates

The information gathered was recorded on a fact sheet, a procedure employed by Sullivan (1987) and Tidwell (1985). A copy of the instrument (entitled Cumulative Record Data Summary Form) is included in Appendix A. The information was gathered on 50 dropouts and similarly upon 50 randomly selected graduates. This allowed comparisons to be made between the two populations on the variables under consideration.

The second phase of the research study focused on the opinions and thoughts of actual dropouts. It involved the administration of a questionnaire to dropouts. A standardized instrument was developed based upon the work of Tidwell (1985). A copy of the instrument (called "Student Questionnaire Interview") is included in Appendix B. A major purpose of this phase of the study was to develop an inventory of recommendations high school dropouts made to school officials regarding their situation.

When students in the school in the study drop out of school, they are required to complete some variation of a school leaving or "clearance" form. This necessitates a consultation with a counsellor, who discussed with the dropout the nature of the research being conducted and enquired whether the dropout would consider responding to a questionnaire. Those who agreed to participate were given the questionnaire.

Additionally, the respondents were invited to contact the researcher if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. The purpose of the interview was to complement the questionnaire and to obtain more in-depth and richer information. The addition of this qualitative dimension facilitated triangulation of the information obtained from the cumulative record cards, the questionnaires, and the interviews. Such interviews were conducted with a dozen participants. The format for the interviews ranged from a semi-structured format where consistency of information was important, to unstructured where the intent was to gain as much information as possible. A semi-structured interview guided the initial stages of the interview and ensured a degree of uniformity among the interviewees. The interviews began as semi-structured, but become less structured as the interview proceeded and rapport was established between the dropout and the researcher. A copy of the Interview Schedule may be found in Appendix C.

All dropouts who were less than 18 years old had to have a form signed by either a parent or a legal guardian giving consent to their participation in the research study.

Data collected by interviews with the dropouts occurred at a time and place deemed mutually convenient to both parties. The interviews took between 45 and 75 minutes. After each interview, the researcher reviewed the notes and made any clarifications necessary. This ensured that the information was uncontaminated by external distractions. In addition, all interviews were audio taped.

One difficulty encountered in dropout studies is that of a low response rate. Sullivan (1967) encountered considerable difficulties in collecting data from dropouts. Accordingly, information in this study was solicited from dropouts as soon they have

indicated they were leaving. Once dropouts have made their decision and left the campus, the less inclined they are participate in research. They may agree to complete a voluntary questionnaire and subsequent interview, but seldom do. It is likely that they are more focused upon leaving this chapter of their lives behind. Their old role has been abandoned and with it, any inclination to review it until the ambivalent feelings associated with school have been resolved.

Justification for the Selected Methodological Approach

The methodology described above was selected as it was deemed suitable for this kind of study. A similar methodology has been used by other researchers exploring similar questions (Tidwell, 1985, Sullivan, 1987). The following features supported this approach in the present study:.

(1) Pilot studies supported and produced additional data to that found in the literature.

(2) The administration of the phase two questionnaires to dropouts provided a range of perceptions which helped to consolidate the instruments designed for this phase of the study.

(3) The administration of semi-structured interviews to dropouts produced feedback which allowed the researcher to assess the validity of the reports and the recommendations offered.

(4) Interviews allowed for clarification of the data, and reinforced the interpretation of the data. Additional insight to the characteristics of the population emerged. Interviews reinforced the tentative conclusions which emerged from the questionnaires administered to the dropouts.

Interviewing is a qualitative collection strategy and one supported by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) as a reliable, effective way of collecting data. The interviews were conducted in a setting neutral to the participants (e.g. a coffee shop, at a mall, in their home or at any locale where they were comfortable), hence were naturalistic. The use of

interviews has been supported by several writers (Borg, 1981, Miles and Huberman, 1984, Best and Kahn, 1989).

Definitions

For the purposes of this study, a dropout was considered to be any person who left high school prior to completing or obtaining a high school diploma (Radwanski, 1987). This definition is one subscribed to by the Edmonton Public School district and Alberta Education.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability refers to replication. It addresses whether or not other researchers using the same methods can obtain the same results as the original study (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Best and Kahn (1989) discuss the reliability of an instrument and describe it as the degree of consistency that the instrument or procedure demonstrates. Is what is being measured done so consistently? Tests with high coefficients of reliability have reduced errors of measurement to a minimum. Thus, reliable instruments are stable in what they measure and yield comparable scores across repeated administrations (Best and Kahn, 1989, p. 169).

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) distinguish between internal reliability and external reliability. Internal reliability refers to the degree to which, within a single study, multiple observers will agree. It thus addresses inter-rater reliability. Are the observations of multiple observers sufficiently congruent such as to describe the phenomena under observation in the same way and arrive at similar conclusions? The concern is with the replicability of the findings. External reliability concerns itself with the degree to which others would discover the same constructs or phenomena (Le Compte and Goetz, 1982).

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) discuss strategies to reduce threats to internal reliability. Researchers can use low-inference descriptors, striving to be as precise and

concrete as possible. Verbatim accounts as well as narratives of behavior reduce ambiguity. Mechanically recording data is another strategy to preserve the integrity of the data and enhance reliability.

Reliability can be achieved by field testing instruments and revising items that are unclear. It also helps to make sure that directions are clear and that there is only one way to respond to and interpret items (n.n., n.d.).

The reliability of questionnaires may be inferred by repeating the administration of the instrument and comparing the responses against the original, or by employing an alternate form (Best and Kahn, 1989). The reliability of interviews may be evaluated by restating questions in a slightly different form later in the interview (Best and Kahn, 1989).

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) acknowledge that due to the complexity of ethnographic research, researchers can at best only approach external reliability. They maintain that external reliability may be enhanced by recognizing the following major problems:

(1) Researcher status and position: to what extent is the researcher a member of the group studied and what position does he hold? Because ethnographic data depend on the social relationship of the researcher with subjects, research reports must clearly identify the researcher's role and status within the group investigated.

(2) Informant choices: participants who gravitate toward ethnographers may be atypical of the group under investigation. The qualities that make them valuable as informants and research assistants may mark them as deviant from their own group. Threats to reliability posed by informant bias are handled most commonly by careful description of those who provided the data.

(3) Social situations and conditions: what informants feel to be appropriate to reveal in some contexts and circumstances may be inappropriate under other conditions eg. what they reveal in a school vs. their home neighborhood.

(4) Analytic constructs and premises: the constructs, definitions or units of analysis must be carefully specified. There must be explicit identification of the assumptions and metatheories which underlie the terminology and the methods of analysis. All assumptions and definitions must be explicitly identified.

(5) Methods of data collection and analysis: Because reliability depends on the potential for subsequent researchers to reconstruct original analytic strategies, only those ethnographic accounts that specify these in sufficient detail will be replicable (LeCompte and Goetz,1982, p. 38 - 40).

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) suggest that qualitative researchers tend to view reliability as a fit between what they record and what actually occurs in the field, as opposed to a consistency across different observations.

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) acknowledge that in ethnographic research, exact replicability can only be approximated. They state, "... because human behavior is never static, no study can be replicated exactly, regardless of the methods and designs employed." (p. 35).

In the conventional paradigm, reliability is equated with consistency and predictability. It is tested by replication and is valued as a precondition for validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Reliability consideration in the present study

The present study addressed the issue of reliability in the following ways. As suggested by LeCompte and Goetz (1982), low-inference and precise descriptors were used. The questionnaires and interviews were pilot tested to discover directions or items that were unclear, or those items that could be responded to in more than one fashion. Interviews were audio recorded to preserve the integrity of the data, and subsequently transcribed. In the interview situation, key concepts were paraphrased for accuracy and were re-asked in a slightly different form later in the interview.

In addition, the researcher endeavored to make a full disclosure of his status and position with regard to the respondents. Included was a statement of the biases of the researcher, coupled with a careful description of the assumptions and methods of data analysis. Care was taken to provide sufficient detail to enable a reasonable degree of replicability. A reflective journal enabled the researcher to document the assumptions and critical decisions, to provide an audit trail.

Validity

Validity is concerned with the accuracy of the findings. It requires assessing the extent to which conclusions represent empirical reality (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982). Put another way, it refers to how truthful and authentic the data are in representing what it claims to measure. To be valid, instruments must measure what the researcher claims to measure (n.n., n.d.). Validity is a quality of data-gathering that enables the researcher to be confident that the instruments used to gather data actually gather the data they are supposed to gather, and further, that they measure what they are supposed to measure. Reliability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for validity. A test must be reliable to be valid, but reliability in and of itself does not guarantee validity (Best and Kahn, 1989). Reliability and validity are achieved through the careful design, testing and revision of the instruments used in the data-gathering process (n.n., n.d.).

In short, an instrument is valid if it measures what it claims to measure (Best and Kahn, 1989). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that validity requires that the propositions generated or tested match the conditions in life. They submit that there are two questions to be asked. First, do researchers actually observe what they think they are measuring? This fundamental problem is known as internal validity. Second, to what extent are the constructs generated applicable across groups? This is external validity. Internal validity can be thought of in terms of credibility and external validity with generalizability. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) state that internal validity is the extent to which the

observations and measurements represent some reality. External validity addresses the degree to which the representations may be compared across groups. They further note that internal and external validity are interrelated issues, but that they are customarily separated to clarify procedures.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) made the point that in the conventional paradigm, internal and external validity are in a trade-off situation. If for the sake of control (internal validity) rigorous laboratory conditions are employed, then the results are not generalizable to other situations (external validity).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also noted that while reliability may be difficult to achieve in qualitative research, validity may be its major strength. Internal validity is derived from the data collection and analysis techniques employed. The practice of collecting data in natural settings reflects the reality of life experiences more accurately than possible in a contrived setting.

Other types of validity to be considered are content validity and construct validity. Best and Kahn (1989) defined content validity as the degree to which an instrument actually measures the traits it was designed for. Construct validity involves the extent to which the instrument is based upon sound theory or constructs. Both of these then are related to internal validity.

The validity of questionnaires is determined by asking the right questions in the least ambiguous way. The meaning of the terms used must be defined so they are interpreted in the same way by the all respondents. In addition, a panel of those having some expertise in questionnaire construction or with the construct being investigated may contribute to the content validity of the instrument (Best and Kahn, 1989). Ensuring that the items on a questionnaire are measuring the appropriate content is largely a judgment issue. Does the content reflect what is important? Does the literature or other research support these variables as being appropriate? Is there a logical connection between what is being asked and what you wish to know (n.n., n.d.).

Guba and Lincoln (1981) discussed factors which may affect the internal validity of research. Distortions arising from bias on the part of the subjects is one such factor which may be applicable to this study. Dropouts themselves responding in phase two, may externalize the reasons for their decision. This drawback however cannot be overcome and must be weighed against the benefits of tapping these sources.

The questionnaire and interviews for phase two of the research paralleled instruments developed by Tidwell (1985), a study which established the validity of the instrument. Some adaptations were made to fit the framework of this study.

As Best and Kahn (1989) noted, "basic to validity of a questionnaire is asking the right questions, phrased in the least ambiguous way. In other words, do the items sample a significant aspect of the purpose of the investigation?" (p. 193 - 194). They suggested that a panel of experts rate the instrument to determine content validity, to determine whether it assessed the aspects it purported to assess.

Transferability

Whether a hypothesis generated in one situation can be applied to another depends on the degree of transferability. It is a function of the similarity or congruence between the two contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Those wishing to make judgments about transferability need information about both contexts. It is therefore necessary to provide sufficient information about the context, to provide what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call a "thick description."

To increase generalizability, researchers are increasingly using multisite or multicase methods with multiple research methods. By comparing cases, one can establish the range or generality of an explanation and the conditions under which that finding will occur. Thus there is greater potential for enhanced explanatory power and generalizability than in the single case study (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) felt that, if researchers provide the necessary documentation, then it is someone else's task to determine how generalizable the findings

are. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that a case study is primarily an interpretative instrument for presenting an idiographic construal of what was found. The information used to construct the case study may be tentatively applied to other settings if an empirical comparison of the sites warrants such extensions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that in qualitative research, the object is not to focus on similarities which may be developed into generalizations, but to detail the specifics that give the context its uniqueness. A second purpose is to generate the information upon which the emergent design and the grounded theory can be based (p. 201).

Researchers must demonstrate that they have presented a credible construction of the original realities. The credibility criterion is the naturalists substitute for internal validity. Transferability is an empirical matter depending upon the similarity between the two contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). It is necessary to accumulate empirical evidence regarding contextual similarity. It is incumbent upon the researcher, therefore, to provide sufficiently thick data to make similarity judgements possible.

Substitute Criteria for Conventional Designs: Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) submitted that the conventional criteria of validity, reliability and objectivity are not consistent with the axioms and procedures of the qualitative study. Trustworthiness is the major consideration. Trustworthiness addresses how a researcher can persuade the audience that the findings are worth consideration. In qualitative studies the conventional constructs of reliability, validity and objectivity are replaced with what Lincoln and Guba (1985) term credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Each has a counterpart in the conventional paradigm which it replaces. These counterparts along with the suggested techniques for achieving them are summarized in the table below.

Table III-1: Characteristics of research designs

positivistic paradigm	qualitative paradigm	techniques for qualitative use
internal validity	credibility	prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checking
external validity	transferability	thick description
reliability	dependability	auditing
objectivity	confirmability	auditing

Techniques to Increase Validity

Miles and Huberman (1984) stated "... traditional positivists have been too concerned with *internal* validity and conceptual certainty, coming to grief when their data lacked authenticity and meaning - *external* validity" (p. 20).

It is more difficult to determine reliability and validity for data-gathering procedures such as interviews and questionnaires, in which the responses are more qualitative and data are not always quantifiable (Best and Kahn, 1989). As LeCompte and Goetz (1982) stated, attaining absolute reliability and validity is an impossible goal. Nonetheless, researchers may enhance these objectives by considering the factors displayed in the above table in the context of their research problems and goals.

The naturalist counterpart to reliability is dependability. In qualitative studies, the researcher considers factors associated with observed changes. Researchers consider instability and factors designed to bring about change (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The naturalist substitute for objectivity is confirmability, achieved through auditing. The audit trail is considered essential and a detailed account is presented by Halpern in

Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the audit trail may be the single most important trustworthiness technique available.

Triangulation is a technique discussed by several writers. Miles and Huberman (1984) recommend triangulating with several data collection methods. They also suggest showing fieldnotes to an outside reader who may be able to detect where and how a researcher is being misled. In the fieldnotes, it is advisable to write accompanying text to characterize and summarize the flows, and to specify in detail the decision rules used in the construction of the networks. To avoid the trap of being misled, it is suggested the researcher keep his research questions firmly in mind.

Validity consideration in the present study

As stated previously, validity is achieved through careful design and testing, and revising the instruments used in the data-gathering process. The validity of questionnaires is determined by asking the right questions in the least ambiguous way. To determine the right questions, both the questionnaire and the interview schedule were scrutinized by practitioners who had demonstrated knowledge of the topic and an interest in the research. In addition, these instruments were assessed by those having some expertise in questionnaire construction to help determine content validity. The questionnaire used was an adapted version of that used by Tidwell (1985). In the interviews, the validity was addressed by following a carefully designed structure. The questionnaire provided the initial point of discussion for the interview which began with some grand tour questions provided by the questionnaire. As the interview progressed, the respondent's story determined the subsequent direction.

To address generalizability, a detailed description was provided to enable the reader to determine the degree of similarity of the contexts. In addition, multicase methods coupled with multiple methods were used. As discussed previously, a sufficiently detailed account should provide the necessary audit trail.

Finally, the data from the interviews were compared against both the questionnaire and against the contents of the individual's cumulative record. Such triangulation yielded a reasonably comprehensive account of the data collected.

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted to explore the appropriateness of the instruments developed. The questionnaire was reviewed by researchers and practitioners who had some familiarity with instrument construction techniques and their recommendations were used to frame the instrument in language that was familiar to dropouts. The researcher then asked two students to review the questionnaire to determine if there were items that were unclear. A pilot study was then conducted with one dropout to verify that the questionnaire was easily understood and suitable for use.

Such procedures provided a preview of how the study was to proceed and allowed adjustments or modifications to be made to the instrument. The procedures were used to determine the clarity, accuracy, relevance and utility of the methods used to gather the data.

Ethics

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) submit there are two issues regarding ethics. First, the subjects enter the research voluntarily. Second, the subjects are not exposed to risks greater than the gains they might derive from participation in the research. It was assumed that the subject's signature on a consent form was evidence of informed consent. The following general principles were taken into consideration:

(1) identities should be protected.

(2) subjects should be treated with respect and their cooperation sought in the research. Subjects should be told of research interests.

(3) the terms should be made clear to those who give permission for the study and any promises should be honored.

(4) the truth must be told when reporting findings. The most important trademark of a researcher should be his devotion to reporting what the data revealed (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982, p. 50).

Ethical problems are always a concern, especially when working with underage juveniles. Accordingly, all measures were taken to strictly ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. All were informed of the purpose of the study prior to their participation. Any views or opinions expressed by the participants were reported with no indication of who said what. Any opinions the respondents did not wish to appear in the final document were respectfully withheld.

In addition, information gained from assessing the contents of the cumulative records did not contain names. The identities of those selected for study was not to be recorded. Only the information contained in the cumulative records was recorded, along with an indication of the population to which that person belonged, either the graduate or the dropout population.

Ethical concerns did not emerge because the involvement of all respondents was voluntary. The students were described only as members of either the dropout or graduate population. The information was then synthesized. The data collection and information was restricted solely to the researcher who took all necessary measures to safeguard the interests of the research subjects.

In accordance with the University of Alberta requirements, a statement outlining compliance with the guidelines was submitted to the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Educational Administration.

Questionnaires

Personally administered questionnaires have a number of advantages. They provide an opportunity to establish rapport, to explain the purposes of the study and to explain any meanings that may not be clear (Best and Kahn, 1989).

There are two general types of questionnaires. The closed form or restricted form calls for short or check mark responses. The second type is the open form, which calls for respondents to reply in their own words. This allows for a greater depth of response and respondents can reveal the frame of reference for their responses. This form however can be difficult to interpret, tabulate and summarize (Best and Kahn, 1989).

Best and Kahn (1989) offered the following characteristics of a good questionnaire:

(1) It deals with a significant topic, and the significance should be clearly and carefully stated on the questionnaire or in the letter accompanying it.

(2) It seeks only information which cannot be obtained from other sources.

(3) It is as short as possible.

(4) It is attractive in appearance and clearly duplicated.

(5) The directions are clear and complete. Important terms are defined. Each question deals with a single idea and is worded as simply as possible.

(6) The questions are objective, with no leading suggestions regarding desired responses.

(7) Questions are presented in good psychological order, arranged from general to more specific responses. This order helps respondents organize their own thinking so that answers are logical.

(8) It is easy to tabulate and interpret.

(Best and Kahn, 1989, pp. 190-191).

Interviews

According to Best and Kahn (1989), interviews are often superior data-gathering devices as people are more inclined to talk than to write. The interviewer can explain the purpose of the research and detail what is wanted. Once rapport is established, confidential information that one might be reluctant to put in writing may be disclosed. The interview also allows the researcher to assess the sincerity of the responses. It is possible to check

the truthfulness of responses by asking similar information at various stages of the interview. Through the emerging dialogue, it may also be possible to stimulate the respondent's insight and explore areas not anticipated in the original plan (Best and Kahn, 1989).

Researchers must be prepared for the interview. They must have a clear picture of what information they need and outline the questions and comments that will systematically elicit the desired responses. Best and Kahn (1989) suggest that a written outline or checklist will provide such a plan for the interview.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that an interview "... is a conversation with a purpose" (p. 268). Interviews, they note, can be categorized by their degree of structure. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) stated that interview can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured. The greater the structure, the better the chances of getting comparable data across subjects, but the less the opportunity to understand how the subjects structure the topic themselves.

As Lincoln and Guba (1985) observed, in the structured interview the questions are determined by the interviewer and responses by the interviewee. In an unstructured interview, both the questions and answers are determined by the interviewee.

In beginning an interview, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended the respondent warm up with some "grand tour" questions, such as "What's a typical day like around here?" Such general questions allow the respondents time to organize and lead up to matters that may be discussed later in greater detail.

When no new information is forthcoming, the interviewer should summarize what he believes has been said and then invite the respondent to react to (member check) the validity of the observations made (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that the tape recorder can be an unimpeachable data source. Tapes can be reviewed for nonverbal clues and provide for reliability checks.

They also recommend that the information be subject to triangulation, that specific data be verified with other respondents or from other sources such as observations or documents.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982), in the qualitative tradition of capturing the respondent's own words in an emergent fashion, favor the flexibility of open-ended responses. They state, "qualitative studies that report how many people do this and how many people do that, rather than generating concepts and understandings, are not highly regarded by qualitative researchers" (p. 71).

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries of a study and conclusions are not to be extended beyond the population sampled (Best and Kahn, 1989).

(1) The study addressed only certain issues found in the literature that are school related. For example, this study did not examine the role and expectations of parents, school climate and so on. The document search considered select items found in the cumulative records. The questionnaires and interviews with dropouts addressed a variety of factors the literature suggested as important school-related factors.

(2) Cumulative records were examined for 50 members of each of the two populations under consideration. Only information contained therein was considered, ignoring any additional anecdotal information.

(3) Information on student characteristics and dropout interviews were collected from one high school, for logistical reasons.

(4) Interviews were restricted to volunteers and consequently the information cannot be generalized beyond those involved in the interview.

Limitations

Best and Kahn (1989) describe limitations as "those conditions beyond the control of the researcher that may place restrictions on the conclusions of the study and their application to other situations" (p. 38).

(1) Data were collected by voluntary participation only. Consequently, the possibility exists that such respondents may not be typical of the population being studied and restrict the generalizability of the research findings.

(2) Data were collected by questionnaire and interviews, so is thus subject to the limitations of these methods of data collection. For example, reliance upon questionnaires limits the range of responses which can be expressed. Both the breadth and depth of questioning are restricted.

(3) A single researcher was utilized to collect and analyze all data.

(4) The questionnaires and interviews were considered adequate means of gathering data relevant to the questions being considered.

(5) The respondents involved in the study were not randomly selected.

Summary

The topic of dropouts is currently popular in educational circles and with the public. From the literature, one can only conclude that little is known about this extremely complex issue. There exists an inter-connectedness between students, their families, schools and society at large. Schools are central to the problem, but there are many variables beyond their control. It appears that the factors associated with dropping out vary from student to student.

This research project assessed the situation in one large urban school in Alberta. It sought to determine the extent to which the educational records of dropouts differ from graduates, and whether the predictors identified in the literature are useful to this type of study. A significant component of the study was to gather detailed information from

dropouts concerning their history, their reasons for dropping out and suggestions they may have to improve the holding power of schools. It is hoped that the study will contribute to the understanding of this phenomena and be useful to school systems in the future.

Chapter 4

Overview of research analysis:

The data for this study were collected in two phases. The first phase was designed to elicit information regarding the educational histories of individual dropouts and graduates. It involved a document search of the cumulative record cards of each group to determine what characteristics might distinguish these two populations.

The second phase of the research involved soliciting the thoughts and opinions of actual dropouts. This was accomplished in two ways. First, dropouts were invited to complete a questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were then invited to participate in a follow up interview. From these two sources, questionnaires and interviews, the researcher hoped to develop an inventory of recommendations that dropouts might make to improve the retention rate of schools.

The discussion of research results follow the pattern described above. The findings of the cumulative record search are discussed in chapter 4, and the results of the information supplied by the dropouts are discussed in subsequent chapters. Results of the questionnaire are addressed in chapter 5 and the results of the interview in chapter 6. The findings of the research are integrated in chapter 7.

Document search

As discussed previously, a record analysis was conducted to elicit detailed information regarding the educational histories of dropouts. A document search of cumulative record cards (a.k.a. "cum" cards or student portfolios) was conducted to determine what characteristics might distinguish the dropout population from its counterpart graduate population. The original proposal was to examine 50 student record portfolios from each population, but when the portfolios of the dropouts were examined, it was discovered that 6 had to be rejected due to incomplete information. Accordingly, the

student portfolios of some 44 dropouts were examined, and a random sample of portfolios an identical number of graduates were examined.

The information collected included the following: core marks for junior high school (that is, marks on the academic subjects of English, Social Studies, Math and Science); core marks for senior high school; the number of absences and lates accumulated in senior high; the total number of credits earned at the time of leaving school (whether it was the time of leaving for dropouts, or the time of graduating in the case of graduates); the number of credits failed and the IQ if such was available on the cumulative record.

The first observation noted when examining the cumulative records was that several of them were incomplete. Cumulative records are ostensibly a comprehensive and accurate record of the educational history of an individual. They are quasi-legal documents and are expected to be complete and accurate in their information. This, however, is not always the case. As mentioned, 6 of the 50 cum cards had to be rejected as they were incomplete. This represents 12% of this sample. Such a situation would not be tolerated with medical records or financial statements. It was also noted that many of the dropouts had transferred schools at a rate many times higher than that of the graduates. This may help to explain the incomplete cumulative records, particularly if they transferred in mid-year.

Academic observations

Grades

The first observation made in scanning the results concerned the consistency of marks for each population. The marks for both populations were stable across both junior and senior high. Marks for the dropouts in junior high were consistently in the mid-fifties, and showed only slightly more variation in high school. The overall average remained basically the same. A similar pattern was observed for the graduates, whose marks, across both junior and senior high, were 12% higher. See table IV-1 below.

Table IV-1: Marks In Core Courses, Junior and Senior High

	Dropouts Grades 7-9	Graduates Grades 7-9	Dropouts Grades 10-12	Graduates Grades 10-12
English	56%	66%	58%	68%
Social	55%	67%	54%	66%
Math	55%	69%	51%	63%
Science	55%	67%	51%	65%
average	55%	67%	54%	66%

Further, the marks when examined across both junior and senior high were highly stable. The average for grades 7 through 12 for both populations on core subjects, is summarized in table IV-2 below.

Table IV-2: Core Averages, Grades 7 - 12 Inclusive

	Dropouts	Graduates
English	57%	67%
Social	54%	66%
Math	53%	66%
Science	53%	66%
average	54%	66%

The average core subject marks of both junior and senior high revealed the same trend. The marks of those who graduate are, on an average, 12% higher than those of those who dropped out. Dropouts average core marks were in the mid-fifties, in both junior and senior high. Graduates average core marks were roughly 10% - 12% higher in the mid-sixties range. These results were consistent across both junior and senior high school.

See figures IV-1 - IV-3.

Figure IV-1: Jr. High Marks

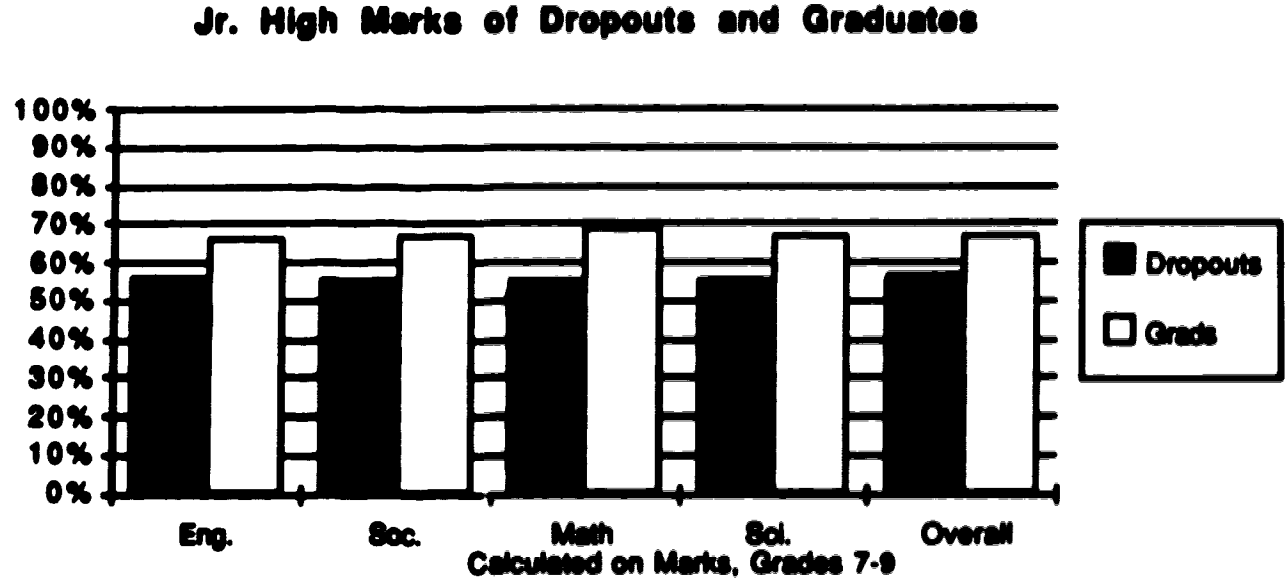


Figure IV-2: Sr. High Core Marks

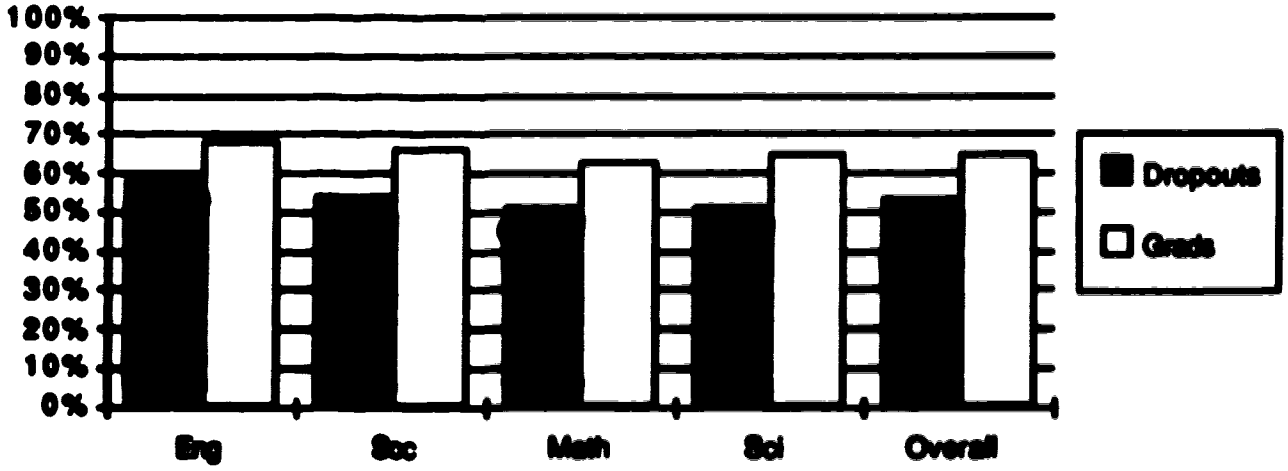
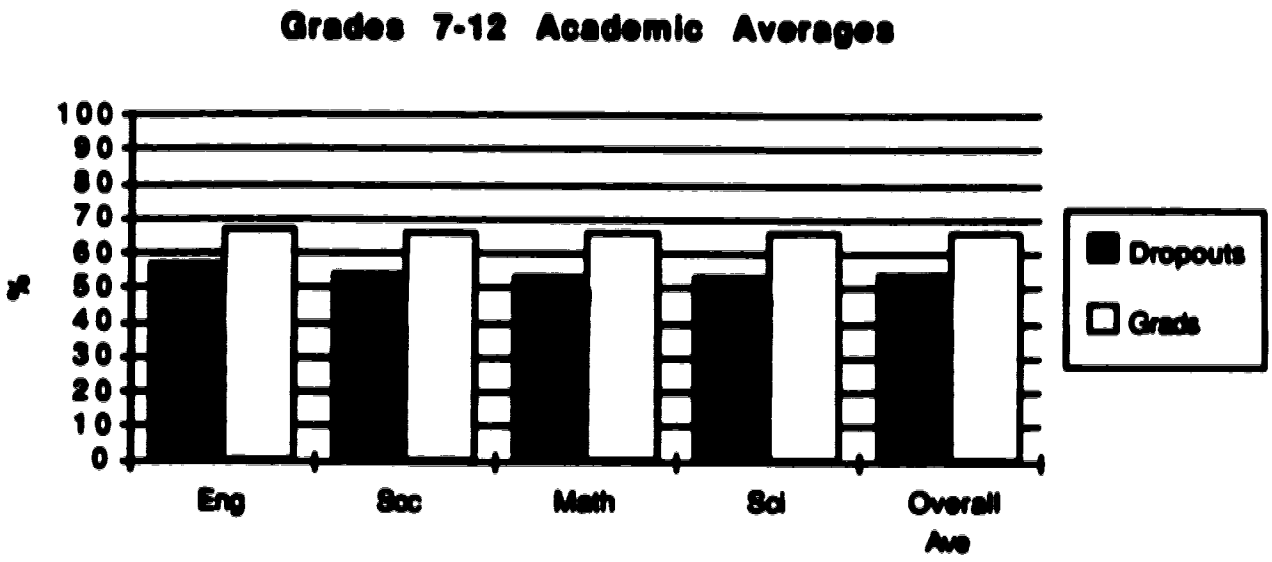


Figure IV-3: Grades 7 - 12: Core Averages



General vs. Advanced Diplomas

It is important to note that in senior high school in Alberta, students may select courses of an academic nature or a general nature. Those who intend to pursue a post-secondary route such as university, are required to take a body of matriculation courses. This is not the case, however, for those pursuing a general high school diploma. Such students may elect to enroll in courses which are less academically rigorous, which in the end will give them a general vs. an advanced diploma. Not only may the academic rigor of the courses vary, but also the number of courses required to gain the diploma. The minimum number of courses required for a diploma depends upon the program. All students must take English in grades 10, 11 and 12. The only choice is whether they enroll in a matriculation or a general course. This is not true, however, in courses such as math or science. While university bound students often take math and at least two grade 12 science courses, general diploma students may take but two math courses and two science courses in all of high school. They could thus take a general math and science course in

grades 10 and 11 only, and still qualify for a diploma, providing they met the balance of the requirements.

The minimum requirements for a General Diploma, at the time of this research, were as follows: English, social studies, math, science and physical education in grade 10, English and social studies in grade 11, and English and 10 additional grade 12 (30 level) credits in grade 12. Students must take additional courses to reach a total of at least 100 credits. This minimum number of academic courses tended to be the preferred route for the non-academic student. Academic students however tended to take a more rigorous program which could lead to a variety of post-secondary programs. The number of students enrolled in academic courses is summarized in table IV-3.

Table IV-3: Percentage of Students Taking Academic Courses by Grade

	Dropouts			Graduates		
	Gr 10	Gr. 11	Gr. 12	Gr. 10	Gr. 11	Gr. 12
English	73%	36%	9%	98%	98%	98%
Social	68%	43%	2%	98%	100%	98%
Math	73%	20%	0%	98%	93%	91%
Science	70%	18%	2%	98%	98%	89%
average	71%	27%	3%	98%	97%	94%

It can be seen from the above that the percentage of dropouts enrolled in academic courses declines dramatically as the grade increases. This occurs for two reasons. Students leaving prior to graduation and not enrolled in grade 12 courses are counted in the figures, and second, those dropouts who do take grade 12 courses tend not to enroll in the academic courses.

In summary, the overall marks of those who dropout are, on an average, at least 10% lower than the grads, and second, the percentage of dropouts taking academic courses diminishes significantly with each grade. See figures IV-4 - IV-6.

Figure IV-4: Percentage of Students Taking Core Courses, Grade 10

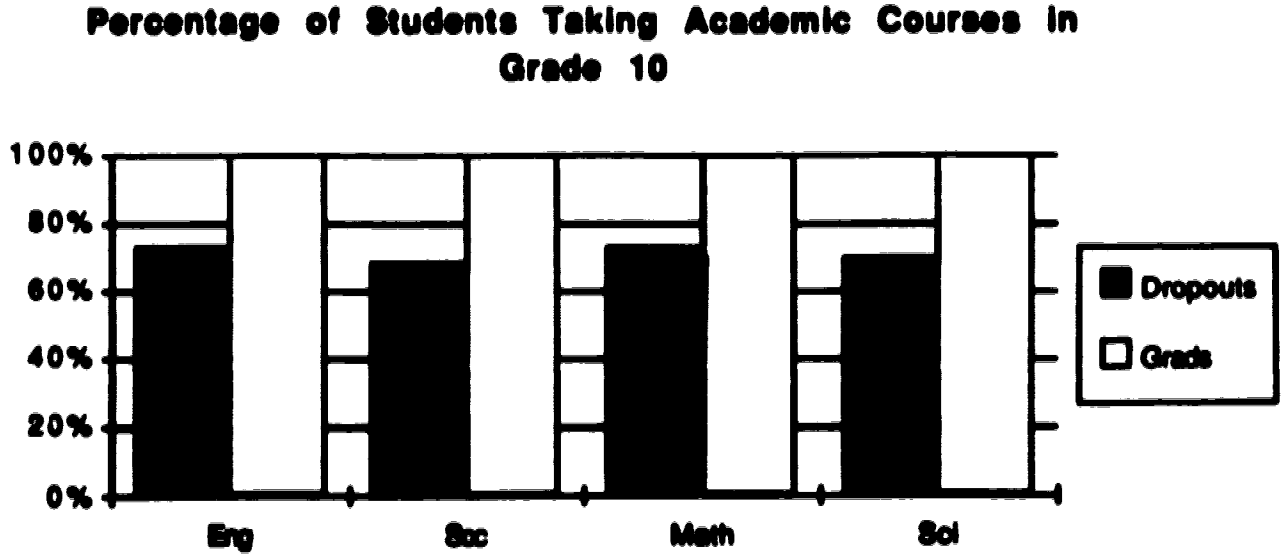


Figure IV-5: Percentage of Students Taking Core Courses, Grade 11

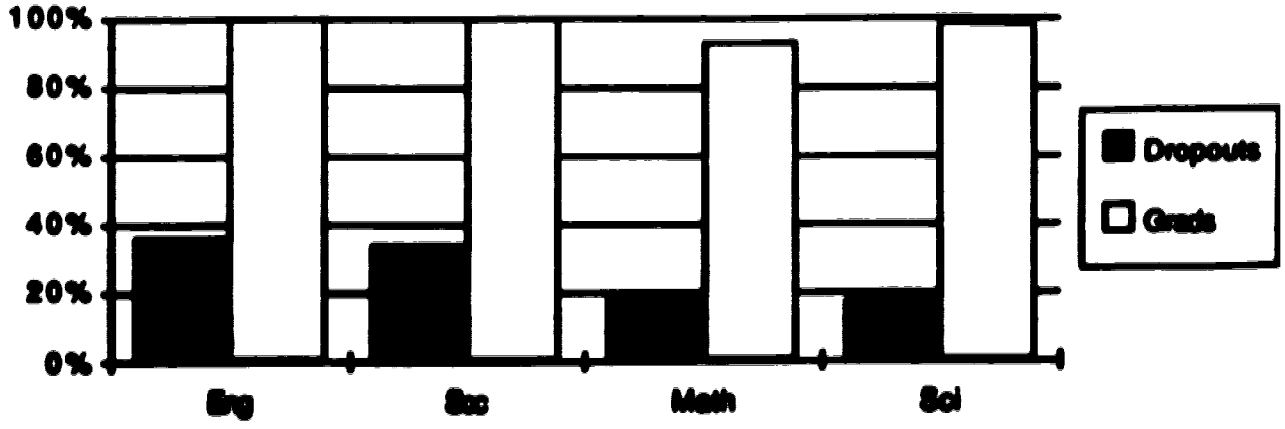
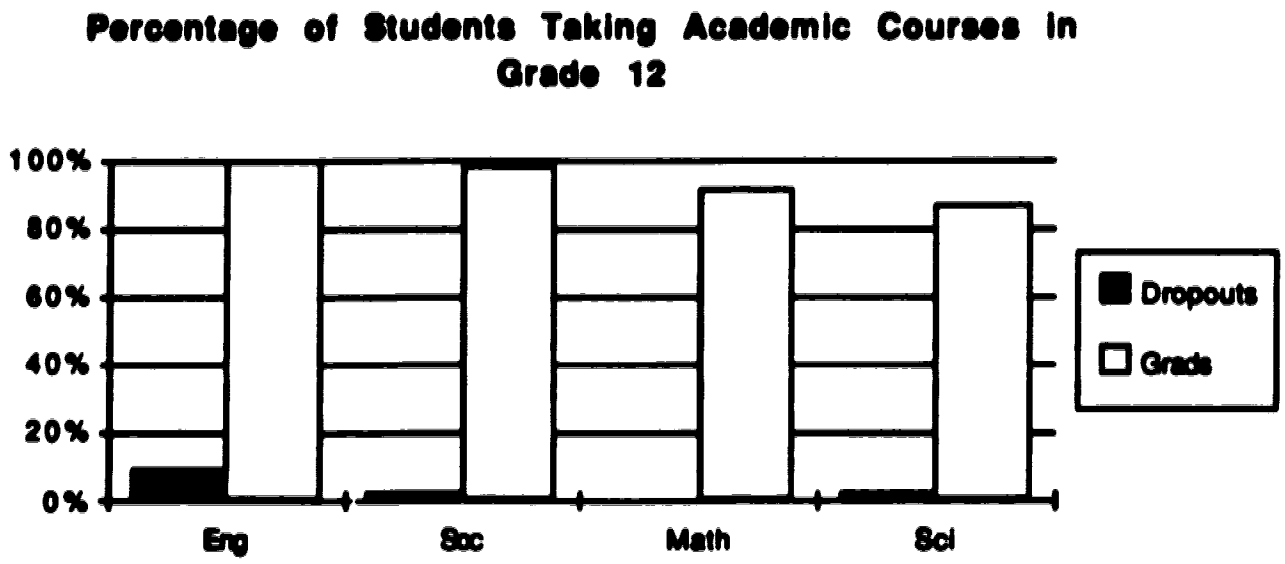


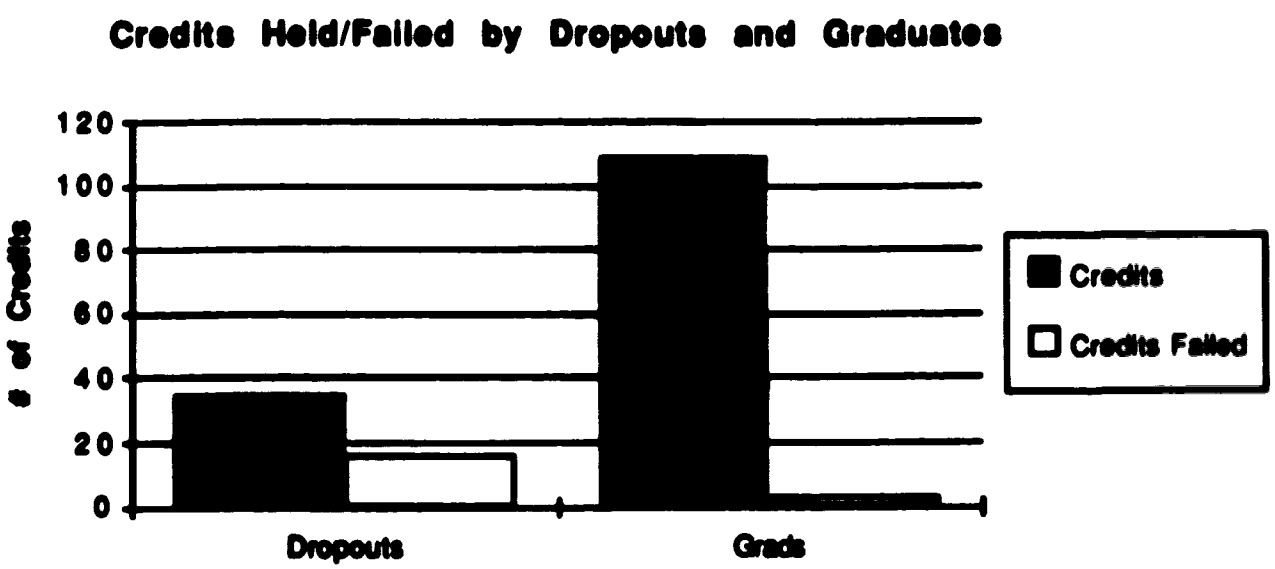
Figure IV-6: Percentage of Students Taking Core Courses in Grade 12



Credits

It would follow that graduates would accumulate more credits than dropouts. That dropouts also failed more courses than graduates was also borne out by the study. The distribution of credits held and failed by each population is presented in Figure IV-7.

Figure IV-7: Credits held/failed

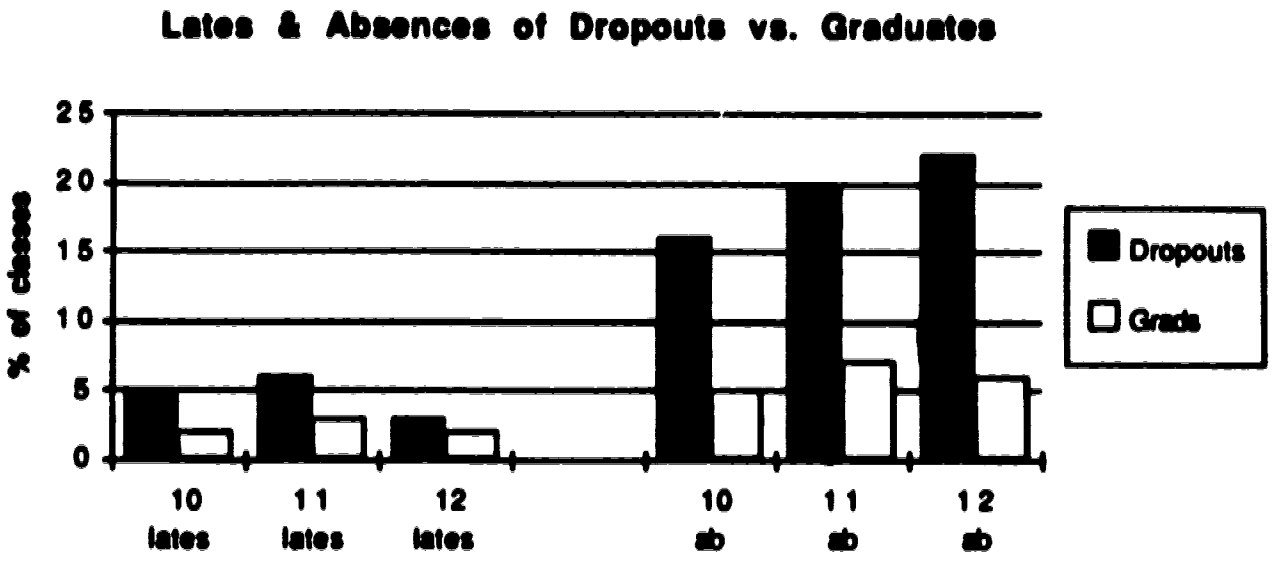


In the above information, dropouts earned an average of 35 credits and graduates an average of 109 credits. Similarly, dropouts failed an average of 16 credits and graduates 3 credits. It should be noted, however, that any student who is doing poorly in a course is not necessarily required to complete the course. With parental awareness, it is a common practice to drop courses in which one has a marginal chance of passing. It is likely then that both populations would experience a higher failure rate if this practice were not allowed, and it is also likely that the failure rate would be significantly higher for the dropout population.

Attendance

One observation commonly made of at-risk students concerns their attendance patterns. They are often accused of either being tardy for class or of not attending at all. This pattern was substantiated in the present study and is summarized in figure IV-8 below.

Figure IV-8: Lates and Absences



The data indicated that dropouts are absent more frequently than late. Lates for both groups tend to be relatively stable across grades 10 and 11, and to diminish in grade 12. At the same time, while absences tend to average around 6% for the graduates, they tend to escalate each year for the dropout population. Dropouts average a 16% absentee rate in grade 10, a 20% rate by grade 11 and a 22% rate by grade 12.

There are a number of explanations for this trend of lates and absences. Regarding lates, by the time students are in grade 12, many of the dropouts feel that if they are late, it is easier to "skip" the class rather than incur the wrath of the teacher for being late yet again. It is not that students become more punctual by year 12, but rather that they are more apt to avoid an unpleasant situation.

The majority of the absences are due to "skipped" class. It is generally held by school officials that if a student's absences reach 10% of the total number of possible classes held, then that student may be at risk of losing his or her credits in that particular course. It can be seen from the data that students in the dropout population exceed this guideline in each year and further, that the trend increases each year. By the time a student

has missed 20% of his or her classes, the chances of gaining credits is severely jeopardized.

There is a sentiment held by many grade 12 students, particularly in spring, that the normal rules no longer apply. The trend for increased grade 12 absenteeism may be due to the feeling on the part of the teachers that by the time students are in grade 12, the staff is not going to pressure them to attend. If they choose to fail their final year, so be it. It is up to them. While the absenteeism rate of the dropout population increased each year and reached its height in year 12, the absenteeism rate of the graduates actually diminished slightly in grade 12 from 7% in grade 11 to 6% in grade 12. This may be due in part to the graduates viewing their final year as one that they can ill afford to miss unless absolutely necessary. It may also reflect that the graduates are coming of an age where they are assuming greater responsibility for their education.

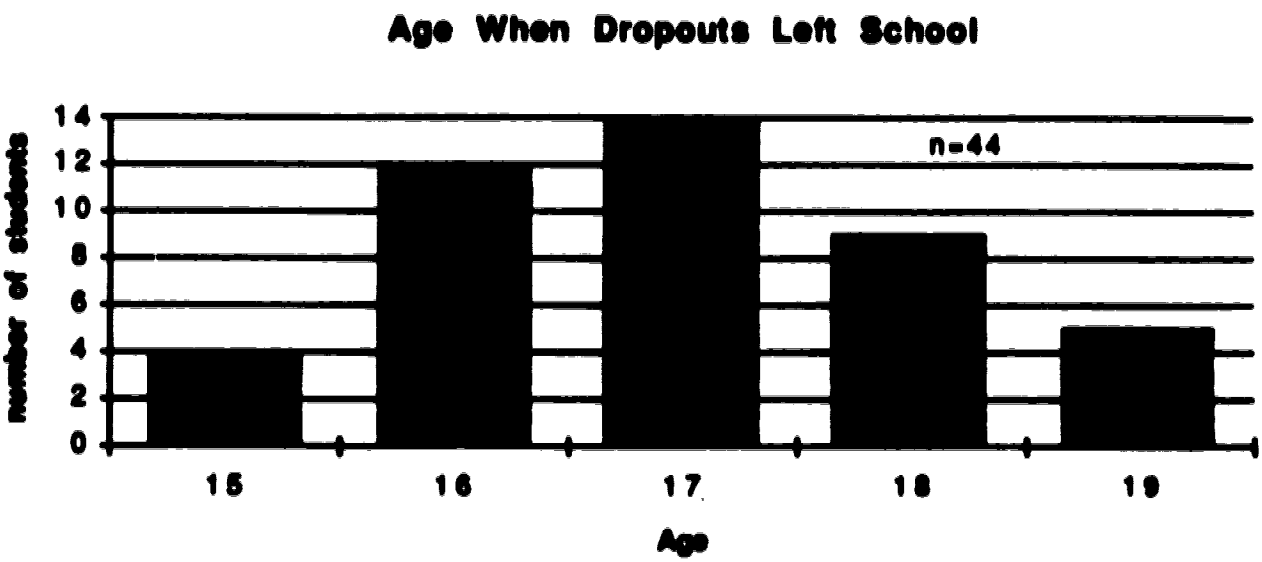
The absenteeism rate for the dropouts averages 19% across the three years. The rate of the graduates averages 6%, which is considered close to the ideal rate for a high school population. An absenteeism rate of 5% among most adult populations would be considered acceptable in the workplace and the attendance rate of the graduates is certainly within this range. It is commonly held among high school administrators across North America that the biggest problem they face is that of attendance. Most high schools in Alberta would be satisfied with an overall absenteeism rate of 6%.

Demographic observations:

Age/Grade when left school

In addition to the academic factors, there are a number of demographic variables that describe the dropout population. Most of the dropouts in the study dropped out when they were either 16 or 17. Of the 44 dropouts 59% were in this age bracket, while 9% were age 15, 21% were age 18, and 11% were 19 years old. The overall average age for dropouts was 17 years two months.

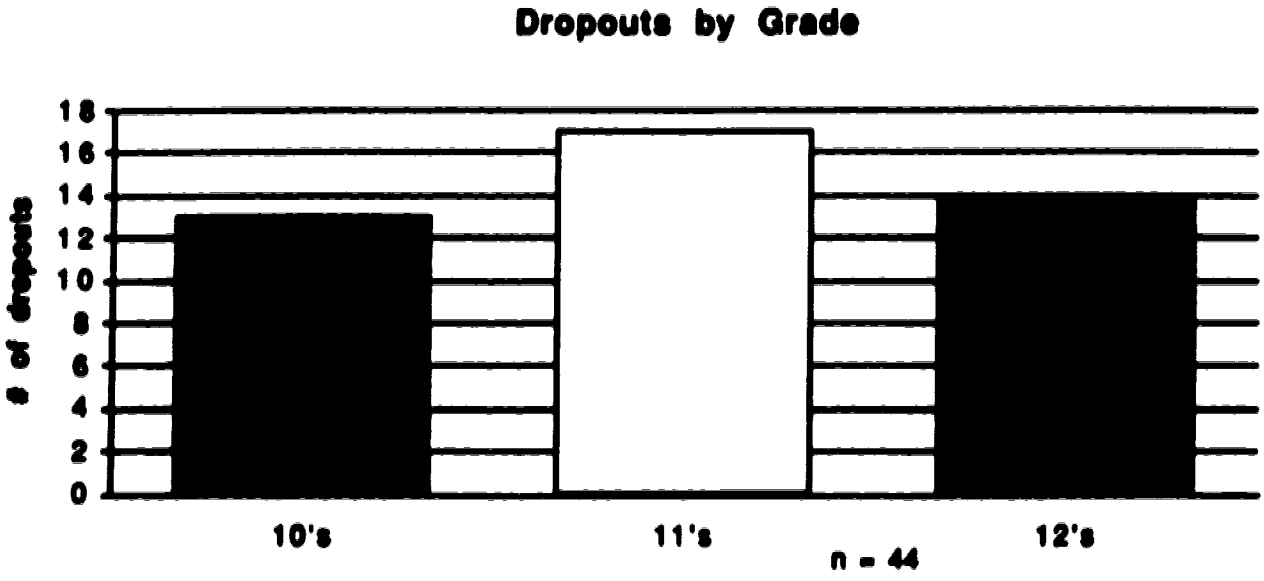
Figure IV-9: Age When Left School



It is understandable that many dropouts leave when they are 16, as this is the legal age at which one may leave school, or the age at which the school may ask them to leave. It is possible that 17 year olds may similarly be disillusioned with their schooling and are of an age to leave. By the time most students are 18 or 19 however, they are closer to the end of their schooling and tend to persevere with their studies. The 15 year olds are an anomaly since they are not yet old enough to legally leave school. However, those with especially dismal school records in terms of attendance, achievement, and classroom demeanor, may leave if their parents/guardians request in writing that their attendance at school be "excused." If such a student has made it abundantly clear that he does not intend to attend school, the parent may decide to withdraw the student.

While the greatest number of dropouts tend to be in grade 11, there are a considerable number in both grades 10 and 12. In this sample, grade tens comprised 29% of the dropouts, grade elevens 39%, and grade twelves 32%.

Figure IV-10: Dropouts by Grade



Age is perhaps a more accurate indicator of dropping out than grade, for students in all grades tend to exit. It is noteworthy that many of those who leave consider themselves overage for grade. That is, they may have already repeated a grade at least once prior to entering high school, so they could be 16 years in grade 10.

The data concerning age and grade when leaving school are summarized in Table IV-4.

Table IV-4: Age/Grade When Dropouts Left School

	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
Age 15	4			4
Age 16	5	7		12
Age 17	3	8	3	14
Age 18		1	8	9
Age 19	1	1	3	5
Total	13	17	14	44

Overage for Grade

Dropouts are more likely than graduates to have experienced academic difficulties prior to arriving in high school, and thus are more likely to have been retained or to have failed a grade. This observation was confirmed in this study. See table IV-5 for a summary of failures.

Table IV-5: Summary of Grades Repeated

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total
Dropouts (#)	4	0	2	0	0	0	4	1	9	20
Graduates (#)	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	5

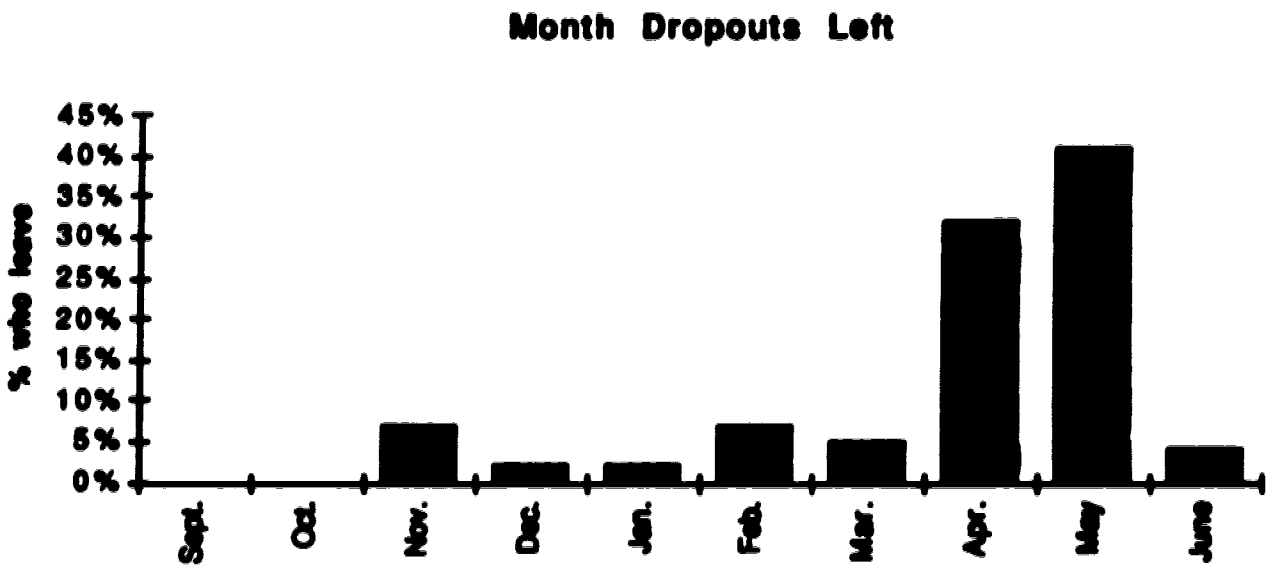
Dropouts outnumber graduates in retentions by 4:1 and are most likely to have repeated grades one, seven or nine. It is not unusual for students to repeat grade one. Students who have not learned the basics by the end of grade one (eg. they do not know the alphabet or have even a reasonable sight vocabulary), may be retained. Students may repeat grade seven because they are not prepared for the transition from elementary to junior high or are not prepared for the increased work load or the increased responsibilities. That students repeat grade nine may be due to teachers not being prepared to send a student who has failing marks on to high school.

In this sample, 45% of the dropouts had repeated a grade, compared to 11% of the graduates.

Month of Leaving

When do students tend to leave? In this study, by far the greatest number tended to leave in the spring.

Figure IV-11: Month Dropouts Left



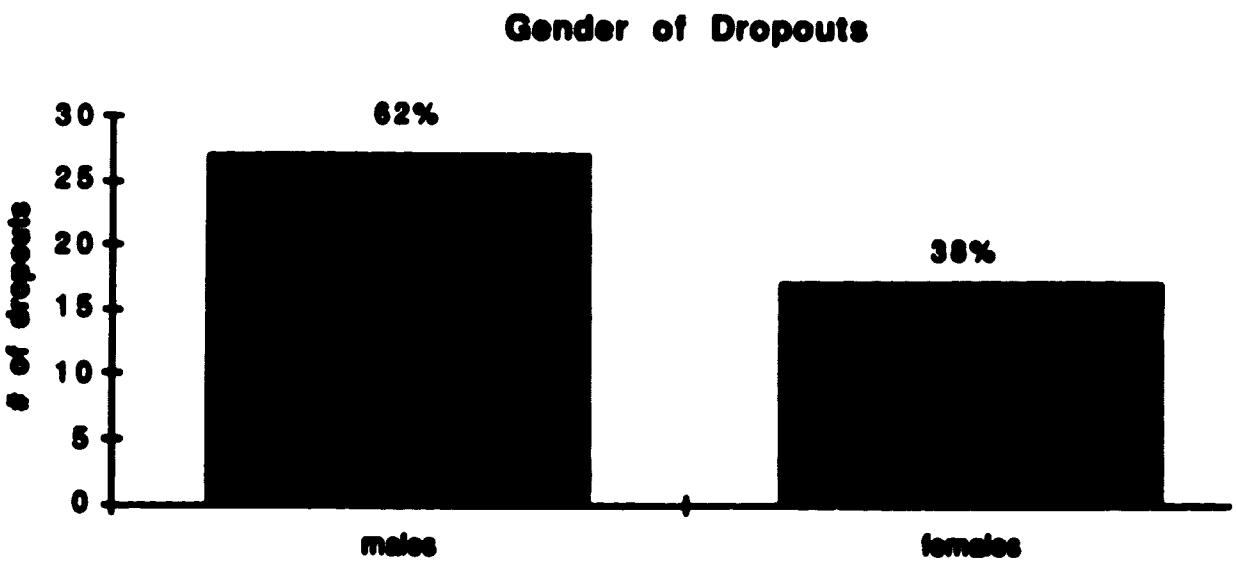
It is somewhat surprising that there are no dropouts in early fall, as it is common to find some students who return to school and discover that they do not have the commitment or resolve that they thought they did at summer's end. Many school systems however do not keep dropout statistics until the September 30th count is established. The November figures likely reflect those students who, after two months of school, have discovered that they are not succeeding and elect to exit at this time. Those who elect to remain past November usually remain until the beginning of semester two in February. At this point they will have their semester one grades and if they are not satisfied with the results, the student may become discouraged and decide to leave.

By far the greatest number of students leave in [illegible] approximately 7% of the dropouts, as does February. [illegible] has about one-third of all dropouts, exceeded only by May which has just [illegible] may be due to a number of considerations, not the least of which is a dissatisfaction with school coupled with the warming days of an imminent summer.

Gender

By gender, males in this study comprised 62% of [illegible] dropouts, and females the remaining 38% of the population.

Figure IV-12: Gender of Dropouts

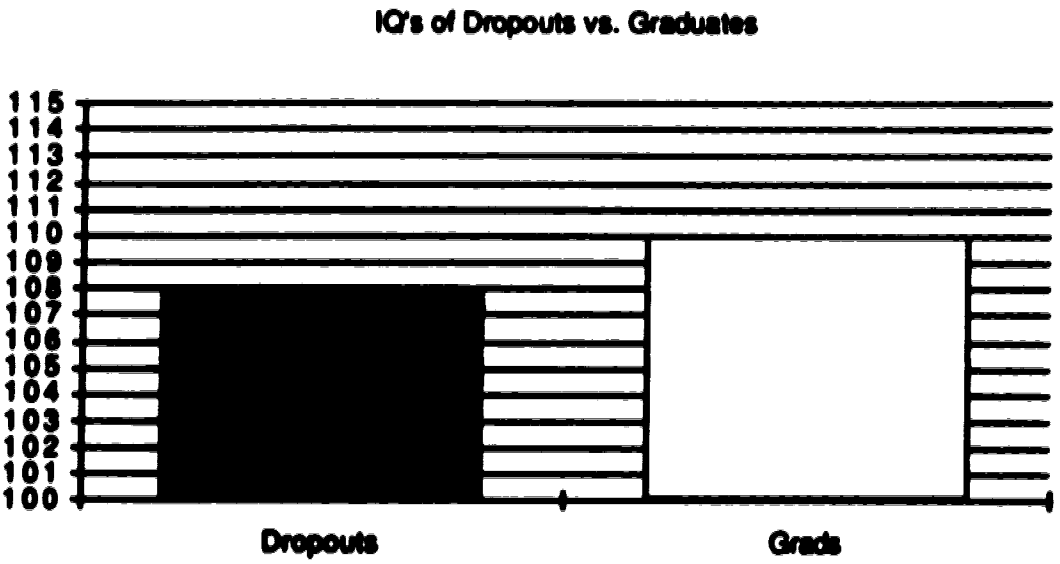


IQ

All the students in the sample had similar cognitive abilities. There is no appreciable difference in intelligence between the two populations as recorded in the cum cards. Not every student had an IQ record in their cum, but most had either a group assessment at some time during their school careers, and several had individual assessments conducted. In the latter case, it was this result which was recorded. Both

populations fall toward the upper end of the average range of ability. Intelligence therefore does not appear to contribute to one's decision to either stay in school or to leave.

Figure IV-13: IQ



In summary, this chapter presented the findings of the information found in the cumulative record search. It compared and contrasted the information of dropouts and graduates from grades 7 through to grade 12. This information was considered necessary due to the depth of information sought. Students do not recall exact details of years past. They may recollect that they were in a "special" remedial program at some time, but not recall the exact grade this occurred. They have but an approximate idea of what marks they have earned. Additionally, the information on the dropouts served as a useful method of triangulating the information gained from questionnaires and interviews.

Chapter 5

Analysis of Questionnaires

When students indicated that they were leaving school, they were invited to complete a questionnaire regarding their decision. Participation in responding was completely voluntary. Eighteen students who left school agreed to complete the questionnaire, which took approximately 30 minutes. For a copy of the original questionnaire, see appendix "B."

Gender

By coincidence, there were equal numbers of respondents across grades 10, 11 and 12. When examined by gender however, the situation presents as follows:

Table V-1: Gender of Questionnaire Respondents

	Male	Female
Grade 10	22%	6%
Grade 11	11%	11%
Grade 12	28%	22%
Σ	61%	39%

In this sample, the number of male dropouts greatly exceeded the number of female. It is coincidental that the male/female ratio is almost identical to that found in the previously reported information on the cumulative records. It is of note that among the grade 10 dropouts, almost 80% of them were male. It may be that a number of dropouts wait until their sixteenth birthday, which happens when they are in grade 10. It is also possible that the grade 10 males became disillusioned with high school after experiencing what high school life was like and thus decided to leave. Those who were considering leaving may have looked at the long uphill task ahead of them, considered it a futile venture, and decided to leave.

Given this trend, it would seem reasonable to target high school dropout intervention programs at the grade tens, and specifically at grade 10 males. A program targeting males would seem appropriate given the ratio of males to females in the previous discussion.

Month of Leaving

In addition to recording the gender of school leavers, the month of leaving was also noted. As seen in the table below, certain months are "peak" dropout months.

Table V-2: Month of Leaving

Semester one		Semester two	
September	6%	February	17%
October	0%	March	11%
November	10%	April	33%
December	6%	May	17%
January	0%	June	0%
Total semester 1	22%	Total semester 2	78%

When considered by semester, only 22% of the dropouts occurred in semester one (September - January) and the remaining of 78% occurred in semester 2 (February - June). The majority of those leaving fall in the latter half of the year. One may speculate that students return to school in September full of resolve to "do the job." Indeed, it is common to hear students stating that they intended to study hard this year. The few September dropouts may have discovered early in the semester that they lacked the commitment required.

Dropout rates tend to be low during the final month of either semester. Those who have persevered this far have more or less completed their courses, have only their exams to write and may feel they have little to loose and much to gain if they can accumulate their credits for the semester. It is possible that the semester two dropout rate is drastically

higher for a number of reasons. First, the students have worn down and succumbed to the rigors of the job. Second, they are disillusioned by their lack of credits. They can predict with some accuracy what their successes for the year are likely to be. Third, they tire of being hounded by teachers, administrators and parents for their behaviors and lack of success. Fourth, they have managed to stay warm for another year and have not had to pound the frozen pavement searching for work. Fifth, many fall victims to "spring fever," they long to be outdoors, and are tempted by the warming rays of summer to skip classes. Such a temptation all but seals the fate of the student who has already accumulated an excessive number of absences. Sixth, the prospect of summer employment, coupled with the lack of school successes, provide an alluring alternative to being in school. They may convince themselves that their year is irretrievable and that by leaving now they will get a head start on the prime summer jobs. There are a number of considerations to explain the high spring dropout rate, and "spring fever" helps account for the attrition rate at this time of year.

Return to School

The next item on the questionnaire addressed whether the dropout intended to return to school. By far the majority indicated an intention to return. When examined by gender, 100% of the males indicated that they planned to return, and 87% of the females indicated likewise. It is possible that these students did not view dropping out as a final act, but rather as a temporary situation. Perhaps they saw themselves as "stopouts," rather than dropouts.

Table V-3: Plan to Return

	Yes	No	Maybe
Males	100%	0%	0%
Females	87%	13%	0%

It is of interest to compare the number who actually returned against those who indicated that they would. Of the students in this sample, all but one indicated that they planned to return. The school registrations were investigated for the subsequent two semesters after these students left; only one student had re-enroled and that student had again left school. This does not mean that these students had not enroled elsewhere, but it does suggest that many of these students had only a vague plan to return, but no commitment as to when. Financial obligations and a lack of desire to return to a situation where they had experienced failure are plausible reasons for their decision.

Why Left School

When asked "Why did you leave high school?", responses fell into a number of clusters. The most frequently cited reason was financial. Three-quarters (76%) of respondents indicated a need to make money and the majority (63%) of these had financial responsibilities and commitments demanding that they work either to support themselves or to meet the financial commitments into which they had entered.

A second reason offered was a lack of academic success. Included here were comments such as: "I still couldn't spell,... poor grades and I couldn't seem to settle down and work,...hard time learning in class,...failing all my courses with too much catching up to do," and " low marks and poor attendance." Twenty-six percent of responses were of this nature.

Other reasons which emerged, but which were not as common were: unmotivated; school was boring or irrelevant; social problems (either too many friends or didn't like the people in school); stress outside of school; and was "kicked out" of school.

The literature cites a list of reasons that are considered important in students deciding to leave school. The response categories on the original questionnaire have been collapsed to determine trends in the reasons. The results are presented in Table V-4.

Table V-4: Typical Problems Experienced by Dropouts

	Yes	No
I had difficulties studying.	86%	14%
I had poor grades.	76%	24%
I needed a job.	76%	24%
I skipped too many classes.	76%	24%
I didn't have the self-discipline.	74%	26%
School was boring.	57%	43%
My behavior in school got me in trouble.	53%	47%
I had home problems.	50%	50%
I was unwilling to do the work	48%	52%
I had problems with teachers.	42%	58%
The subjects I was taking were irrelevant.	40%	60%
I had problems with my parents.	37%	63%
I was depressed.	35%	65%
My teachers suggested that I should leave school.	29%	71%
The work was too difficult.	27%	73%
My teachers were unhelpful.	25%	75%
I had too many job responsibilities.	24%	76%
I had alcohol problems.	20%	80%
I had transportation problems.	18%	82%
I was suspended.	18%	82%
I had boyfriend/girlfriend problems.	17%	83%
I had drug problems.	14%	86%
I had health problems.	12%	88%
Other students at school were unfriendly.	12%	88%
I felt too old.	12%	88%
I was in trouble with the law.	6%	94%
My friends encouraged me to leave.	0%	100%
Pregnancy was a problem.	0%	100%

In the previous table, items in the first quartile (0%-25%) or the fourth quartile (75%-100%) would indicate a strong sentiment on the part of the respondents. Items that seem to reflect the sentiments echoed throughout the questionnaire would be: agreement that they had poor grades (76%), that they needed a job (76%), that they skipped too many classes (76%), and that they had difficulties studying (86%).

Respondents disagreed with the following: that friends encouraged them to leave (100%), that others were unfriendly (88%), that teachers were unhelpful (75%), that they were in trouble with the law (94%), that they had alcohol (80%) or drug (86%) problems, or relationship problems (83%). It is interesting to note that 74% also responded that they didn't have the self- discipline needed.

Some of the items are fairly directly related to success at school. For example, about half (53%) of the respondents acknowledged that their behavior was part of the problem. Similar findings were that they were unwilling to do the work (48%) and that school was boring (57%) or irrelevant (40%). It is of note that the most often cited difficulties were within the direct personal purview and control of the individuals while encouragement of friends (peer pressure) was an issue of no consequence.

Another contributor to difficulties at school is home problems. Here half of the students indicated that there were home related concerns, and the majority of these were related to problems with parents.

Another item on the questionnaire addressed school concerns only. The results of this item are presented in Table V-5.

Table V-5: School Factors

	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
I believe learning is important.	100%	0%	0%
I believe it's important to graduate and receive my high school diploma	89%	11%	0%
If I wanted to speak to my counselor, I was sure that he/she would speak to me	88%	6%	6%
I have the abilities to graduate from high school.	58%	18%	34%
I believed it was important to work for good grades in high school	47%	18%	35%
My high school encouraged its students to be active in school affairs and activities	41%	24%	35%
I was not interested in school by the time I reached high school.	36%	29%	35%
My expectations about school were too high.	30%	29%	41%
I believe education has played a meaningful role in shaping my life.	30%	40%	30%
I felt lonely when I was in high school.	18%	18%	54%
My teachers at my school were open to me.	18%	35%	47%
If I wished to speak to the principal, I felt comfortable in doing so.	18%	29%	53%

It can be seen that all believed that learning is important but only 47% felt that education had played a meaningful role in their lives. It would seem that while education is deemed to be important, there is some doubt about the delivery system, i.e., the schools. Only half (47%) felt that it was important to work for good grades, but most (89%) felt it was important to get a high school diploma. About one-third (36%) acknowledged they were not interested in high school by the time they arrived and a further 29% felt undecided. Just over half (58%) thought they had the ability to graduate, while one-third (34%) felt they did not have the ability.

Regarding school personnel, almost half (47%) felt their teachers were not open to them, just over half (53%) felt they would not approach the principal but the majority (88%) said they would/could approach their counsellor.

Co-Curricular Participation

When asked about participation in co-curricular activities, it was found that males were less likely than females to become involved. Ninety percent of males responded that they were never involved, compared to 71% of females. Overall, however, it appears that most of the dropouts were not involved with school activities. Those that did choose to become involved were members of an athletic team, rather than a club or fine arts group. The majority, however, chose not to belong to a formal organization, but rather preferred to "hang-out" at the back doors, and/or skip classes. They choose not to make the commitment required by a structured organization.

Friends

When asked if they would recommend a similar decision to leave to a friend, none responded that they definitely would, but just under half of the males (45%) responded "maybe." Females were less undecided, with only 29% selecting the "maybe" category. It would appear that females are less qualified in their responses, perhaps because they do not share the same financial situations as the males. It was largely the males who left home or who had financial commitments, such as car loans or rent. While most commented on the necessity of getting an education, financial considerations entered the equation and militated against educational considerations.

When asked whether they had friends who had left school and whether that decision influenced their decision, respondents acknowledged that they indeed knew of someone who had made the same decision, but were unanimous in the contention that they were not influenced by others.

It would be difficult with the dropout rate being what it is, not to know of someone who had left school. Also, knowing that adolescents struggle for autonomy and

independence, it is unlikely that they would acknowledge that this major decision was influenced by others. Many of the responses indicated that friends, if anything, had tried to encourage them to remain in school. It is quite likely that the decision to leave is indeed a personal one with which students wrestle, but the individual involved may be unaware of the silent influences of others.

Activities Since Leaving

Since leaving school and at the time of responding to the questionnaire, none of the respondents had enrolled in any other type of schooling such as technical school, night school or adult education, but 88% of those had sought employment. Just over half (53%) of the dropouts had full time jobs prior to dropping out and worked an average of 43 hours a week for an average wage of $6.80/hour ($14,600/year). Another quarter of the dropouts had part-time jobs and worked on an average of 19 hours/week at $4.20/hour. Slightly less than a quarter (21%) were not employed at the time they dropped out.

These findings support the previously discussed financial situation of this population. It is difficult to imagine working full time while attending school full time. Eventually one suffers at the expense of the other, and in these cases, it seems to be school that eventually becomes secondary. The literature indicates that 15 hours per week of part-time work is critical (Tidwell, 1985). Any work in excess of this number places the student at-risk of dropping out. In this study, 79% of the dropouts would have exceeded the 15 hours/week, suggesting that school had indeed become secondary to the demands of work.

Diploma

Dropouts were asked why they would or would not wish to return to school. Virtually all responded that they desired their high school diploma. While some saw a diploma as a "ticket" to the job market and others saw a value to education per se, they all agreed on the merit of graduating. They had obviously accepted the indoctrination of the culture in realizing the desirability of meeting this goal.

Although the value of a diploma was recognized, respondents indicated that they would not like to return to school for a variety of reasons. The most commonly mentioned was financial, followed by a lack of success in school and not being prepared to do the work demanded at school. Apparently, once one experiences the world of work, it is difficult to re-assume the role of the student.

Future Plans

When asked what they would do in the future, student responses fell into two categories. Most respondents indicated an intention to complete their education, with a lesser number indicating a vague vocational plan. These students did not appear to possess either vocational or educational plans, but rather were characterized by a total lack of plans.

Best and Worst Features of School

In response to the best features remembered in high school, the three most mentioned categories were friends, closely followed by teachers and third, courses which were interesting. Also mentioned were the attractiveness of the school, the co-curricular activities offered, the freedom and the choices inherent in the high school setting and finally, the smoking doors.

When asked for the worst features of high school, the most common response addressed particular teachers they perceived as being too strict, unfriendly, picking favorites or not caring about the students. The second most nominated category was other students, their peers. The most common complaint here tended to center around cliques and the labels used for others who were not in their circle. Courses were described as being too long, too difficult, having too much homework or being too boring. There were also a number of comments made on how easy it was to "skip" classes.

Recommendations

The final question, and the most critical of the study in the eyes of the researcher, asked the dropouts what suggestions they would make to improve the retention rate of schools. The most common plea was to make the courses more relevant and interesting.

Several responses indicated that students did not see the material as being useful. They wanted their studies to reflect what they deemed necessary to gain skills for employment and did not see any value in studying outdated materials. As one student stated, "...teach what's important today, not yesterday." Closely related was a recommendation that addressed the curricular demand and a suggestion that the courses be tailored to the needs of the students. A call was made for "...learning through experience rather than monotonous books," and for materials to be more directly linked to the world of work as opposed to learning academics for the sake of academics. These comments were followed in frequency by a call for a tighter discipline policy. Many felt that it was too easy to skip and that it was the responsibility of the school to "...catch the skippers before it catches up to them." The hours of operation were also a concern to some, who felt that their lifestyles did not mesh with the daytime hours of the school. Some desired an earlier start, some later. The basis for the request stemmed from a desire to combine school and work. Some students expressed the view that school was too serious, that it should be or could be more "fun." A related call was also made to select teachers who could relate well to students and who treated students with respect and dignity, and did not "put them down or treat us like robots." The call was made for teachers to be more open and caring, to encourage more open dialogue between faculty and students.

With the exception of the response calling for school to be more "fun," it was the feeling of the researcher that the replies showed considerable merit. They were extemporaneously solicited and indicated that the dropouts had a considered if not insightful idea of what they both liked and disliked about school.

Chapter 6

Discussion of the Interviews

Review

As indicated previously, this study is comprised of two distinct research phases. Phase one was a document analysis of the educational histories of individual students, both dropouts and graduands. The second phase of the study focused on the opinions and thoughts of actual dropouts. Chapter 5 discussed the responses of the questionnaire that dropouts completed. Those who completed the questionnaire were invited to contact the researcher to participate in a follow-up interview. This qualitative dimension was intended to facilitate triangulation of the previously gained information and to add more in-depth information.

One dozen dropouts agreed to the interview, which was audio taped. All interviews began as semi-structured but became less structured as the interview developed. The interviews followed the lead of the dropouts who told their own stories. The following dimensions of the interviews and the lives of the respondents are discussed in this chapter under the following headings: home background and influences; school attitudes and behaviors; lifestyle influences including peers; and, involvement in the world of work. The reasons why students left school are summarized, along with their feelings, reflections, aspirations and recommendations for the school system.

Home Life

Students do not enter the institution of school "tabula rasa," all equal in terms of ability, aptitudes, experiences, attitudes or behaviors. They present themselves with a wide variety of attitudes, abilities and expectations, most of which are influenced by their home life. This is true whether they are entering school for the first time or are about to graduate. The importance of the home influence cannot be over-estimated.

In the sample interviewed, it became apparent that a considerable number had what could be called "less than an ideal" home background. Their profiles might be characterized as follows.

Parents' Educational Attainment

It is widely acknowledged that the educational level attained by one's parents is one factor influencing educational involvement. It is assumed that if parents are dropouts, that they may not serve as the best role models for their children. The data provided in this sample support this claim. Of the 12 dropouts interviewed, 10 had at least one parent who had not completed high school. However, it must be acknowledged that some dropouts had at least one parent who had post-secondary training and, conversely, some graduates had at least one parent who had dropped out of school.

It is interesting to note, also, that one-quarter of the sample were unsure of the educational level attained by at least one parent. This would suggest that the modelling effect of the parent regarding education was minimal.

Financial Hardship

Another factor associated with dropouts is the socio-economic status of the parents. The lower the income of the parents, it is suggested, the less likely it is that one will complete high school. Additionally, there is a positive correlation between educational levels of parents and their children (Macdonald, 1989). Students in lower socio-economic groups may feel a need to work to supplement the family income or may choose to work to compete with more affluent classmates. Those who work part-time in excess of 15 hours per week are increasingly "at risk" of dropping out (Edmonton Public Schools, 1988).

Only one of the 12 dropouts indicated that there were considerable financial concerns in his family. The school he attended is located in a reasonably affluent area in a bedroom community near a large urban city. It would appear that financial hardship was not a concern for students dropping out in this particular area. As Joe stated, "You know I like to have the material things, to try...Midpoint is kinda a rich area, so there's lots of kids

with cars and stuff, and nice houses. It makes me happy to fit in with these people. If I wasn't like that, I guess I'd probably have a poorer self-esteem." This statement regarding "fitting in" substantiates Cassell's (1985) position that adolescents are tempted by commercialism to elevate their self-esteem by buying it.

Living Arrangements

It has long been recognized that students from single parent families are more likely to dropout than those in which both parents are present. In this sample exactly half of the dropouts were from single parent homes. Given that the divorce rate in Alberta is between 30%-40%, it is not surprising that there is a substantial proportion of students from single parent families. These results are in keeping with Alberta statistics recently cited in a report by Alberta Education and Career Development (1993). In this report (hereafter referred to as the "Bellan" report), 83% of graduates lived with both parents while only 53% of dropouts did so. It would appear that the living arrangements of these young people are strongly associated with whether they drop out of school.

Relationships with Parents

Several of the dropouts described their relationship with their parent(s) as being less than ideal. This may be due to the generation gap or to any number of factors including a lack of academic success at school. Many parents get frustrated with their childrens' attitude towards school, and in frustration, either give up or nag. Jill's report is fairly typical of many such families.

> My parents were always on my case, like about studying and everything. Where I was going to go, my future, and everything. My Dad felt that I wasn't disciplined enough, basically. Like my Mom is a bit slacker, than my Dad. He's always on my Mom's case, like tellin' my Mom that she's too easy with me and everything, and they'd get in fights and stuff, and it was over me and school. So you could say I caused chaos in the house.

While it is tempting to cast children as victims of poor parenting, the above report reminds one that communication and household relationships are a two-way process, and that the child as well as the parent has a role to play in determining the relationships

fostered in the home. There are instances where, regardless of parenting roles, the kid is just a "bad apple." Unfortunately, there are many instances when the child is not responsible for determining the parent-child interactions, and when the child is a victim.

Abuse

Child abuse is perhaps the most dramatic instance of a home life "gone bad." Unfortunately, it is a fact of life in the background of many children. Of the 12 dropouts interviewed, three had a history of some type of abuse. Abuse can take many forms. It can be psychological, sexual, physical or it can be the neglect of one's basic needs. The cases reported here are instances of physical abuse, with overtones of mental abuse. An abusive situation is an obvious statement that the family is not in harmony, that there are stresses on the family that are not dealt with in an appropriate fashion. In the instances cited here, all children were from what can either be termed "autocratic" child-rearing situation or from "laissez-faire" situations. As Cassell (1985) observed, such situations teach children that power is what counts and such children come to believe that if you have the right to punish them, they in turn have the right to punish you. This leads to a vicious cycle of each blaming the other. One example of this cycle is as follows.

Don left home when he was 14. He has what he describes as a "fairly close" relationship with his Mom but he and his Dad have been at odds ever since Don can recall. He is the eldest in a family of three and it is his feeling that he was left to fend for himself since age eight. It is also his feeling that he was neglected by his parents and that his two younger siblings were given preferential treatment. His father would try to control him, but Don suggests that he had "no control," as Don had no respect for the man. His mother would let Don do pretty much as he wished and would encourage him to do his chores. Attempts were made to influence who Don associated with, but Don acknowledges that he was a bit of a rebel. He got into trouble with the police for breaking and entering. He acknowledges that at age 14 he wanted to get caught, and he did.

> That's when he [father] freaks eh? He slugged me once, that's when he broke my jaw, and pushed me down the stairs, and that's when my shoulder snapped out of place. Then he went to kick me, and I moved, took his legs, smashed into the wall and it broke his leg.

Don moved out two years later and in the 4 year interval since, his father has refused to talk to him. He supports himself financially by working 20 - 25 hours per week at a pet store and is leaving school to work full time.

Don's situation is an example of using power to get back at parents. He felt he could get attention and revenge by striking out, by getting in trouble with the law. This situation is not unlike Eve's, whose older sister was a slow learner. Eve's natural father left when she was an infant and her mother was always overprotective of the older disabled child. As she stated:

> My sister is slow. She's 24 now, and she's never been quite up to par. She's...it's kinda hard to explain. With my family, there was always my sister, and then there was me, and my sister always got the special attention. I was always taught to survive on my own.

Consequently Eve sought ways to gain her mother's attention and she and her mother were often at odds. When Eve was 5, her mother remarried and the step-father would physically abuse the older sister because she was "dumb." When the older sister "...got kicked out of the house," Eve became the new target for the step-father. Eve was instrumental in destroying the relationship between her step-father and her mother. As she states, quite unemotionally, "I would, ...play dirty tricks, and lie and weasel myself into getting them fighting with each other. Eventually they got a divorce because of that."

Both Don and Eve are what would be called "relationship resistant" children. They maintain that they honestly do not care about their parents and further, they are quite wary of forming any close attachments to adults. Given their histories, this is not surprising. The love, attention and nurturing they needed as children was absent. Unfortunately, they are likely to encounter difficulties in their own personal adult relationships for the balance of their lives. It is noteworthy that all three of the abused teens left home and subsequently left school.

Summary of Home Life Factors

While many factors are thought to contribute to the dropout picture, it would appear that home background is a significant consideration. Of the dropouts interviewed in this study, the following factors emerged: 25% (3 of 12) of the dropouts came from abusive situations, 42% (5 of 12) revealed there were significant "hassles" with their parent(s), 50% (6 of 12) came from single parent families and a full 83% (10 of 12) indicated that at least one parent had not graduated from high school. Home factors appear to be an important factor associated with the process of dropping out. While it would appear that these background characteristics are associated with dropping out, only two of the dropouts shared all of these characteristics while one had none of the characteristics.

School Life

Schools have many faces, many components. The majority of the comments offered by the dropouts centered about themselves and their roles in these complex institutions. School life is a large topic in and of itself, but "school" also includes the non-academic components such as interactions with peers, co-curricular activities, and to some extent, the world of work via work experience. Although these topics are addressed as discrete entities, it is important to keep in mind that they cannot be partialled out, that they are all a part of the bigger package known as "school."

Overage for Grade

Repeating a grade (or being overage for grade) is commonly associated with dropping out (Madak, 1987). In this survey, eight of the 12 interviewed had either failed a grade or were overage for grade as a result of participating in a special education programs prior to reaching high school.

There is no consensus in the educational arena concerning "retentions." The current thinking seems to discourage the practice as the long term benefits seem to be questionable and the consequences can be damaging to the individuals. It should be noted, however,

that there are many teachers as well as parents who continue to believe in retentions. At the elementary school level, one would hope decisions regarding retentions or promotions are a joint decision reached between the parent and the school. Furthermore, at least in the primary grades, if there is no consensus between the teacher and parent, the parent has the deciding vote.

The following document was distributed in one of the elementary schools in which the researcher worked, and is provided to indicate current thinking regarding student retention.

Flunking the Grade: Summary of Research Findings

(1) Retention in grade has no benefit for academic achievement.

(2) At-risk or low achieving students who are promoted achieve at or above the levels of their retained peers. They were 1/3 to 1/2 a year in grade equivalent units ahead of their retained peers.

(3) The effect increased over the long-term. That is, as time passed, separation between the retained and the non-retained students increased.

(4) The same negative results were found for impact of retention on personal adjustment, self-concept, attitude toward school, and attendance.

(5) There is a strong relationship between early retention and later dropping out of school.

(6) Two years in kindergarten or one year plus a transition year fails to improve achievement.

(7) Most principals, teachers and parents believe that retention works.

(8) Each group (principals, teachers, parents) believe themselves to be in the best position to make the retention decisions.

(9) Interviews with children indicate that they see retention as conflict laden and hurtful. Non-promotion does not act as a motivating force.

(10) Retention activity varies widely from one area to another, zero in some areas (Japan), 50% plus in some areas in the U.S. Cumulative retention as high as 66%.

(11) Beliefs about how children learn and the need to appear "tough" and have "high standards" are related to retention rates.

Explanation:

(1) Teachers have misleading data.

(2) Teachers express a desire to protect children from the graded system.

(3) Teachers express a strong desire for homogeneity.

The above document was circulated to staff, not as a policy guide, but rather as professional information.

Interviews with this sample of dropouts would support statement five above, that "there is a strong relationship between early retention and later dropping out of school." Of the eight who repeated, none could offer any explanation as to why they had repeated. Comments reflected that early failures (in elementary school) tended to make them feel "dumb," and that they subsequently questioned their learning ability. As Lee stated, "I repeated fourth grade and I think it started going downhill after. I just couldn't see the point in it I guess." Such a belief tends to lead to further negative learning experiences which can become a vicious circle.

Most of those who repeated in junior high reported that they felt anger, either at themselves or at the school system. Only one student reported that repeating was a motivating force, but in retrospect, it was a temporary one. He worked diligently the next year but his achievement fell off thereafter.

As Bellas (1993) stated, not only are there academic ramifications, but there are social consequences as students become stigmatized because they are older than their classmates. Three of the students mentioned this to be a factor in how they felt about themselves in their classes. Fay commented:

> I was taking grade 10 classes and everybody is 15 or whatever, and I'm 18, and you know...there's a big difference between someone who's 15 and somebody who's 18. Like I'm upgrading. Is there something wrong with that? But they just don't understand, I guess. Like, I couldn't understand either when I was that age.

Ann stated the problem succinctly when she said,"You're older than all the other kids, and you don't want to be with all these 'younger' kids." As students progress further through high school, age, rather than ability, increasingly appears to become a factor.

Special Education

In this school system a number of special education classes exist and half of the dropouts interviewed had been exposed in some way to these classes. Such classes provide assistance on a smaller pupil-teacher ratio and are intended to provide assistance at the level at which the student is achieving. There are two basic programs. One is for the learning disabled (Learning Assistance), the other for the slow learner (basic core). While the programs have their pedagogical merits, they also have a social stigma attached to them. John, a severely learning disabled child, was part of the Learning Assistance class for grades 4 - 6, and in a modified program in grades 7 - 9. He commented on the "label" attached to being in such classes:

> I think it was...um, well actually ya gotta go back to elementary. I was in a special class, and the big name was "OP." Actually, it's just a name, but back then it really mattered, ya know. I mean I got in a whole lot of fights because of it. Ya know. And it's more of the kids at that stage, and it's just kinda bitterness that grows with you, and you just kinda take it with you. It was like there was a glass dome over everybody else and I was on the outside knockin,' and everybody else just stared, "Go away you Op!" I think it did make me kinda bitter...

At elementary school, kids tend to look for any chink in the armour of others and use that to exploit their victims. They love to find somebody who is different and to tease and torment them. Being in a special class and being called an "Op" just seemed to fit the bill. At junior high, the process appears to continue, although students often have more sophisticated coping skills. Joe commented that he felt others looked down on him or called him "a dummy," but he realized that he had a problem with his attention span, so he tried to ignore such comments.

All of the students who were part of the Basic Core program in junior high thought it a positive experience. The students covered the same basic curriculum, but in a smaller class setting with materials designed for their level. Students reported that it was easier to get their work done and restored a feeling of pride in their school work. The down side, however, was that such a program would instill a false sense of accomplishment, for these

students would likely fail miserably in a regular junior high program. In their specialized program they could earn commendable marks and consequently may have developed unrealistic expectations regarding what they could expect when they entered high school.

Grades

Failing courses are held to be one characteristic of dropouts and this study would tend to support that observation. Seven of the 12 dropouts had poor grades. Failing grades however is not a clear-cut issue, for related to it are poor attendance patterns and poor study habits. An additional 4 students had excessive absenteeism and although capable students, they would likely have received failing grades had they continued in their programs. Of the 12 interviewed, only one student had both acceptable grades and attendance at the time of leaving. As Bellan (1993) observed, "...the profile of dropouts in terms of academic performance is complex" (p. 23).

It was common for these students to be satisfied with "getting by," to invest as little effort as possible but still achieve enough to get their credits. They appeared to have developed an uncanny knack of knowing just how much (or how little) they needed to perform to reach that level. If they didn't try, if they didn't take a risk, they could defend their self-concept by rationalizing that they did not give it their "best shot," that they didn't try all that hard. This is the fear of failure syndrome, a fear that if they invested a significant effort in a task, they might still fail. When John was asked if marks were a problem, he laughed and replied: "Um, not to me. If I scraped by, I scraped. If I didn't, I didn't, ya know. So long as you got your credits, that was all that mattered." Other students tended to adopt a futile attitude when faced with a series of failing grades. Lee stated,"Um, I just wasn't doing really well in school, and it just seemed that I was wasting my time cuz I wasn't getting as many credits as I should." Lee experienced difficulties with his assignments, so would skip classes and watch his grades decrease even more. It became a vicious cycle for him.

Junior-Senior High Transition

The transition from junior high to senior high is a stepping stone in the educational careers of students, one upon which several of those interviewed commented. They commented that they experienced a certain amount of apprehension, based upon what their teachers had told them and likely based upon senior high being an "unknown." Of the six students who commented upon this transition, 4 felt the junior highs had done an adequate job in preparing them for high school. One student who protested that he had not been prepared for senior high came from the Basic Core special education program. He commented:

> You get to high school and it's bang...a brick wall! Ya know? And now-a-days, you go to high school, and it's all of a sudden, you're an adult. And you're told that. I remember that. And that's just not true. I mean you don't grow up overnight. And then you go to high school, and ...where am I? On Venus somewhere, ya know?

Interestingly, the researcher was involved in counselling John on his move to high school and advising him in which programs he might find the greatest success, but John had spent the last 6 years in special education programs and was unwilling to carry the "label" any further. He enroled in a general program with no special education help and ran straight into the "brick wall" he described. Other students made recommendations regarding the junior-senior transition, which will be discussed later.

Attitude Toward School

Bored

It is often heard that dropouts find their classes boring (Hartnagel, Krahn and Lowe, 1986, Tidwell, 1988). While several students questioned the relevance of their studies, only one commented that she was truly bored. This student was also 18, close to high school graduation and uncomfortable sitting in classes with 15 year olds. Perhaps given the range of courses offered at this large urban high school, boredom was not as significant as being over-age for grade.

Relevance

While many of those interviewed did not complain about the boredom of their classes, the majority did comment upon or question the relevance of what they were required to study. The comments centered about the core or academic courses, for many of these students had little idea as to why they were required to study courses they did not perceive as relevant. These students had a vague idea as to what vocational niche they aspired, and could not comprehend the necessity of mandatory courses in science, mathematics, and social studies. Interestingly, they did not question CALM, physical education or English. About the other courses however, they had definite opinions. As Joe commented:

> I think the question that pops up so much is for math or sciences. Okay, what do we need to know this for? We're not gonna use it for life. I think that's a very popular statement. Not everyone will need all these courses, I don't think. In my opinion I don't think some of these courses are necessary towards what a person would wanna be.

This sentiment was further echoed by Don who stated:

> I think that by the time you get to high school, you already know what ya want. Most people, if you need math, ya need socials, then fine take it. If you don't, then it's a waste of time so why be taking it? I don't understand...I mean some people think it's important. I believe it's not. Especially if you're taking something that's not involving any of that.

This is reflective of what Mitchell (1971) stated regarding the the idealism and intellectual development of youth. Teens are prone to questioning, even challenging, the world as they perceive it. The students interviewed here would serve to verify the observation that youth question, indeed challenge the "system." They can see the application of courses in business or in a vocational program. They cannot see the value of many of the academic courses as they do not perceive such courses as preparing them for the job market, and consequently challenge their "relevance."

Relationship with Administrators and Counselors

Previous studies have indicated that dropouts tend to have poor relationships with the school administration, as this population tends to engage in behaviors that result in their

being disciplined. Consequently, the students often perceive the administration as being restrictive and as not treating them as individuals (Mitchell, 1971). It is surprising therefore that the dropouts sampled in this study did not perceive the administration in a negative light. Of the nine students who commented on the administration, eight of them thought the rules and treatment fair. John admitted that "...the administrators were on my case, but they were on my case about skipping and uh, ya know stuff like that and that's their job. Okay. That is their job. You're there to go to school."

Most of the dropouts would have met administrators due to their attendance patterns. Without exception the dropouts thought the attendance policy fair and its enforcement fair. When asked if the policy was reasonable, Jill replied, "Ya, I think so. And if someone my age can't handle it, there's gotta be something wrong...[the administrators] were fair. You can only do so much. You can't be too slack or anything."

The single negative comment regarding the administration dealt with feeling comfortable approaching the principal. Eve, a student in her first year at Midpoint High, stated "I don't know him. Like I know who he is, I know to see him in the hall. But I don't know him, and I wouldn't feel comfortable just talking to him...but nobody I know talks to the principal unless they're in trouble, so...maybe it's just the title."

Tidwell (1988) mentioned that students complained about the availability of counseling services, that their counselors were to busy to see them. This did not seem to be borne out here. Midpoint High has three full time counselors, two of which were mentioned specifically as being very open, approachable and easy to talk to. From the comments made, it appears that the reputation of counselors depends upon their willingness to see students when there is a need. It also appears that the reputation of this service depends largely upon "word of mouth," that although the dropouts may not have discussed their decision to leave school with their counselor, they did feel that they could do so if they wished. When counselors have a favorable reputation with the student body, then students, including dropouts, feel they can approach them.

Feelings regarding School

Given that many dropouts leave school for school-related reasons, it would be expected that there would be considerable dissatisfaction with school. Surprisingly, none of the respondents complained about school per se. Negative references were made about particular teachers, but school as a whole received only positive comments. These reflections followed two strands. First, students enjoyed the greater freedom of the high school environment, of being able to select from a variety of courses and of feeling that they were treated as responsible adults. Second, students reported enjoying the stimulation of school, of the total environment. Mentioned were specific classes, sports, friends, co-curricular programs and the "back door." This is the one area of the school where students were allowed to smoke and tends to be a congregating spot for several of these students. The students reported appreciating having an area which they perceived as being "their turf" and where they were not "hassled" by administrators for going for a smoke.

While students who leave school might not like school, none of those interviewed were hostile or even negative towards it. Given their history of failing grades, of being chastised by teachers and of being punished for skipping, this was a major surprise. In fact, half of those interviewed had positive comments regarding the school system and tended to blame themselves for their lack of success. Lee commented:

> Uhm, I'm sure I've probably made comments for the negative side, that it's all the school's fault. But in actuality, the school system wasn't too bad. I just couldn't get the grades, so there was no point in it. It wasn't the school's fault. My brain wasn't big enough.

Another student, Jill, thought Midpoint one of the best schools around. As she stated:

> I'd say this school is doing great! Isn't it one of the best? And you know, there's nothing wrong with this school. Like you don't need problems with the school, but there's nothing wrong with it. It's like me. What can you say? There's only so much the school system can do.

There was one respondent whose comments about her schooling were not totally enthusiastic. She reported coming from a rural district where her grade three teacher "terrorized" her. In Ann's words:

> She was strict and rude and mean. Like made fun of me in front of the class. A really bad teacher. Really bad. And then I would be quiet and from grade three on until grade 12, I just wouldn't participate in things. I just did my work and handed it in, but I wouldn't discuss or do anything. I was really embarrassed. ...then I just started hating school. And then, I hated it.

That became a turning point for Ann and although she rated Midpoint favorably, her educational history was decidedly tainted by this elementary experience. As Chapman and Boersma (1979) suggested, academic self-concept is formed by third grade, as Ann's comments would confirm.

Relationships with Teachers

It is common to hear that dropouts have poor relationships with their teachers (Hartnagel, Krahn and Lowe, 1986). However, the vast majority of dropouts reported good relationships with most of their teachers. Eleven of the dozen dropouts interviewed gave their teachers a favorable report. Five themes were identified repeatedly. These were: they felt the teachers cared about them as individuals; the teachers were willing to help if the student did not understand a concept; the teachers knew their subject matter; the teachers know how to enjoy themselves with the students; and, finally, the teachers treated the students with respect. When asked what percentage of their teachers "cared" about their students, responses ranged from a low of 50% to a high of 100%, with the average being 71%.

Two themes that came across as being particularly important are offered by Lee and Jill. Lee stated, "Like they'd [teachers] show an interest and ask me how I was doing, or just give me extra help for certain things." Jill commented about being treated with respect. "They [teachers] treat you like an equal. Which Mr. "R" did. He talked to us like we were normal people. Where other teachers talked to you like you were an invalid or something. Like you were stupid." It was obvious from the comments made that the students had great admiration for teachers who possessed a number of the qualities listed above.

While 11 of the dropouts reported favorable characteristics of teachers, seven of the same group had complaints. The complaints regarding teachers were: teachers didn't know their subject matter; teachers had minimal class control; teachers didn't help students in need; teachers picked on students; and teachers did not seem to "care" about the student . Ken commented about such teachers:

> They just come here to do their job. They come to give you your work and mark your work and they give you a mark. That's it. They don't really care about you or what you do. As long as you get your work in, that's all they care about.

Another criticism that seemed to be voiced most passionately concerned teachers that refused to help those students who were struggling. Rob commented:

> If some students don't understand, they don't revert to a different method, they just keep going because the majority of the class will understand. They won't change for just 3 or 5 students like. I don't find that to be like a good teacher, I guess. Or a good person.

The complaint about the lack of help is likely a circular situation in which the teacher gives attention and help to those students who they believe want it and are willing to demonstrate such by virtue of "doing the right thing." Teachers tend to be unwilling to help students who appear unwilling to help themselves. Attendance, punctuality, doing assignments and participating in class are all behaviors that are valued by teachers and are not always behaviors common to the dropout population. As Smey-Richman (1988) pointed out, the behavior of the student also influences the behavior of the teacher.

Ann's comments as a victim of teacher harassment were reported earlier and could certainly apply to complaints of others regarding feeling picked on.

Work Habits

Smey-Richman (1988) noted that poor achievers tend to lack an active approach to problem solving. They do not plan adequately, nor do they regulate their activities or have self direction.

Not all of the respondents had poor marks in school. Of the dozen, eight were consistently failing one or more courses per semester, two were getting averages in the 50% - 60% range, and two had averages of 60% or higher. Of the 12 students, however, 10 stated that they had difficulties studying. A common theme here centered around not having the self-discipline and not knowing "how" to study. For example, when asked how much time he'd spend on homework, Don replied matter of factly:

> Never did it. Ever. Not even for finals. I can't do it. It just doesn't work for me. I cannot sit down and ...It's ...I've sat in class for 6 months, or whatever and I don't want to go over it again. That's the only way I can put it. I don't want to waste my time. But I don't think I could [study].

Lee's response to the same question sounded similar. "Sometimes I tried to, but it was really hard for me. Like I couldn't concentrate on it. So, even when I'd try, I'd only get a little while into it and I'd just stop and go do something else."

Several of the students responded that they did no homework. Those that did conceded that they did some homework thought their efforts would be between 15 - 30 minutes twice a week. A universal response however was not knowing how to study. As Rob stated:

> Well actually I don't know nothing about studying. I've never really actually learnt, I guess, how to really sit down and do notes so I could learn them and memorize them. All I've ever really done to study is just read over my notes. That's all I ever do, and that's it. Cuz, I don't really know how to study."

Rob also commented that he thought the recommended an hour and a half a night was reasonable, but then he added, "...but I've never in my life been a homework kinda guy!"

Teachers and parents constantly tell students that they should study. That is a given. Several of the dropouts mentioned that their parents had nagged them for years to "do their homework," but to no avail. Eventually, the majority of the parents, weary of the struggle, resigned from the fruitless activity and left it up to the student. Teachers are equally concerned with homework and study, but it is not common for teachers to teach students how to study, how to take notes or how to prepare for different types of exams. Admittedly, there is often a "crash course" early in grade 10, but after that, it is assumed the students have been taught and that they now know how to learn. It thus becomes their responsibility.

School Behaviors

High school teachers can readily point out that the behavior of dropouts differs from that of graduates. Dropouts tend to be less involved in or committed to their studies. They tend to be absent more frequently, to be late for class more often and to go for extended "breaks" during class. Their assignments are less likely to be completed and they tend not to prepare for exams to the same degree as graduates. In addition, they seem less inclined to participate in the co-curricular activities of the school: in Students' Council, in clubs or activities, on sports teams. In short, they do not seem to derive a sense of satisfaction from being "connected" to their school, other than viewing it as a social meeting place. The histories gathered in this study would tend to support this observation.

Co-Curricular Participation

Several researchers (Tidwell, 1988, Rumberger, 1987) have observed that dropouts are less inclined to participate in the non-academic activities of their school, in the co-curricular programs. Of the dozen interviewed, only three had participated in any co-

curricular activity. John had belonged to the ski team for one year but dropped out his second year due to non-acceptance by other team members. Eve had been active in cheerleading and drama in her previous school, but not since enroling in Midpoint High, and Lee had played one season of rugby for Midpoint.

It would appear then that these students were not involved in the mainstream activities of the school and further, that they chose not to be. They chose to remove themselves from what is traditionally viewed as accepted high school behaviors. They thus have fewer "ties" with either other students in the school or the sanctioned activities of the school. In Bellan's study (Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993), 77% of the graduates participated in such activities compared to 55% of dropouts. In this small sample, 25% of the dropouts participated in some activity.

Skipping Classes

Skipping class may be the major irritant to teachers and administrators. Teachers soon develop the attitude that if students cannot be bothered to show up for class, then they cannot be bothered to help them. They find it particularly offensive to encounter a student during the very class that he is supposed to be in or to encounter the student shortly after their class. This often results in the administration becoming involved in the charade.

That attendance is related to achievement is obvious. Skipping classes is a fairly blatant way to withdraw from the academic scene in school. It does not sit well with teachers, who in turn tend to "hassle" the student when they do return. This the student often interprets as being victimized by an uncaring teacher, which exacerbates the problem. Attendance is viewed as perhaps the biggest problem facing high schools and is almost inevitably a problem for the at-risk student.

A commonly held rule of thumb at Midpoint High was that a student had a serious attendance problem if they had missed 10% of their classes. If absences continued to escalate to 15%, it was considered unlikely that the student would earn any credits, and should their absenteeism approach 20%, it was almost a given that they would fail.

Attendance is only related to credits (passing) in an indirect way. Achievement, not attendance, is the yardstick for gaining credits. Nonetheless, attendance is still compulsory and it is related to achievement.

Of the 12 students in this study, all had what would be considered major attendance problems. Some interesting trends emerged from the interviews. First, there was a pattern of escalating absences which tended to begin in the second semester of grade 10. Initially students would skip a few classes. Mike explained, "...just to see if we could get away with it, just to see what it was like." Skipping then began to escalate with each subsequent semester the student was enroled in school. As Mike commented, "It's kinda...like when you skip once, you get away with it. It's addictive kinda. It becomes a habit."

The second trend to emerge contributed to the creation of a vicious circle because teachers would convey their annoyance to the student and the student would in turn skip subsequent classes to avoid such treatment. Jill commented:

> Like the way the teacher acts towards you in the classroom. Like sometimes the teacher would come up to me and , "Did you get that Jill?" Of course, I'm coming late all the time, absences, skipping all the time. It's not hard to tell that you're not doing very good in school...I knew I didn't know my stuff, so I'd go late all the time, or not go at all.

Others reported a different solution. They were never late. If they were late, they would not go. It was easier to skip and avoid the problem than to incur the wrath of a teacher who was irritated at habitual latecomers.

The third trend associated with absenteeism involved the student not attending at all for a lengthy period prior to actually quitting school. The students who invoked this strategy confessed that initially they were undecided about leaving school, that they were merely taking "a few days off." This strategy seems to involve not being willing to make the decision to leave, but rather deferring until the decision is made for them. The student misses a week or two of classes on top of a chronic absentee pattern and the decision is removed from their hands. It is made for them by the administration. This absolved the student for having to assume responsibility for the decision. Both Fay and Jill admitted to

using this approach to their leaving school. It is interesting to note however, that they did not "blame" the administration for expediting their exit. On the contrary, they seemed appreciative.

Attendance patterns then appears to be a strong predictor of dropping out. While many graduates also skip classes, they tend to miss significantly fewer than the dropout.

Lifestyles

It is widely acknowledged that peer pressure is most influential during adolescence, for it is at this time when young people are searching for acceptance among their peers as they struggle to find their own identity. They are searching for an identity separate from their parents', and they use their peers as a sounding board. As Cassell (1985) stated, they desperately want to belong and are willing to reject the values of their parents and of the school in an effort to gain peer recognition and approval. Coopersmith (1967) referred to this need as one of significance, where significance is found in receiving the attention of others, in acceptance. Significance equals belonging.

Belonging

The students interviewed definitely reflected the need to belong. While there was no overt statement regarding rebelling against the values of the home or the school, there was also no mention of these institutions having any significance in their values. The need to belong, to be accepted by their peers, however, was fundamental. As John said, "The big thing is to be accepted. It is like, ya know, school is school, but...the people. You always want to belong, and no matter where you are, you want to belong." To achieve this John was willing to get his hair cut short so he'd be accepted. When this did not work for him, he grew his hair long and joined the "back-door crowd."

Joe emphasized the need to belong with his simple statement, "You have to fit in is what I'm trying to get at."

Tina discussed the influence of friends and how this affected her schooling. "In junior high, it was me and my best friend and we just weren't interested in school. And it was in the spring and we'd just go out and tan, anything but school. As long as we were with each other and not doing school, we were happy." She went on to point out that, in her mind, she considered this more of a junior high attitude, that by senior high (age 17), she did not consider the peer influence to be as strong. While she considered the peer influence to be a definite influence during junior high, when asked how big an influence it was at senior high, she replied:

> It's...I'd say it's still pretty big, but like they don't make my decisions for me anymore. Like when I was in junior high they like, what they said went. Now what I say goes. I think for myself anyways...Like their opinion matters, but not to the extent that I'll do anything for them.

Having said that however, she did comment that her friends were a definite influence on her skipping. She has friends that skip, one friend in particular with whom she arranges to skip and as she said,"...maybe like that helps my skipping cuz I have friends like that will skip and do skip and I'm more than willing to join them."

School Groups and Cliques

In any large high school, students, in their attempts to establish their own identity, tend to gravitate towards various groups or cliques. Such groups tend to define themselves by their dress, music, behavior and activities. The students interviewed identified the following list of groups: jocks, preppies, heads, bangers, mobs, yuppies, loners, whiz kids, alternatives, the skinheads, and the "in-betweens," the normal average everyday people.

The students did not consider their school "cliquey," but accepted that in a large school a variety of groups were to be expected. Eight of the those interviewed were cast in the the mold of the "in-betweens." They tended to see themselves as "normal" or "average," and to see "others" as being part of a clique. Three would identify themselves as "back door types" (although they generally did not refer to themselves as "bangers"),

and one was a "jock." None were "preppies," who were viewed with considerable disdain.

A common theme here involved the stereotyping or labelling of people. Mitchell (1971) stated that adolescents tend to be idealistic and that they dislike being treated impersonally. There was consensus among this sample that one should not label or judge a person based upon appearance. Stereotyping was viewed with contempt. Most of those interviewed felt that belonging to a group was normal and acceptable, but to attach a label to membership in "their" group was not. They did not perceive any contradiction with this process. That they fit in, or belonged to a group, was acceptable. For others, however, to label them for belonging to such a group was not.

The "Bad Crowd"

Not surprisingly, very few dropouts were willing to attribute their behaviors to being influenced by the "bad" or "wrong" crowd. They tended to "stick up" for their friends and wear this distinction like a badge of honor.

Similarly, when asked about friends who had dropped out whether their friend's decision had any influence on theirs, only three students acknowledged a friend who had dropped out of school and all three denied that this in any way influenced their decision. If a person chose to leave school, it was "their" choice. All maintained that it was their own personal decision. In addition, they maintained that, if anything, their friends discouraged them from dropping out. As Tina stated, "Actually, the people that I talked to that have left school, they tell me like, they discourage me if anything, to quit, cuz they say it's just too hard to go back after you've done it..." This message was echoed by Jill:

> Like my friends are really good. They're not stupid. You know...Like my friends basically told me not to. And they still are. "You're stupid. You're stupid" they keep saying to me. Things happen. So what can I say. I know I'm stupid [laughs].

It is somewhat surprising, given the number of dropouts there are, that so few students seem to know someone who has dropped out. It is equally surprising, given the

influence peers have on each other, that nobody admits to having been influenced by the decisions of others.

The Social Side of School

School life has many components, of which classes are but one. A school is the social center of most students' lives, so it is not surprising that it is a viewed in a positive light for social reasons. Four of those interviewed conceded that they were more interested in the social aspects of school than the academic. Joe felt that it was the opportunity of seeing friends on a daily basis that kept him in school as long as it did. "Like I was sittin' at home today deciding about whether I should drop today or not, but I didn't really want to, cuz you know I like to see all these guys. I don't really like to do this..." While Joe wrestled with the consequences of not seeing his friends, others conceded that perhaps they were overly social and this was a factor contributing to their lack of success at school, for they were more involved in socializing than in working or they were influenced by friends to skip rather than attend classes.

It is not uncommon to see students who have left school still "hanging around" on a regular basis. One sometimes questions whether they do not spend more time at school after they have dropped out than they did when they were enroled.

Drinking, Drugs and Criminal Convictions

Drinking, drug use and criminal activities are commonly held to be associated with dropouts. It may be an artifact of this particular study, but these factors did not emerge as significant in research. While the respondents did acknowledge some familiarity with drugs, none reported any more than occasional use. In this sample, it appeared that alcohol was the drug of choice. Lee stated:

> Most people that I know, most of them drink. Drugs has cut down. It's not as big. I don't see it around the school as much as I used to. It's more just a thing, a leisurely thing. I'd say drinking is bigger than drugs now...I'd say that every one of 'em drinks, and then, the drugs aren't really around, so unless like you're somewhere where it's going to happen or whatnot, you don't really see it, cuz it's not like you have people, really dealing out in the open at school.

When asked about his personal "bad" habits, Lee confessed to smoking and drinking a little too much. When asked how much he drank, he stated, "...maybe a forty. I don't know, cuz I just go out and I'll drink usually on the weekend. I don't really drink much during the week. I'll have a couple maybe here and there, but that's about it."

John also confessed to using both alcohol drugs (marijuana and hash) and in retrospect, viewed it as "...a lot of stupid shit." He was adamant that he did so by virtue of his own free will, meaning that nobody forced him into it. He also did not view it as being a factor in his lack of academic success.

Only one of the respondents had any contact with the law. Don related that he used to get in trouble with the law "quite a bit." He was an abused child from a home with an autocratic father. His law breaking may have been related to attempts to get back at his father. When asked about his encounters with the law, Don said:

> Lets' see...B&E's. I just did it because. I never stole anything. I just did it because [laughs]. I just kinda, you know...Uhm, B&E's and cars. The majority B&E's...Actually, I think I wanted to get caught. I don't know. I just had nothing better to do. I never stole anything. I just got caught for B&E's. It sounds stupid I know, but uh...that's just it.

In this study, criminal activity did not appear to be a factor in dropping out of school. Nor did alcohol nor drug consumption. It should be noted however that the respondents interviewed may not have been totally frank regarding their experiences on this topic.

The World of Work

It is commonly suggested in the literature (Mann, 1986, Radwanski, 1987) that there is a correlation between the number of hours worked and the likelihood of dropping out of school. Findings here would tend to support this. It is not work per se, but rather the amount of work that competes for one's energies.

Students seemed to work for two main reasons. Either they needed the money to support themselves or they wanted the money to support a more consumer oriented lifestyle.

Of those interviewed, five fell into the first category. They needed the money to support themselves, for all of them had either left home or were in the process of leaving. Three of these students had experienced conflicts at home and were "kicked out." One had a parent in financial difficulty and worked to support himself and his mother, and the remaining student had left her rural school to attend a school with more course options.

Although it appears that financial need was a deciding factor in the decision of these five students to leave school, only two had investigated the possibility of financial aid from Social Services or inquired about a maintenance grant from student loans.

It would appear that moving out to live on your own is a moderate indicator of dropping out.

Working and Dropping Out

Several researchers (Mann, 1986, Rumberger, 1989, Radwanski,1987) have suggested that working in excess of 15 hour per week increases the likelihood of a student being "at risk." Eight of the 12 interviewed here worked more than 15 hours per week. Their average hours worked per week was 30. This number however includes the five discussed previously who had moved out of home and were supporting themselves. Notably, three of them worked the equivalent of a full time job. As Ken commented, "when you get off work at midnight it's hard to go home and go right to bed, so you relax for awhile." Getting up for school the next morning then becomes progressively more difficult.

Two-thirds of the dropouts interviewed worked in excess of 15 hours per week and it would appear that such a working pattern is a moderate indicator of dropping out.

The "I Want" Generation

Cassell (1985) submitted that teens are tempted by a material world and that they feel they can buy their self-esteem. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern (1990) observed that teens tend to spend on a variety of self-indulgent areas and further submit that "...the greater the net worth of a youth...the more the youth is at risk." (p. 28).

From the interviews conducted, it would appear that many of the youth of Midpoint High do have a materialistic or consumer oriented outlook. Several of the dropouts commented upon the felt necessity of "having." The most candid was Joe, who felt:

> I'm just one of those types of people who try to keep up with the Jones'. You know I like to have the material things, to try... Midpoint is kinda a rich area so there's lots of kids with cars and stuff, nice houses...It makes me happy to fit in with these people. If I wasn't like that, I guess I'd probably have a poorer self-esteem.

Eve concurred with the assessment of Midpoint as an expensive area, as did Fay. However,they characterized the students with their designer "preppy" clothes as being upper middle class "snobs."

John is one who bought in to the affluent lifestyle. He reported that he worked 20 hours a week for $5/hour. John bought a used car and his wages "...barely paid my gas. I smoked. It went pretty quick over the weekend [laughs]. Beer money." John was not alone in buying a car. Four of the 12 dropouts had cars and all disclosed that keeping them on the road was more expensive than they had anticipated. Car payments turned out to be only part of the cost. Insurance premiums and vehicle maintenance also proved to be more costly than this group had thought.

Many dropouts desire the financial and emotional autonomy associated with working. In the workplace they tend to be treated as adults and reap the financial benefit of employment. However, the perceptions of dropouts may be unrealistic. They see the wages as leading to financial independence but discover that, not only are the wages minimal, but also, that there is little job security and little chance for promotion. The money that promised to be their ticket to independence was barely adequate when they had

to support themselves. John left school to work for $8.00 an hour. He was attracted to the idea of making $50 /day as opposed to making "nothing at all" going to school. When in school, work was his priority. After being in the workforce, however, he discovered that "he was going nowhere" and that he didn't want to work as unskilled labour for the rest of his life.

Reasons for Leaving

The reasons for leaving school are complex and no single factor is a guaranteed predictor of leaving. This was evident when examining the feelings the dropouts had about their decision. The majority felt that they needed a high school diploma to be successful in the future. The reasons offered for desiring a diploma centered about their future in the workplace, about vocational possibilities. There were no comments about post-secondary education, about completing the job or about deriving any personal satisfaction from achieving the diploma. If vocational considerations were the driving force in their rationale, then these students were either externally oriented, or had accepted society's message regarding the necessity of a diploma.

Their comments affirmed that their vocational futures would be shaped by whether or not they had graduated, by the necessity of acquiring a diploma to secure a reasonable future.

The Decision to Drop Out

The reports of this sample would indicate that the decision to drop out is a very personal decision. All the respondents who addressed this stated that they had made the decision themselves without consultation with their peers. When they told their friends after the fact, their friends tended to give them dual messages. One that it was probably a mistake to dropout and second, that they accepted the decision made. As John stated,

> ...my best friend kinda said"whatcha quit for?" and I said cuz I wanna make some money, and he just kinda "Oh ya?" He said like I shouldn't dropout, like it's not the right thing to do, but he didn't bug me about it or stress me. He just kinda let it go. In other words, it was my choice, and he accepted that.

When students leave school, the parents are contacted by the school as part of the "school clearing" process. Some of the dropouts had consulted with their parents prior to dropping out, some had not, but the decision was not a shock to any of the parents. They were apprised of the situation on an ongoing basis and many parents viewed dropping out as inevitable. The parents appeared resigned to the situation and often commented that it was either a matter of dropping out or being kicked out. For most students there was a "face saving" component in making the decision before it was made for you.

There was also a measure of acceptance of responsibility for the decision made. Not only did the individuals exercise their own choice, but they tended not to blame others for the situation that led up to the decision. John stated: "I can't blame anybody. It's my own choice. I did it because I wanted to do it and that's all there is to it, ya know."

Miscellaneous Reasons

These students were also influenced by external events and situations. Five of the dropouts had experienced events that had an impact on their lives, an impact that was perhaps transitory, or one that had more prolonged ramifications.

Joe's mother was involved in a serious car accident which necessitated her quitting work and eventually turning to welfare. Financial considerations resulted in Joe's decision to leave school.

Mike's father suffered a nervous breakdown and he too could no longer work. His father became irritable at home and quarrels resulted in physical violence directed towards Mike and other family members. It was considered best if Mike left home. This scenario was similar to Don's, who also experienced physical conflicts with his father. He too left home.

Two of the dropouts had some contact with with suicide. John had a close friend who committed suicide and this had a considerable impact on John who "went into a stall." Eve's situation was more direct. She went into a depression as a result of the conflicts within her family, particularly between her and her mother. To solve her problems, she attempted suicide. She was not successful and she and her mother sought professional help. She and her mother continue to be incompatible, however, and it has been agreed that she should live on her own. Consequently Eve is a 16 year old leaving home with her mother's sanction and has left school to support herself.

The Dropout Label

None of the dropouts liked the label of "dropout," and only Lee seemed indifferent. The one message that emerged was that a dropout was an unmotivated "slackard," one with no direction. As Joe stated, "I definitely don't like it [dropout label], but it does fit the people who do. It fits those who just quit because they are bums and don't want to work. People in my situation should be looked upon differently."

These young people rationalized that if they had a reason for leaving and an intention of returning, they were somehow immune to the status of being dropouts. Don felt strongly:

> I know there's a lot of people that say that if you dropout, you're stupid. Ya, ya actually ruin your life if you dropout. I don't believe that's true. Uhm, well, it's just not true. There are lots of reasons for dropping out. And some of them are good. And there's nothing you can do about it. If you plan on coming back, I mean, what should be the big problem? I don't see it.

This feeling, that one should examine the reasons for leaving and that one should not be considered a dropout if they plan to return was held generally. It would appear that while they did not care for the "label," these students did not view dropping out as a catastrophe if they planned to return. It was considered a temporary situation, not a disaster.

Feelings

The literature suggests that the dropouts tend to devalue themselves because of their decision to leave school (Tidwell, 1988). It is suggested that many dropouts already have lower self-concepts (Armstrong, 1988).

Not all researchers reported a negative feeling among dropouts. Some feel the opposite, a feeling of control and of gaining some meaningful direction in their lives (Hartnagel, Krahn and Lowe, 1986).

The dropouts in this study reported a wide range of feelings regarding their decision and there was not a clear consensus regarding these feelings. Some did view themselves as having let either themselves or others down. Others did not. Some felt diminished by their new found status. Others considered it to be "no big deal." There was thus a considerable range of feelings and emotions attached to leaving school.

Attitudes About Quitting School

As mentioned previously, many of the dropouts did not care for the label "dropout," as they did not see themselves in this light. Most of them indicated they planned to return to school at some point, so the contention was that, this being the case, they were not legitimate "dropouts." To coin a phrase of a Phi Delta Kappan publication (1987) they perhaps viewed themselves more as "stopouts." As Radwanski (1987) reported, however, the reality is that less than 50% of dropouts attempt to return to school.

Mixed Emotions

While some of the dropouts felt that they were justified in leaving school, due to their particular circumstances, others felt, in hindsight, that it was a definite mistake. For some, the decision to dropout had been made much earlier than the actual date they completed the paperwork. It had been made by virtue of their school behavior and the paperwork only completed a process that had begun months previously. Those that regretted their decision tended to do so in hindsight. Once the die had been cast, they felt it

to be a mistake. They did not harbor these sentiments prior to their decision. All those who commented felt that dropping out was "stupid." Ann stated, "I think I'm stupid. I think like that was the biggest stupidest thing I've ever done. I shoulda got my grade 12...I don't care how hard it was, I'd stick it out." Although this sentiment was not voiced by all the dropouts, just under half expressed sentiments similar to this, suggesting that not only did they consider it to be a mistake, but also, that they devalued themselves for such a decision.

The most commonly expressed emotions were anger and a feeling of futility. Interestingly, the anger was not always directed towards the school system. Of the seven students who openly expressed feelings of anger, three were angry at the school and these feelings were most often non-directional or "shotgun" emotions. They were angry and the school, the focus of their failure, served as the target for their emotions. Only Ann was specifically angry at a school and her feelings were directed toward her grade three teacher. These feelings generalized however, and led to her resentment towards school. For Ann, "...it became a big effort for me to get up and go to school. It's an awful feeling to wake up five mornings a week and go to something you hate."

One student was angry at Social Services for not being willing to provide the support he felt needed, two were angry at their parents for not providing the parenting they felt they deserved and three were angry at themselves. Ken expressed his anger in stating, "I was angry at myself, cuz I know, like I said, I know that it's my fault. I don't know, I just have problems achieving. It's like what I said, I talk too much, I have problems socializing." Mike was more direct. He stated, "I'm pissed off [at myself]. I'm just goofing off all the time. Talking in class the whole time, making jokes, and ..." It would appear that while anger is a common emotion, these students were not overtly angry with the system.

Nearly half the students expressed feelings of futility, feelings associated with developing poor behavioral patterns and not achieving. Some of these feelings were

associated with feeling academic futility or inadequacy, while others experienced the same feeling due to their habits of skipping or being chronically late. John, the special education student, expressed academic futility when he stated, "I didn't feel that I could do anything, I didn't feel like I was doing any good there. I had to ask myself what am I doin' here?" A more common reason however was associated with poor attendance or a lack of handing in assignments which resulted in the inevitable conclusion that they were not going to receive their credits for the semester. As Ken said, "It was more like stay and get nothing, or leave and do something. There's no sense in me staying. I wouldn't pass, so what's the point? I wasn't gettin' nothin' outa it."

Closely associated with the feelings of futility is the feeling of resignation. The student simply feels that there is no point in the investing the effort, and they "give up." Jill said:

> I could tell when I was behind too. I could tell when I didn't know my stuff, I knew when I shoulda been studying. I knew when I was way behind. Ya know. And I was. Like half the time I was really behind. And when I'd catch up, then I'd just start getting behind again. Like, "Ohmigod..." You're always behind, so why bother?

Frustration was a consequence of either an inability to do the work or feeling unable to resurrect the balance of the semester and salvage some credits. Other emotions that surfaced were often linked to the feelings of academic futility. Students at times mentioned feeling inadequate and feeling that they had let others (parents or teachers), as well as themselves down.

Not all the negative emotions were associated with the school. Those with unsatisfactory home relationships tended to feel that they had been rejected by their parents and these same individuals also tended to portray "relationship resistant" characteristics.

Another characteristic manifested by some of the dropouts was learned "helpless" behavior. Here students attribute their lack of success to their inability and, therefore perceives failure as being inevitable (Smey-Richman, 1988). Such students believe that if they don't try, they can't fail. They tend to cast themselves as being "lazy" rather than

being incapable. This is a safer route, for if they try and fail, they see themselves as failures. If they don't try and fail, they see themselves as lazy rather than incapable. Three of the males interviewed described themselves in this fashion, as being lazy. John thought it unfair that others could come home, throw their book in the corner and go out and have fun while he was expected to study for 2 or 3 hours. He thus described his behavior as being lazy. Lee also followed this pattern, but went further and described his brain as being "too small." He stated, "...if I did try in my classes, and I'd find them hard, or things just wouldn't work out, then I'd give up on that class." He added, "Uhm, I'd listen to what the teacher was trying to say, and try to understand it, like for 2 or 3 times, and I like still wouldn't understand it, and I just gave up on it and just goofed off." The pattern of learned helplessness, coupled with a lack of persistence in completing tasks, is a combination that yields only continued failure but serves also to reinforce the idea that the individual is not capable of the task nor of success.

Research suggests that those with an external locus of control feel they are not in charge (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Van Bockern, 1990). They see little connection between their efforts and the consequences, especially academic consequences. Thus they would be said to have an external academic self-concept. One observation to emerge from the interviews with the dropouts, was that some of these individuals assumed an external locus of control in their academic lives, yet held an internal locus regarding the world of work. That is, they tended to believe that they had little control over their successes at school, yet tended to see themselves as being in control in the workplace. Of the 12 dropouts who were interviewed, half could be said to have an external locus of control regarding school, and coincidentally, half described as having an internal locus regarding the world of work.

Closely related to the construct of locus of control is academic self-concept. There appears to be a close relationship between these two constructs, for all of those considered to have an external locus of control had a negative academic self-concept. Seven of the 12

had a negative academic self-concept, that is they did not see themselves as being capable of the work.

One could sum up the negative feelings with the observation that many of the students expressed considerable discouragement. They felt defeated by their home situations or by the school system. Given that there is a connection between affect and cognitive functioning, feelings of competence are unlikely in the discouraged student. Cassell (1985) submitted that a discouraged child is more likely to misbehave and that discouraged teens may resort to destructive goals to gain acceptance. Whether students resort to excessive alcohol consumption or to excessive skipping, it seems fair to conclude that the majority of the dropouts indulged in some behaviors that were incompatible with success in school. There seems to be a relationship between the discouraged teen and dropping out.

Positive Feelings

While all of the dropouts expressed some negative feelings during the interviews, it would be unfair to portray the interviews solely in this light. Dropouts are not characterized as having only negative feelings and graduates as having only positive feelings.

Adolescents desire greater autonomy and independence. This message was delivered by six of the dropouts and they wanted independence in a number of areas. Five mentioned wanting independence from their families and not surprisingly, three of these were in some type of abusive home situation. Eve was quite emphatic as she relayed,

> She [mother] wants me out. She doesn't want me around, and I honestly don't care. I've been, I mean, I care what she thinks of me, but I don't care if she wants me around anymore. Cuz, I'm used to it. I've been fending for myself for how many years now? It doesn't bother me anymore. I want to be on my own and like make it myself.

These individuals wanted their independence and autonomy now, in the present. They not only wanted autonomy from their families, but to some degree also from their

friends. While they valued the opinions of their peers, they no longer wanted them making decisions for them.

A second theme to emerge was a desire to have financial independence in the future. Several times it was mentioned that they desired a reasonable and comfortable existence once they had entered the workforce. Joe stated, "Like you know make an average income, and support a family and stuff, and live happily...I want to be successful and have my own house and a family and summer vacations." This idea was commonly voiced by the males, although there was a recognition that further education would be necessary to realize this situation.

Half of the dropouts felt relieved by finally having made their decision and were satisfied that the decision was "right for them." They felt that they could now either get on with doing something meaningful, or secure a position of financial stability prior to returning for the remainder of their program. It was a revelation to some of these students to discover that they were in fact the same person as they had been prior to making their decision. As Rob stated, "It felt kinda good to make the decision, one that I knew wasn't the worst one in the world. I'm not really changing all that much." While nobody felt proud about dropping out, several felt a sense of relief and an accompanying realization that they were still okay people in spite of their now being "dropouts." As stated previously, there was a strong sentiment that one should look at the individual's circumstances before "passing judgement" on them. These students seemed particularly adept at rationalizing their situation, perhaps, correctly so.

Not Hostile

The reaction that most struck the researcher about the dropouts in the study was their lack of hostility. Perhaps this was because the interviewer was a neutral party to the process, or perhaps because they volunteered to participate in the study, but it was expected that there would be a certain amount of venom to be aired. That this was not the case, was a surprise to the researcher.

Not one of the 12 appeared hostile towards the high school. Surprisingly, there was considerable support for what the school had done for them. Five of the 12 voiced praises for the school and only Ann voiced complaints about her elementary education. Don commented, "Actually, I kinda like the way it's set up, I think it's pretty good...Everything was basically the way it should be." Tina was somewhat lukewarm in her comments as she said, "I don't like school, but it's clean and we've got pretty good teachers who care, and they know their stuff okay." Jill on the other hand gave the school a rave review.

> I'd say this school is doing great! I mean isn't Midpoint supposed to be one of the best? That's what I heard. I'd say great. Look at some of the other schools. Look at Nohope High. Half of them people come outa there and they can't even read, ya know. I talked to the kids, some of the other students, and that's what they think. So I'd say Midpoint is doing pretty good. I was never mad at the system or anything, and you know there's nothing wrong with this school. Like you don't need it, problems with the school, but there's nothing wrong with it. It's like me. Well what can you say? There's only so much the school system can do.

The reactions expressed would indicate that not only are the students not hostile towards the school, but further, that they accept some of the responsibility for their situation.

Future Plans

As Bellan (Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993) noted, dropping out is not an end state. Dropping out of school does not necessarily mean that students will stay out of school as nearly half the dropouts return to school. It is speculated that the majority of these returnees come back as their experiences in the job market gave them a new perspective on their schooling. They recognized that a diploma provides an alternative to dead end jobs.

All of the dropouts interviewed indicated they planned to return to school to complete their education and to get their high school diploma. Some had a vague feeling that they "just had to," but Jill summed up the feeling of most when she indicated that "If you want to get a half decent job, then you need it."

The researcher checked the registration at Midpoint High the following semester, the September intake, and found none of them had in fact re-registered. The same was true the subsequent semester in February. This does not indicate that they will not return or that they had not enroled in another program elsewhere. It does suggest, however, that the plans of this population are seldom well formulated. As John said, "Like I do wanna go back to school someday, but, uhm not until I'm ready. I don't think I'm ready yet, not yet. Soon, very soon." That statement was made in the summer of 1990. John has yet to return.

Naive

One of the themes that emerged from the interviews was that this population was both educationally and vocationally naive. They seemed to lack direction. They looked to the short term and seldom beyond. Ken typified this view when he stated:

> I didn't plan what I was gonna do for the rest of my life. I just planned on the next two days...It's too hard. Its a waste of my life. See like a lot of people think for the future, but I go day by day, but not the future. A lot of people just live day by day, and say forget it.

Not only did few of them have a vocational or career goal, but it also appeared that several of them lacked even the most basic understanding of the educational patterns they were in and what the consequences of such a pattern were likely to be. John exemplified this basic lack of understanding when he stated:

> I thought well you know, you get your high school diploma and you can go on to whatever you want, but uh, it's not that way. They look at your grades. I remember when I came back to school and I uh, talked to my counsellor, and we talked about grades and courses and things like that, and uh, with the courses I had taken what I could do for a career, and what I can't. Well I didn't know that. I jumped into high school thinking, well, I'll just get my 100 credits and I'll be out and I'll be able to do what I want. You know. I never thought about them checking on your grades or them saying you gotta have a 60% average to do this or that. I never thought about that.

While John's portrayal may be extreme, it is unfortunately not atypical of this population. Perhaps because they do not have a vocational goal, they see no need to attend to which courses will lead them in what direction. They seem to select their courses on the

basis of how difficult they are (only one student was enroled in an advanced diploma program, the others were enroled in the general stream). Dropouts do not tend to select courses with an eye to their future utility.

The one student who was enroled in the advanced stream was similar in not having a vocational direction. Jill stated:

> I was thinking I'd like to go to a community college and take some courses, but I've not idea what to take. I was looking into that with my counsellor, but then it didn't look like I was going to get my diploma, so I just forgot about it. So I really don't know. What's the point? Like it's not that I don't want to go. Like I do. Just not right now.

It is not uncommon for high school students to be uncertain about their futures. What separates this population from the graduates however is their level of vocational maturity. Many appear to be vocationally illiterate. Those that do have an idea of what they might like to try, have little understanding of what is required to gain entrance into such a program or of what the vocation entails.

John for example wanted to be a social worker but had no idea of what post-secondary training might be required. Lee considered completing his high school and then taking "some courses" at NAIT (Northern Alberta Institute of Technology). He considered either mixology or business management and was not aware that they were considerably different. Tina dreamed of being either a social worker or a writer, but had no idea of what training was required for either. Similarly, Ann was interested in becoming a legal secretary but had only looked at a pamphlet and assumed that was all she needed to do.

A related concern involves the lack of job seeking strategies these individuals possess. When asked about how she might gain employment, Jill stated:

> I'll basically just walk around Midpoint. I applied in a restaurant in town, but they haven't called me. I think I'll probably stay in Midpoint. I think I'll try at the new restaurant here. Maybe I'll go to the mall. Like I'm talking about it, but I haven't exactly done the applications yet. I guess I should.

These students had been exposed to some educational and vocational planning in their school experience. In grade nine, their counselors had spent several hours describing

high school life, high school counselors had visited the school to orient the students, and the students had visited the high school for a half day prior to registering for grade 10. The students were supposed to have discussed their high school program with their parents and the parents were required to sign the registration sheet.

In high school, the counselors spent three class period with each grade 10 English class doing what was termed "Mini-Careers." Interested students were invited to make an individual appointment with their counsellor if they wished to pursue this topic.

The counselors observations on this process are useful. It seems that it is the academic students who take the process the most seriously. It is often the weaker academics who are the most difficult to reach, as they see these classes as "free time," an opportunity to "goof off." When asked what their plans were, they often replied that they know what they are going to be, so why did they need to bother with "this stuff?" They often assumed that they were going to drive truck, work on the rigs or do other unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. They did not see a need for vocational planning and consequently saw no need for educational planning.

All students currently enroled in Alberta high schools are required to take a course known as Careers and Life Management, or C.A.L.M. This program may help address the concerns expressed above.

Reflections

When asked about the best features of high school, most students mentioned friends. Other commonly voiced feelings were directed towards some of the teachers, those that truly seemed to care about the student as an individual, the "backdoor" area where students could congregate and meet friends and the co-curricular activities provided for the students. A few of the students also commented that they appreciated the school building itself, it's appearance and the way it was maintained.

The researcher anticipated that when he asked the sample group about the worst features of school, there would be a litany of complaints. Indeed, the dropouts were

invited to "take their best shot" at the school in telling their story. It was therefore surprising that only eight of the 12 took the opportunity to comment on the worst features, and the central complaint involved the cliques in the school and the way the students treated each other. They accepted cliques as part of any school, particularly a large school, but they did not care for the cliquish-ness just the same. Only three students complained about teachers and their complaints were directed at a specific teacher who, in their view, either picked on selected students or who did not explain material in a way that they found intelligible.

Summary

The following table summarizes the situations relevant to each of the dropouts interviewed in this research. It would appear that the factors most strongly associated with this group were: having at least one parent who did not graduate, a lack of study habits, and attendance problems. Moderate occurrences (those relevant for 7 - 9 of the dropouts) were: being educationally/vocationally naive, questioning the relevance of their studies, and being overage for grade. Those occurring less often (occurring for 4 - 6 of the dropouts) were: a desire for materialism, divorce, financial hardships, being learning disabled or slow learners, working in excess of 15 hours per week, and having hassles with their parents. Least frequent was coming from a situation where they were abused.

It should be noted however that frequency of occurrence does not suggest or imply that this factor is a strong or weak indicator. For example, a child could come from an abusive situation and that alone could suffice to have the child leave home, look for a job and leave school.

Table VI-1: Characteristics of the Sample

	John	Joe	Don	Lee	Tina	Eve	Rob	Fay	Ken	Jill	Mike	Ann	Σ
parent hassels			x		x	x				x	x		5
abused			x			x					x		3
divorced		x			x	x	x				x	x	6
financial		x			x	x		x			x		5
family NOT grad	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	10
materialistic	x	x						x	x				4
Educ. naive	x		x	x	x		x		x	x		x	8
Voc. naive	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	9
LD/Core	x				x		x	x			x	x	6
relevance		x	x		x		x	x		x	x		7
repeated		x		x	x		x	x	x		x	x	8
study habits	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	10
attendance	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	12
not hostile	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	12
return?	x	x	?	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	11
work 15+hrs.	x	x						x	x		x		5
male	x	x	x	x			x		x		x		7
female					x	x		x		x		x	5

Chapter 7: Summary of Results

This chapter condenses and integrates the major findings of the research study. As indicated previously, data were gathered three ways. First, a record analysis were conducted by examining the student portfolios of an equal number of of dropouts and graduates. Second, a questionnaire was given to any student who indicated that they were dropping out of school. The decision of whether or not to complete this questionnaire was completely voluntary and 18 students chose to complete the questionnaire. Third, students who did elect to respond to the questionnaire were invited to participate in a follow-up interview. Twelve students chose to participate in the interview process which was intended to triangulate the previous information and provide a more in-depth, qualitative dimension. The quantitative dimensions of the portfolio search and the questionnaire are combined with the qualitative information of the interviews.

The results of these three sources of data are summarized below. Not every aspect of each phase of the research is considered, but rather only those that were deemed most salient.

It is important to note that the data were gathered from a relatively small sample size. Taken collectively, n=74.

Generally, there are four components in a young person's world: family, school, friends and work. The discussion which follows examines personal factors, school and friendship factors, and the work-related factors.

Personal Reasons

Half of the responses to the questionnaire affirmed that they had home problems, and 37% of the respondents indicated that, to varying degrees, they had some problem with their parents. Home situations have an obvious and powerful impact on students, for it is at home that one's self-concept is largely formed, as well as one's attitudes, beliefs and the need to achieve.

Of the respondents, 83% (10 of 12) had a parent that did not complete high school. Half the students (6 of 12) lived in a single parent arrangement and slightly less that half (5 of 12, or 42%) indicated that they had hassles with their parents on a regular basis. Of those who indicated problems with their parents, three (25%) were abused physically and consequently emotionally. Home factors play an important part in the process of dropping out. The home factors associated with those interviewed are summarized below:

Table VII-1: Home Characteristics of the Sample

	John	Joe	Don	Les	Tina	Eve	Rob	Fay	Ken	Jill	Mike	Ann	Σ
Abused			x			x					x		3
Parent hassles			x		x	x				x	x		5
Divorce		x			x	x	x				x	x	6
Family NOT Grad	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	10

School Factors

Gender

As Bellan (1993) observed, studies in general show that males who drop out outnumber females by a ratio of roughly 2 to 1. The data in this study are consistent and indicate that males comprise 61% of the dropouts and females 39%. As Bellan (Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993) noted however, the majority of both males and females graduate, so gender is considered a weak predictor of dropouts. Regardless, males do tend to outnumber females in this population. In addition, it is important to note that among the grade 10 dropouts, 72% (13/18 combining student portfolios and questionnaires) were males while 28% (5 of 18) were females.

Age/Grade at School Leaving

Ages were recorded only on the student portfolios. Information contained here indicates the following information regarding ages.

Table VII-2: Age at School Leaving

Age	15 years	16 years	17 years	18 years	19 years
%	9%	27%	32%	21%	11%

Fifteen year olds account for 9% of the dropouts and this figure triples to 27% for 16 year olds, when a student may legally leave school as stipulated by the School Act. It is likely that the numbers remain high for 17 and 18 year olds as they may not be experiencing success at school and be inclined to leave. The majority of dropouts were either 16 or 17 at the time they dropped out of school. This age range constitutes 59% of those studied. Eighteen year olds add another 21% to the figures.The figures tend to diminish for 19 year olds as it is likely that they are close to graduation and are more likely to complete their studies.

When the data are examined by grade, there appears to be a reasonably even split among the grades. See Table VII-3

Table VII-3: Grade At School Leaving

Grade	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
%	29%	34%	37%

While the dropout rate tends to increase slightly with each grade, the distribution does not markedly favor any one grade. Dropouts tend to come from all grades and it is likely that age is a more important consideration than grade level. The reason for this may be that many of those who leave are overage for grade, that is, they have repeated at least once in either elementary or junior high and are older than their classmates. Many such students are not strong academically and consider themselves to be "dumb." They find

school to be a challenge and may eventually decide to quit rather than continue with the struggle. Many overage students feel stigmatized as they are older than their classmates and this concern compounds academic considerations. For older students, age rather than achievement increasingly seems to become a factor.

Month of Leaving

Midpoint High operates on a semester system, and by far the majority of the dropouts tend to leave school in semester two (85%). It is important to note that many studies report the dropout rate to be significant in June, as a number of returning students simply elect not to show for the autumn registration (Bellan, Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993). This, it is suggested, is the easiest time to leave. This study however did not use this method of compiling data and recorded those who dropped out during the year, noting in which month this occurred. Dropouts in this school tend to leave in spring. Table VII-4 is a compilation of the 44 student portfolio records and the 18 questionnaire responses.

Table VII-4: Month when Left

Month	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June
#	1	0	5	2	1	6	4	22	19	2
%	2%	0%	8%	3%	2%	10%	6%	35%	31%	3%

note: n=62

The majority of those leaving do so in the latter half of the year. Midpoint High operates on a semester system and 15% of the dropouts occurred in semester one (September - January), with 85% occurring in semester two. One may speculate that in semester one students tend to "start fresh," but by second semester their energies and good resolve have worn thin and their behaviors during first semester have earned them an unsavory reputation with both teachers and administrators. Those students who receive a

number of warnings about lates, absences, lack of achievement etcetera are less likely to have similar behaviors tolerated the second semester. Dropout rates tend to be low during the final month of either semester, as those who have persevered thus far have only their exams to write and may feel they have more to gain than to lose if they can accumulate their credits for the semester.

The semester two dropout rate may be higher for a number of reasons. First, the students are tired of school. Second, they are disillusioned by their lack of success. They can predict with some accuracy what their credits earned are likely to be. Third, they tire of being disciplined for their behaviors. Fourth, many fall victims to "spring fever," they long to be outdoors and are tempted by the warming rays of summer to skip classes . Such a temptation all but seals the fate of the student who has already accumulated an excessive number of absences. Finally, they may convince themselves that their year is irretrievable and that by leaving they will get a head start on the prime summer jobs.

Grades

As an overall statement, grades of dropouts are lower than those of graduates. However, not all dropouts are poor or marginal students. Some of the dropouts had averages in the sixties, yet for personal reasons, they left school. Generally, dropouts experienced far greater academic difficulties than did graduates. The average marks for the dropout population in junior-high was 55% compared to that of 67% for the graduates. The trend continued in senior-high where the dropouts overall core average (prior to dropping) was 54%, compared to the graduates core average of 66%. This pattern of grades is consistent across grades 7 - 12, with dropouts achieving a 54% average compared to the 12% higher average of 66% for graduates. On the questionnaire, three-quarters of the dropouts agreed that they had poor grades.

While marks are a less than perfect predictor of dropping out, they do serve as one early warning signal that students may be at-risk. It should also be noted that there is no difference in terms of intelligence between the two populations. IQ results were recorded

from the student portfolios and both populations fell within the average range of intelligence.

Attendance

A chronic absentee pattern is typical of many dropouts and such a pattern was substantiated in this study. Absences for graduates average 5% in grade 10, 7% in grade 11 and 6% in grade 12. Dropouts on the other hand had a grade 10 absentee rate of 16%, a grade 11 rate of 20% and a grade 12 rate of 22%. Not only is the absentee rate triple for the graduate population, it tends to escalate each successive year of high school.

At Midpoint High, a 10% absentee rate is cause for alarm and it is considered doubtful that students will earn their credits if their absentee rate approaches 15%. At the teacher's instigation, students may be placed on a contract which stipulates the terms for continued enrollment in that course. If a student does not honor the terms of the contract by a stipulated date, they may be removed from the course. Should students miss 20% of any course, it is likely they would be removed from class. The dropouts' average absentee rate of 19% for grades 10 - 12 places them in a precarious position - being removed from class seems imminent for many. The students interviewed had a sense of how close they were to being removed from any particular class and governed their attendance accordingly.

Students are not only absent from class, they are also late for class. All students know that being late for class is considered a "lesser crime" than being absent and many students consequently tend to take an extra few minutes between classes. They linger longer with friends, or go for a smoke, knowing they will be late by doing so. Teachers tend to get annoyed with chronic lates but are less inclined to act than if classes are skipped. Dropouts are late less often than they are absent. However, they are late more often than graduates. Generally, dropouts tended to be late about twice as often as graduates.

A few of the students interviewed discussed another technique often used to get out of class, one which is not considered to fall into either the late or absence category. They will arrange to meet a friend at a certain time. They then get permission from the teacher to

leave the room, ostensibly as a toilet break. The students know that it becomes bewildering to teachers when several students leave at different times, and teachers, unless vigilant, tend not to know how long students are absent from class.

Credits

Given the tendency of dropouts to be both absent and late more than their graduate counterparts, one could expect a connection between grades and credits earned. The average number of credits earned by dropouts was 35, for graduates it was 109. One hundred credits are required for graduation. Dropouts not only earned fewer credits, but failed more courses. Dropouts on average failed 16 credits, while graduates failed 3 credits. It should be noted that, with parental permission, any student may be allowed to drop a course. It is possible that the failure rate could be higher if this practice were not allowed.

Also, graduates and dropouts tend to take different programs while in high school. Dropouts tend to enrol in the general program and within that program, to take a minimal number of academic courses. For example, in grade 10, slightly less than three-quarters of the dropouts remained enroled in "core" courses, while almost all graduates were enroled in "core" courses. By grade 11, only one-quarter of dropouts were enroled in such courses, while the rate among graduates remained unchanged. By grade 12, only 3% of dropouts were taking any "core" courses, whereas 94% of graduates were in academic courses. Graduates then take a much more academically rigorous program.

Study Habits

Many teachers would agree with the generalization that the dropout is not only less likely to attend classes, but also less likely to complete assignments and study for exams. Questionnaire results showed most dropouts (86%) had difficulties studying. Three-quarters also acknowledged that they thought they lacked self-discipline. A number of those interviewed made similar comments, suggesting that they lacked not only self-

discipline, but also self-direction. Taken collectively, a full 83% of the dropouts stated that they had significant problems in this area.

These students did not know how to study and found that attempts made to do so yielded minimal results. They became frustrated and saw little point in continuing with a task that appeared pointless. They seemed to need structure, but were incapable of establishing one for themselves. This may be related to having an external locus of control, of being externally motivated in a milieu that assumed students would accept increasing responsibility for their education. Those with an external orientation saw little connection between their investment of time and energy and the outcome.

Accepting the responsibility for their own scholastic performance is a difficult task for students who struggles academically, are poorly motivated and manifest a short-term world view. This makes success at high school difficult.

In a related sense, dropouts responded to questionnaire items in a seemingly inconsistent manner. Only half (47%) felt that education played a meaningful role in their lives and a similar number (47%) acknowledged working for good grades. Most (89%), however, felt it important to get a high school diploma and all (100%) perceived learning to be important. About a third (36%) acknowledged that they were not interested in school by the time they reached high school.

On the surface, these responses seem incongruous. However, if these students value learning that has direct vocational application, then it is possible that working for grades would be considered to be more worthwhile. Additionally, students are not inclined to work for good grades if their academic self-concept is low. Many of these students were overage for grade, had failed somewhere in the past and viewed themselves as "stupid." They came to believe that no amount of effort would result in success, so tended to adopt a rather fatalistic "why bother" attitude. Repeated failures tended to cement the external orientation of such students and they attributed their successes to luck or ease of task, and their failures to inability. They concluded that they have low ability which resulted in

feelings of incompetence. They tended to see their failures as being due to a lack of ability rather than a lack of effort. These students who had experienced frustration and failure in schools were not likely to be interested in school by the time they reached high school. The fact that it was high school did not make any difference to these students. They knew they could "try it on," see how it went and leave when they were (finally) 16. Very often they did!

Overage for Grade

Dropouts are more likely than graduates to have repeated a grade. In the student portfolios, 45% of dropouts had repeated a grade compared to 11% of graduates. Dropouts thus repeated 4 times more often than graduates. Among those interviewed, 67% (8 of 12) had repeated a grade and were overage for grade upon entering high school. The grades most likely to have been repeated in this study were grades one, seven and nine.

When the student record portfolios were combined with the interviews, it was evident that exactly half of all the dropouts had repeated a grade.

Co-Curricular Activities

Researchers have found that typically dropouts are less inclined to participate in the co-curricular activities of the school. While slightly less than half (41%) of respondents agreed that their high school encouraged its students to be active in school affairs, only one-quarter of those interviewed had actually participated in a school sponsored program. Most chose not to "connect" with what are generally considered to be valued aspects of school.

It should be stated, however, that not all graduates are active in co-curricular activities and that such a lack of participation does not equate with an "at-risk" designation.

Friends and Belonging

It is widely accepted that peer influence is strongest during adolescence and that group pressure is a value forming agent during this time (Cassell, 1985). It is during this period that teens struggle to belong and to define a self-identity that is separate from their

parents, one that is their own. To achieve this they tend to use music, dress and behaviors different from that of most parents. Adolescents have increased intellectual skills, but no commensurate responsibilities in an adult world, so tend too rely heavily upon each other for guidance and a feeling of defined significance.

The students in this study emphasized how important it was to them to belong. It was not only what they said, it was the conviction with which it was stated. John shared the following thoughts about friends:

> They're friends, and uh, they'll always be there for me, and I know that, ya know? I mean, you just know that about friends. I can trust them, I can rely on them, ya know, and if I've got a problem and they can help me, they'll help me.

Virtually all the individuals interviewed expressed similar sentiments reflecting the value they placed on friendship.

Given this closeness among friends, it is surprising that dropouts maintained that they were not influenced by friends who had left school. Students maintained that it was "their" decision, that they were "the first," they were "dropout pioneers" as it were. Given the number of dropouts there are in a large high school, it seems implausible that one dropout does not know of others, or further, that he does not have an acquaintance who has dropped out. Regardless, each student maintained that it was an entirely personal decision, reached solely via introspection. Given that this is a period when adolescents are striving to define their own self-identity, coupled with the probable soul-searching that often precedes such a weighty decision, perhaps dropouts do view it entirely as a personal decision.

It should also be stated that no dropouts indicated that friends had encouraged them to leave. If anything, friends tended to discourage this decision, but to be accepting of it once made.

As stated previously, school is the social hub for many students and while students may complain about classes or teachers, most cherish the social activity found in school.

This is where they make daily contact with friends. They spend time in classes together and walk the halls together, just "hanging out." One-quarter of of the students interviewed reported that they let the social aspect of school take precedence over the academic and either tended to spend class time socializing, or spent time with friends when they should have been attending class. Either behavior leads weak students into academic difficulties and reflects their orientation that the academic side of high school is secondary.

Relevance and boredom

When children grow towards adolescence, they become increasingly idealistic as their intellectual powers grow (Mitchell, 1971). The subjects of this study displayed two discrete traits. First, they were decidedly "here and now," that is , they exhibited the impatience typical of youth and tended not to develop long term goals. They were impetuous and lacked self-direction. They tended not to plan adequately, and they did not regulate their activities.

The second trait relates to their intellectual prowess. They challenged the relevance of what they were required to study, for to many of them, it had little meaning. They did not see a connection between academia and the world of work, as they understood it. The males in particular complained that if they were to pursue a trade, what relevance was there to subjects such as social studies, algebra, and the sciences. To them it was abstract knowledge with no connection to "reality."

In discussions with those interviewed, it became apparent that they were developmentally naive regarding both educational and vocational awareness. Only one student had a viable plan on which to build. The others had either no plan or only a vague idea of where they were headed. The common ambition focused on gaining employment and assessing their respective situations from this condition.

The Future

When asked about future plans, three observations were noted. Most dropouts indicated an intention to work, but few had what could be considered a serious job search

strategy. Second, virtually all the dropouts indicated a plan to return to school to complete their diploma, but at this point, there was no established timeline as to when this might happen. The researcher investigated the registration status of these dropouts for the subsequent two semesters and found that none of them had re-registered. This suggests that the plans of this population were not well formulated. The third observation was that this group had ill-defined vocational plans. It is commonly held by high schools that some type of vocational goal helps to motivate students, for they know which courses are required for entrance into a vocation and what range of marks are needed to be considered competitive. Dropouts could be described as being both vocationally and educationally naive.

As a final comment, it seems that many of this population did not consider themselves as dropouts, for they intended to return. It seems that they did not consider dropping out as a final act, but rather as a necessary "time-out." Dropping out did not mean they would stay out. Bellan (Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993) noted, nearly half of dropouts return to school.

Work

Many of the dropouts cited work-related reasons as a determining factor in their choosing to leave school. Teens long to feel important, to feel they are making a valid contribution to the world. They perceive work as a vehicle to personal autonomy and independence, to an environment where they are treated responsibly and where they can assume control over what happens. As Bellan (Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993) stated, work represents money, freedom and a sense of independence. Students in this study tended to work for one of two reasons. Either they needed to work to support themselves, or they wanted to work to support a consumer oriented lifestyle. Of those interviewed, 42% (5 of 12) needed to work and 17% (2 of 12) chose to work to

support their lifestyle. Both of the latter had cars, as did two of the former group, and found payments and upkeep to be substantial.

Many researchers (Rumberger et al, 1989, Radwanski, 1987) have suggested that it is not work that poses a problem, but rather the amount of work that creates difficulties. Figures of 15 hours per week are mentioned by some and 20 hours per week by others. In this study, just over half the students worked an average of 43 hours/week at an average salary of $6.80/hour. A further quarter of the sample worked an average of 19 hours/week for an average of $4.20/hour. The remaining 21% were not employed at the time of leaving school.

Working full time while attending school was often possible for these students by carrying less than a full course load. Often the hours of a part-time job would gradually increase and students who began working at 4 p.m. found their shifts extended to the point they were working full time. They would often drop their first class, and possibly all morning classes to maintain their jobs.

When students left school, they were asked about their job search strategies. It was observed that they were largely ignorant of this topic and given the unemployment rate at that time, unreasonably optimistic. The jobs they were targeting tended to be in the unskilled area, with males in labor and females in waitressing positions.

Feelings About School and Leaving School

Given that dropouts have often experienced academic difficulties, given also that they developed negative feelings towards school, it was surprising that those interviewed were not bitter about their school or their experiences while attending. If fact, most gave the school a favorable report and accepted the blame for their status. There were negative comments passed regarding particular teachers they did not care for, but the school as a whole was perceived in a positive light.

There are a number of possible explanations. Perhaps the teachers were doing an adequate job and the students knew this. Perhaps the administration had in place what the students considered to be reasonable policies and the students felt that they received fair treatment. The students rated the services of the guidance department favorably. It is also possible that, after the fact, the dropouts' anger had dissipated and they were accepting of the situation. They had made a decision, acted upon it and were now experiencing a calmness as a result. The animosities of past battles may have been forgotten as they departed and set out looking for employment.

The dropouts interviewed rated most of their teachers favorably. They felt their teachers cared about them, that they were willing to give them help if asked, that they knew their subject matter and that they treated the students with respect. Approval, however, was not unanimous. There were reservations. Just over half of the respondents commented on teacher qualities or behaviors that they did not appreciate. They mentioned teachers not knowing their subject matter; not helping students in need; picking on students; not being in control of the class, and, not conveying a sense of caring about their students.

The students interviewed in this study reported a wide range of feelings regarding their decision to quit school. Some (just under half) tended to devalue themselves and to consider that they had let themselves and/or their parents down. These students thought dropping out was a mistake and regretted their decision. They tended to feel angry at themselves and also expressed feelings of resignation, inadequacy and futility. They could be described as "discouraged."

Others however indicated a sense of relief and anticipated that they could now move onto something that had some purpose and more meaning for them, the world of work. They looked forward to the independence and autonomy towards which they thought they were now setting out (Edmonton Public School District, 1988).

There was a marked sentiment voiced by many that they were not truly dropouts, for they intended to return to complete their schooling. Several indicated that people should

consider the reasons that led to their dropping out before they labeled them as dropouts. These students considered themselves justified in leaving due to their particular circumstances and may well consider themselves as "stopouts" rather than as dropouts.

Reasons for Dropping Out

The reasons for dropping out tended to fall into three categories: school-related reasons, work-related reasons and personal reasons (Bellan, Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993). The most frequently cited reasons were financial need and doing poorly in school. Personal reasons tended to center about home problems, most often problems with parents.

The financial circumstances of the dropouts were varied. Some had left home or were in the process of doing so and had to support themselves financially. Others had succumbed to the affluent lifestyle and had payments they could not maintain, usually car payments.

The school related reasons tended to include: difficulties studying, poor grades, a lack of self-discipline, boring or irrelevant school programs and an acknowledgement that their behaviors in school caused them difficulties. Significantly, very few dropouts reported leaving because of problems with teachers. The vast majority of this population reported getting along with most of their teachers and indeed, with all school personnel.

What emerges from this picture is that dropouts tend to leave for a variety of reasons. The majority tend to be doing poorly in their studies and work-related reasons were often quoted as the cause of leaving. Most who indicated a desire to work, however, communicated that this was a preference rather than a need. Work related reasons cannot be completely partialled out from school reasons, as the workplace may be more alluring to the student who is not doing well academically. Personal reasons centered about home-life and played a significant role for many.

Best/Worst Reflections

Students were asked to comment on both the best and the worst features of high school. There was agreement that the best features were friends, teachers and having a selection of interesting courses. Also mentioned were the attractiveness of the building, the variety of co-curricular activities and the smoking doors.

The most nominated category for worst features was teachers, who were criticized for not caring about the students. This was closely followed by complaints about other students, about the cliques and the way students treated each other. The intolerance was not appreciated. Courses were described as being too long, having too much homework or being boring. Surprisingly, several commented on how easy it was to skip classes.

Profile

There is no general profile that describes dropouts. The reasons for dropping out are varied and complex. There is no "typical" dropout. There are no guaranteed predictors. However, dropouts are more likely to have the following characteristics. They are more likely to be male, 16 or 17, have repeated a grade or have been in a special education program, come from a single parent home and to have a job where they work more than 15 hours per week. They may have a parent who themselves did not graduate and are more likely than not to have had difficulties studying and to have had attendance problems at high school. Although none of these characteristics are attributable to all of the dropouts, it is fair to state that the more of them students possessed, the greater the likelihood that they would drop out of school.

Summary

There are several components in a young person's world: family, school, friends and work. This study found that half the students indicated home related concerns. In school, dropouts experienced far greater difficulties than did graduates, but the most often cited difficulties were within the purview and control of the individual. Surprisingly, peer influence was an issue of no consequence in this study. There does, however, appear to be

a relationship between the number of hours worked and the likelihood of dropping o st of school.

Chapter 8

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

> How did it all begin? Through exploration of the universe we know that something spectacular happened 13 billion years ago. But we do not know why there is something instead of nothing. Although men can hopefully answer logically: what, when and how, they have no idea why. That question, of deepest significance is outside the realm of science.
>
> Alan Sandage
> Inscription located at Siding Spring Observatory
> N.S.W. Australia

Rationale for the Study

Concern over the dropout situation seems to escalating. There is an increased concern regarding what Hahn (1987) described as this multifaceted and complex problem.

LeCompte (1987) pointed out that prior to the 1950s, dropouts were absorbed into the economy. Madak (1988a) noted however, that today a high school diploma is considered by many as the minimum requirement for economic survival.

The literature on dropouts has well documented the profile of the dropout. There are several characteristics that this population shares, some of which are associated with home factors and some with school behaviors Accordingly, it is considered appropriate to explore both of these domains as they are part of the life of the student. Particular interest was devoted, in this study, to the school related factors which may contribute to the decision to drop out, as they are obviously under the control and influence of the school.

While school related factors may not be causal in the decision to drop out, they may certainly contribute to the decision. Therefore it seems germane to examine some of the factors which are within the school's control to determine how they might contribute to the situation.

Justification and Discussion of the Conceptual Model

In addition to the practical considerations listed above, the study also contributes to the theoretical approach of problem structuring. The study evaluated the utility of using a

problem structuring approach developed by Dunn (1981) in formulating policy recommendations in this area. The intent of problem structuring is to ensure that the "right" problem is identified for solution. This is more likely to occur if the problem is viewed from a number of perspectives. In this study, the problem was structured by analyzing the perceptions of dropouts, for it is suggested that without their perceptions the wrong policy problem could be addressed. Dropouts are the principal players in the situation and their perceptions are considered critical to defining the problem. A key consideration then is whether the perceptions of the dropouts aid in problem structuring and the decision making process regarding policies on dropouts. Problem structuring allows one to speculate about potential solutions to problems.

Dunn (1981, p. 99) discussed four characteristics of policy problems: interdependence, subjectivity, artificiality and dynamics. Interdependence of policy problems means that problems in one area affect policy problems in other areas. He stated "in reality policy problems are not independent entities; they are part of whole systems of problems best described as *messes*, that is, systems of external conditions that produce dissatisfaction among different segments of the community" (p. 99). Subjectivity of policy problems recognizes that policy problems are filtered through human experience and judgment. Artificiality acknowledges that policy problems are the product of subjective judgment. As Dunn (1981) stated "problems have no existence apart from the individuals and groups who define them, which means that there are no 'natural' states of society which in and of themselves constitute policy problems" (p. 99). The dynamics of policy problems states that there are as many different solutions for a given problem as there are definitions of that problem. Recognition of these characteristics alerts one to the possibility of the unanticipated consequences that may result from policies based on the wrong problem (Dunn, p. 100).

It is important to note that most policy problems, in addition to the characteristics discussed above, are ill structured:

> ...because they are really complex systems of problems that involve high levels of conflict among competing stakeholders. It is unrealistic to assume the existence of one or a few decision makers with uniform preferences; consensus on goals and objectives is rare; and it is seldom possible to identify the full range of alternative solutions and their consequences (Dunn, 1981, p. 133).

Ill-structured problems do not lend themselves to resolution by conventional methods. Rather, they require the analyst to take an active part in defining the problem. It is also a characteristic of ill-defined problems that they are elusive and appear to be the personal creations of their creators (Mitroff and Mason, 1981). Ill-defined or wicked problems however defy objective formulations and can be structured in a number of ways. As Hansen (1987) noted, messy problems can be structured in many ways and the aim is to develop creative solutions which specify the formal problem underlying the situation (p. 192). Dunn (1981) suggested that ill-structured problems necessitate the researcher to be active in defining the nature of the problem and in so doing, they must be creative and insightful.

It is submitted that the perceptions of the dropouts will enhance the ability of the policymakers to arrive at creative and useful solutions. It was their perceptions which aided in specifying the problem, which was conceptualized through the use of the qualitative approach, which Dunn contends is well suited for problem structuring.

The purpose of the conceptual model was to determine what information could be considered for problem structuring and policy development in the area of dropouts. Would the perception of dropouts aid in the problem structuring and decision making process for policies related to this population? Initially the problem statement and the research questions guided the research. The qualitative orientation is based on the assumption that policy problems "have no existence apart from the individuals and groups who define them" (Dunn, p. 99).

The data collection phase of problem structuring as discussed by Bonas (1988) was considered useful. Here, she described which segments of the research dissertation

addressed which phases of problem structuring. She described the problem sensing phase as including the introduction, justification and review of the literature; problem conceptualization as including the qualitative approach, the interpretative paradigm and the multi-case study; and problem specification as including the perceptions of the informants, significant others and experts in the field. The collection of data for problem structuring adopted from Bottas (1988, p. 84) is illustrated in figure VIII-1.

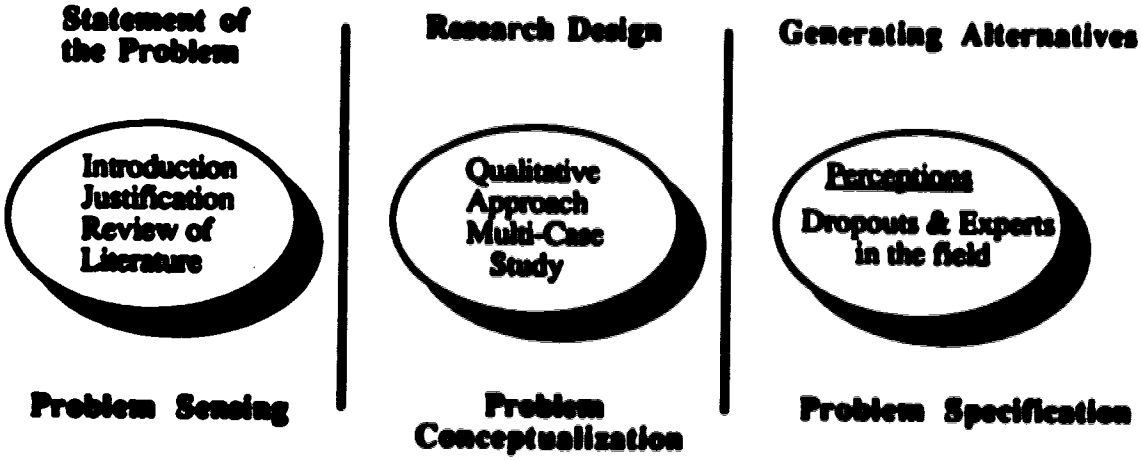


Figure VIII-1: Problem Structuring as it relates to Data Collection

The model of problem structuring developed by Dunn (1981) to structure "messy" problems was considered useful in this application. The phases of the process served to organize the study in describing the substantive and formal problem in the formulation of recommendations. The interpretative perspective used to conceptualize the subjective nature of policy problems to describe the substantive problem and then the formal problem was useful. In moving from a problematic situation to a substantive problem, the conceptualization of the problem was guided by the perceptions of the dropouts interviewed. This helped define the problem. The overall design allowed the researcher to consider the perceptions of individuals and formulate them into general recommendations.

The conclusions drawn served to specify the problem and were conceived via the problem specification process which identified the problem.

The findings of this study are considered relevant and are intended to generate discussion among the various stakeholders as they evaluate the issues and problems that need to be addressed. With increased awareness of the perceptions of some of the dropouts affected, it is hoped that this study will generate a review of some of the policies which may be of use to both schools and the students they serve.

Recommendations of Dropouts

It is submitted that if researchers and school officials want to know how to improve the retention rate, then it is reasonable to solicit suggestions from those who actually drop out of school. The dropouts had many observations and recommendations and their responses tended to fall into two categories: suggestions that could be termed structural, that is, fundamental changes to the system per se; and suggestions which addressed teaching and the teachers themselves.

Structural Recommendations

Collectively the students made a total of 12 recommendations. Those that follow were mentioned by several of the students. This arrangement of recommendations does not imply a prioritized list.

1. There should be an effort made to provide an alternative to the traditional mode of lecture style teaching. It was suggested that there be more group work, that there be teams for mini-competitions as part of the class and that there be more project work. It was not suggested that schools become amusement parks, but rather that there be greater variety in the delivery of activities.
2. Skipping should be made more difficult. Tina suggested that schools make a concerted effort "...to catch the skipping before it catches up to the kids." Another student had commented that skipping becomes addictive and he too concurred that schools should

deal with it. The students recognized that skipping was a major factor that caused the academic downfall of many dropouts.

3. That there be a "bridge" between the junior high model and the senior high. While few of the students complained about the transition, there was a sentiment that if the distinction between junior and senior high were not as abrupt, it might make senior high easier. It was suggested that junior and senior high be made more similar.
4. That senior high teachers adopt the model of the elementary school system where one teacher teaches several classes (not all however), in an effort to better get to know the students and to coordinate the amount of homework assigned on any given day.
5. That instruction be more individualized to allow for different learning styles. It was felt that some of the academic classes just went too fast for the students to digest the material and it was suggested that instruction be more individualized to allow for different learning styles.
6. That there be some type of alternate program for those who are not dealing successfully with the regular program, a "different" program for those who are struggling. There were no specifics attached to this idea, but a vague feeling that an alternate program might offer a safety net to those at-risk.
7. That school hours to be altered, perhaps having staggered starting times at different times of the year. The structure of the school year was questioned. While students prefer the semester system, some would like to see it become a trimester system. Supposedly this would enable students to graduate faster, or to make up classes that had been either failed or not taken. This would allow the student to graduate with their cohort.
8. That courses be made more "relevant" to the real world. It was felt that the academic courses were too cerebral and had little relationship to business or industry.
9. That there be more career or vocational information. There was a feeling that vocational guidance should begin earlier in junior high and that it should be integrated into all

subject areas rather than being but one part of a discrete course such as health or CALM.

The following recommendations were offered by only one individual.

10. More in-depth course descriptions to better enable students to make truly informed choices regarding what each course offered. The concern originated as it was felt that the general two or three sentence course descriptions found in the school handbook were inadequate.
11. That there be a closer liaison between the school counselors and Social Services, for it was felt that this would better educate Social Services to the needs of the students.
12. That a greater variety of co-curricular activities be implemented to target more audiences and diminish the cliques in the school.

Dropouts' Recommendations regarding Teachers:

The students sampled were generally satisfied with the instruction they received. The comments made about teachers were not directed at individual teachers, but were rather characteristics they valued in teachers. First, it was felt that somehow teachers should convey that they care about students. Teacher interest was considered very important. Further, it was suggested that one way teachers could show an interest and meet the learning needs of the individual was for teachers to alter the pace of instruction to match the individuals in the class. Ann stated that:

> [a good teacher] takes the extra time, and they like, it's not like they hound you and stuff like that, but they do act like they care and they talk to you. You can talk about anything, kind of thing. You can tell them a personal problem, or anything

The students felt that teachers should have the following characteristics. They should treat students as individuals, they should care, they should try to understand the student, they should take the time to make sure each student knows the material and they should take the time to get to know the student.

Diploma Requirements

Most of this population were quite opinionated regarding the increased academic requirements necessary to earn a high school diploma. The majority (five of the seven who addressed this item) felt that increased academic requirements would encourage more students to leave school prior to graduation. As Fay said:

> I think it'll make more kids leave school, cuz a lot of people can't do it. Like a lot of people can't do chemistry, or physics or biology. Math. I know a lot of people that can't do math. And then, since they can't do math, they're not gonna graduate, so why stay with it?

Those that opposed the increased requirements felt that society was making it more difficult to graduate and were discouraged by escalating post-secondary and high school diploma requirements. There was a feeling that it was all becoming unnecessary and that more students would give up.

Not everybody agreed, however. Two students did not consider the more academic requirements to be particularly onerous. Jill felt that "...you just get used to doing what you have to do...like the system is what it is and you just follow it. You just do it. That's the way it is." Mike recognized that there was a need to know more today and felt that if people know they need their education, they'll stay in school.

It should be noted that Mike and Jill were two of the more capable students in this group.

Media Commercials, "Bo Knows..."

At the time of these interviews (spring of 1991) there were a number of commercials on television encouraging students to stay in school. The dropouts responded to this media campaign with mixed feelings. There was an even split regarding whether they felt the commercials to be effective.

Joe felt that the "Bo Jackson" commercials had an impact on him because Bo Jackson is a superstar and Joe an admirer. Tina agreed that the message was powerful. "I think they have a real big impact. The first time I saw one it was like, almost a tear jerker.

But like I think they're really powerful commercials." A similar reaction was voiced by Jill:

> I remember I'd see those on the TV, like those ads, and I was like, "Ya, that's true. There's no way I'm gonna dropout." But now I look at it and like change the station. It's true. I think it's a good thing. Like you don't want people dropping out. The ads annoy me now...

As mentioned however, half the students thought the commercials ineffective. Their reasoning was interesting. Don felt that he did not care what anybody else had to say, that it was his personal decision. Lee criticized the use of rich superstars who don't know anything about being average, while Mike maintained that he discounts anything he sees on TV, because it is on TV. Ken felt that only punitive messages have any impact on people and cited drunk driving as an example. He stated,"...the only way people cut down on drinking and driving is because, if the cops do. It's the fines, the penalties. The ads are just a waste of money."

It is interesting to look at the responses by gender. Of those who thought the commercials effective, three of the four were female. Of those who considered the commercials ineffective, all were males.

It is worthy of noting that the student responses were extemporaneous rather than formulated. It is the feeling of the researcher that, with the exception of the one recommendation that "school be made more fun," that the suggestions offered above are worth consideration. They appear to have merit, indeed, support can be found for most of them in the literature. Educators may well take these comments under advisement.

Above and Beyond

The researcher has worked in the public school system for the past 20 years as a teacher, counsellor and administrator. Fifteen of these years were in the capacity of school counsellor. He has worked with students from K-12 and worked extensively with high school students for a period of 8 years. While in the high school, he worked closely with at-risk students and thus has some familiarity with how these students behave and think.

As a practitioner, the researcher brings a body of tacit knowledge to the study and it was suggested that he draw upon this experience and include his own thoughts and recommendations in the study. As Dunn (1981) suggested, ill structured problems require the researcher to be an active part of the process. The research conducted thus served as a impetus for the following thoughts and observations.

What follows are the personal reflections of the researcher. They are not drawn from the research directly, but rather go "above and beyond" the findings of the study. The recommendations are based upon experience as a practitioner, upon discussions held with "experts" in the field and upon suggestions found in the literature that either support or extend ideas formulated by the author. As such, they are based upon experience rather than empiricism.

Hamilton (1986) lends support to this approach. He stated "...the reader should not infer that educational research is sufficient to determine educational policy and practice." (p. 412). Mann (1986) extended this notion with the following statement:

> Not very many policy decisions are based exclusively on the evidence. While initiatives are frequently resisted on the ostensible grounds that they are "unproven," thankfully, school people never waited for the analytic community to resolve the last empirical issue before adopting a probably preferable practice... I have not felt compelled to inundate [these] pages with a sea of footnotes. If the substance and logic of what I say here does not convince, neither will the conventional rituals of scholarship (p. 317).

Accordingly, the author submits the following discussion.

Personal Reflections

Is there a fundamental problem with the current structure of the school systems? Are failures merely a by-product of a competitive school system? Is the current system designed to produce failures, somewhat akin to the unemployment found at any time in the economy? Is it possible to replace the current win-lose approach with a win-win approach?

First, one needs to address a simple question, "Is there a problem?" Sociologists tell us that an issue only becomes a social problem when people decide it is one. There have always been dropouts from the school system. The dropout rate has not escalated to

alarming proportions in recent years. It is not a new problem, yet it has become a "hot topic" in the past few years. It is not uncommon to read articles about the problem in newspapers or journals on a regular basis. Is it only the media that has found an issue to sell to the public or is there a genuine "bona fide" problem? Perhaps it is a case of the public's dissatisfaction with "the system," with many of the institutions of contemporary society. There seems to be a cynicism regarding many of our public institutions, the banking system, the police and judicial systems, the education system, the post office, the political system and others. There seem to be few exceptions to the rancor. Is education just one more target and the dropout issue an example of a failing system? The educational system in general and teachers in particular, seem to be "in the line of fire."

It is common today to hear educators complaining about burnout, about the litany of changes they are expected to keep abreast of professionally. Teachers today seem not to be viewed with the same regard they once were. Many do not feel they have parental support and it is increasingly common for teachers to have to endure rude and insolent behaviors from young children. Teachers are no longer sure of where they stand, of what behaviors will be tolerated by administration or parents. They tire of reports accusing the educational system of failing to produce literate graduates. Teachers may feel they are the scapegoats for the ills of society. They do not teach the proper values. They do not teach sex education correctly. They do not teach children how to think. They do not teach children to respect each other. The list goes on and on. Is the dropout situation yet one more indicator of dissatisfaction with the educational system?

A generation ago, students who dropped out of school were not considered a problem, for they were assimilated into the workplace where they could secure jobs and earn a livelihood. A generation ago, those who were different or who had special needs simply existed, maintaining the belief that the school system was functioning as it should be. In today's economy however, such is not the case. Unemployment rates are high, with the rate for the 16 - 24 year old age bracket being among the highest. Second, the positions

available today, with the exception of the "McJobs," demand a minimum of a high school diploma. It thus appears that the situation has changed and that opportunities for uneducated youth are restricted. This being the case, dropouts today face limited, if not bleak, prospects and place increased demands on the social services of society. This situation is reflected in statements such as: "The costs of supporting our dropouts and dumpouts as illiterate, unemployable, violent or mentally ill citizens are staggering. We no longer can afford the economic drain of disposable people." (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Bockern, 1990, p. 3).

If as a starting point, it is assumed that the educational system is not working smoothly, that there are problems which require attention, then it would seem appropriate to adopt an attitude of: "If what you're doing isn't working, then try something else." As Conant bluntly stated, "...it seems absurd to continue more of what is not working." (p. 6). " But what should we try?

Programs

Teachers teach students and they teach programs. "Program" can have many different meanings. It can refer to the program of studies, the curriculum dictated by the government. It can mean programs such as dropout prevention, (of which there are a multitude) and which are being spawned daily as schools attempt to deal with the dropout dilemma. It can mean new directions or philosophies which alter the traditional delivery and necessitate changes. For the purposes of this discussion, programs will refer to any interventions schools or school systems have developed to address the dropout situation. As such, it is intentionally an umbrella term intended to encompass a wide range of approaches and interventions.

Baker (1991) stated that there appears to be a consensus that there is a great deal more information about dropouts than there is about school policy and strategy interventions related to the dropout phenomenon. This criticism seems to acknowledge that researchers have spent considerable energy attempting to understand the characteristics of

this population and have been less diligent in addressing interventions. This is undoubtedly so, but an investigation of the literature indicates that while discussions regarding characteristics supercedes discussions regarding interventions, there is no shortage of materials regarding the latter. As Mann (1986) observed, schools are trying a multitude of strategies, since virtually anything can be related to the dropout problem. In attempts to assess the interventions used, he suggested that it would be useful to sort the preventative programs from the remedial interventions, but noted that this is seldom done. Fortune, Bruce and Williams (1991) further suggested that programs be classified according to whether their function is to (a) identify dropouts and develop programs, a predictive strategy, or (b) provide an alternative program to the regular program and offer this choice to the at-risk student, an alternative strategy. The literature abounds with program interventions, but these are seldom classified. A host of characteristics however are discussed. What then are the characteristics of successful dropout prevention programs?

Hamilton (1986) identified four common characteristics of dropout prevention programs:

> (1) they separate potential dropouts from other students
> (2) they have strong vocational components
> (3) they utilize out of classroom learning; and
> (4) they are intensive in the sense of being small, individualizing instruction, having low student-teacher ratios, and offering more counselling than ordinary schools (p. 410).

Hamilton (1986) also summarized the characteristics found by Whelage and his colleagues: small size and autonomy; teachers who accepted responsibility for their students' success defined by improvement over previous work rather than by conforming to a uniform standard; teachers caring for students; a teacher culture of collegiality; instruction which emphasized cooperative group settings; real-life problem solving; and use of experiential learning to motivate classroom learning. Afolayan (1991) further noted that effective programs must provide different programs for different kinds of dropouts, they

must employ timely identification of high risk students and include programs for early prevention, late prevention and recovery. Baker (1991) advocated interventions which include community involvement in either the school or the community, an idea supported by Alberta Education (1991). Conant (1992) maintained that the quality of human relationships supercedes the specific interventions used and suggested that a core of teacher conditions which include "empathy, sincerity, warmth, spontaneity, patience, calmness and authenticity" (p. 9). In short, staff must have a genuine regard for students and strive to foster trust, respect and cooperation.

Streeter and Franklin (1991) submitted that because the dropout problem is complex and multifaceted, different interventions may be needed for different groups of dropouts. They maintained that:

> ...effective dropout prevention and intervention requires remediation which transcends academic skill deficiencies and focuses on problems which go beyond the scope of the traditional school...In order for schools adequately to do their job as educators, a greater integration with other agencies in the community may be required (p. 217).

McLaughlin and Vacha (1992) advocated that at the building level, schools could employ strategies such as peer tutoring, cooperative learning and personalized instruction. Additionally, it was suggested that school districts develop a district-wide plan.

Natriello, Pallas and McDill (1986) maintained that the most crucial aspect of the school was to assess on an continuing basis the impact the programs had on students. Accordingly, they called for the "systematic design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of school programs" (p. 434).

It can be seen from these descriptions that the interventions suggested advocate a change from the standard practices of delivery found in most high schools.

As a starting point, the researcher felt compelled to acknowledge the suggestions and recommendations made by the dropouts. These have been summarized as follows:

1. Find an alternate to traditional lecture style of teaching. More group work, more projects.

2. Have fewer classes for teachers so they can get to know students better (elementary school model).
3. Pace instruction to recognize different learning styles. Individualized instruction.
4. Select teachers who work with "at-risk" kids with care.
5. Make skipping more difficult.
6. Build a "bridge" between junior and senior high school.
7. Provide an alternate program for those "at-risk."
8. Implement a trimester system and/or extended school hours.
9. Provide greater vocational guidance integrated across subjects.
10. Make the courses more relevant.
11. Provide better course descriptions to allow informed choices.
12. Provide a closer link between school counselors and social services.
13. Design co-curricular programs to reach more than the popular cliques of the school.

In reviewing the recommendations of the students, it is interesting to note that with the single exception of the recommendation to provide better course descriptions (#11), support for these recommendations is found in the literature.

Several of the recommendations outlined above relate directly or indirectly to teacher qualities, characteristics or behaviors. Such comments served as a stimulus for the researcher who built upon them and developed the following recommendations.

In making recommendations, one first has to determine whether the recommended changes are alterations to the current system, or involve a re-structuring of the system. It is acknowledged that both of these are incorporated into the recommendations.

Teaching

There are two discrete aspects to teaching. What is taught and second, how it is taught. There are again two discrete aspects to what is taught. First, there is the

curriculum, dictated by Alberta Education. Then there is, or could be, process skills taught at all grade levels and across all subjects. These thinking skills, process skills, or what Smey-Richman (1988) calls metacognitive skills, focus on the teaching of thinking strategies and emphasize the teacher as a planner and mediator rather than the traditional dispenser of knowledge. Under such a system, the teacher must consider what strategies students need and then how students can learn these strategies.

Low achievers tend not to develop appropriate metacognitive strategies for themselves. Consequently they could benefit from instruction on how to be aware of their own thinking strategies. They might learn how to learn from reading, how to think aloud in problem solving, self-questioning techniques and paraphrasing. Students need to be consciously aware of what they are doing, how they are doing it and why. They need to see skills modeled and to have frequent intermittent practice. They need to learn how to use feedback to correct their own performance, to receive guidance on how to use the skill and to talk about the skill. They need opportunities to practice the skill in a variety of contexts. That is, it is not a discrete part of one course, but rather an underpinning fundamental to all subjects. Such students require more structure, more active instruction and feedback. They require greater amounts of feedback and high success rates. They need to be taught how to study and how to write exams.

Fundamental to such an approach is getting students to accept responsibility for their successes, to understand that effort and persistence are related and to develop an internal locus-of-control. Alberta Education supports the teaching of comprehensive thinking skills and refers readers to their available documents.

Just as metacognitive strategies are part of all subjects, so too is vocational information. Admittedly, vocational education is part of the curriculum, but it is a small part of the health program. Like the teaching of metacognitive skills, it too could be discussed on an ongoing basis in many subject areas. Frequent intermittent discussions throughout the school years could enhance the vocational perspective and information

students develop. The need for vocational education and exploration which encourages students to make informed choices is supported by Hamilton (1986) and DeBlois (1989).

Teacher Qualities

Teachers are the critical ingredient in education. It is they who interact with the student. It is they who shape the feelings of the students towards school. They can make a child's day a pleasure or a nightmare. Parents play the central role in developing a child's self-concept and play a major role in determining whether a child values education, but the teacher ultimately defines the interaction between themselves and the student. There are a number of qualities desirable for those who work with the low achiever. McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1986) felt that teachers must establish a climate conducive to learning and they recommended clear rules with consistent enforcement, academic rewards that are attainable and depend upon effort and proficiency, coupled with a grading system based upon effort and progress rather than a norm-referenced system.

The students interviewed were quite clear on the qualities they valued in a teacher and equally clear on those that they did not. They felt that above all, teachers should somehow be able to convey that they cared about students. In addition, they would pace the instruction to meet the needs of those who do not understand a concept and take the extra time required. Good teachers know their subject material and they take the time just to talk to students, find out what their interests are, what they like and dislike. In short they treat students with respect.

Characteristics that were disliked in teachers were: "picking on" students; having minimal class control; not knowing their subject matter; not helping students in need, and not caring about the student. It appears that students are quite capable of assessing the qualities of effective teachers.

Teachers can earn respect by being knowledgeable and competent. If so, and if they treat students with respect, they in turn will be respected. This the basis from which to solve problems (Cassell, 1985). Obedience can be demanded, but not respect.

Unfortunately many teachers demand to be treated with more respect than they themselves demonstrate towards students. Teachers must be encouraging and further, know when to talk and when to listen. In doing so, they should be relaxed, confident and consistent. They build on strengths and find positive qualities in every student. Discouraged students are convinced that nobody cares about them and they tend to feel worthless. Such students need extra encouragement and the challenge is to draw them in, to earn their trust.

As Brendtro, Brokenleg and Bockern (1990) observed, trust develops over time. Initially youth will observe how much power the adult uses, how others see the adult and how they approach youth. They will test the limits and begin to trust when their experiences suggest that the adult is worth the risk. Thus, teachers working with discouraged children need to be encouraging, set realistic limits, be predictable and consistent and extend trust in manageable doses. Patience is needed.

Conant (1992) described what he called the "consummate" teacher. Such a teacher would not only model appropriate and effective behaviors, but possess and display a genuine regard for students. They would take an interest in the individual and have the characteristics of trust, respect and cooperation. Similarly, Whelage and Rutter (1986) contended that teachers develop a caring relationship with students and Afolyan (1991) stated that teachers who emphasize positive school experiences can make a significant difference in the lives of students.

While it is desirable to develop programs for youth, it is more often the delivery than the program itself that differentiates the successful from the marginal program. Often it is the personality of the teacher that is the determining factor. Many at-risk youth have persevered in school when matched with the "right" teacher and similarly, many such youth have quit when matched with a "wrong" teacher. Success then, depends on the quality of support they build, on the quality of relationships rather than the specific interventions. Brendtro, Brokenleg and Bockern (1990) maintain that teachers who believe that they need

to "keep their distance" to maintain respect are misinformed. Youth are much more responsive to discipline from those they respect.

Teachers of discouraged youth need, not only patience, but the ability to disengage from the conflict cycle. They know that to be lured into counter-aggression with difficult youth is unproductive. They know that when an adult gets into a power struggle with a child, the adult seldom "wins." They relate to the reluctant and address the behavior, not the student. They tend not to ask "why," but rather "what." "What happened? Is this acceptable? What will you do in the future?" The consequences of mis-behavior need to be reasonable.

Master teachers create a supportive environment. They find ways to break down an impersonalized bureaucracy. Schools are the only institutions providing long-term relationships with children. As such they have a tremendous challenge, and a tremendous responsibility. Schools have the opportunity to provide nurturing or damaging relationships with children. For the at-risk child or youth, it is often the latter.

Teaching Strategies

To develop success, task difficulty should be achievable. While this appears obvious, many at-risk students are asked to perform tasks that are at a specific grade level rather than an appropriate grade level. It is therefore necessary to determine skill levels prior to instruction and build from that point. One way of developing positive attitudes is to reward improvement over past performance or achievement gains. Another is to use cooperative learning and group achievement. DeBlois (1989) recommended mastery learning in a continuous progress curriculum and stated that such is the foundation on which alternative schools should be based.

If we wish students to develop intrinsic motivation for school related tasks, then the tasks must appear relevant to the needs of the learner. Conant (1992) supported the need for students to do work that is satisfying and meaningful. The issue of relevance concerned many of the dropouts interviewed, as they had little idea as to why they were

required to study courses they perceived to be irrelevant. They could not comprehend the necessity of mandatory courses in academic areas that were unrelated to their perceptions of what was required in the work world. Consequently it would seem appropriate to extend to them a detailed and ongoing explanation of the relevance of a particular study or to challenge the validity of the material under study. If we require them to learn a body of knowledge, perhaps we at least owe them an explanation as to why it is necessary for them to learn it.

Many students ask themselves, "who cares?" and many teachers do not considered it necessary to discuss why this knowledge is important. Teachers spend several months instructing a course and do not take the time to put that course in any meaningful context for the student. We do not tell our math students that math is an exercise in logic. We do not tell them that math develops a particular part of the brain. We do not tell them that math is creative, like an art work. We do not point out the applications of math in our everyday (technological) world. We do not even illustrate the post-secondary requirements or the avenues open to students who have one course over another course. We simply do a deplorable job of answering a very basic and fundamental question, "Why should I learn this?" If we cannot provide an adequate answer, then maybe we should not be teaching it. Schools have done a dismal job of discussing "why" a subject matter is required, why it is relevant.

Historically, it has been the domain of the school to "offer" the course and not to place it in a context that is understood by the consumers, the students. Much of what is taught is of little relevance (consequence) to the at-risk student, who rightly questions its "relevance." Perhaps it is time to challenge the orthodoxy of what we teach, and "why" we teach it. Many of the students who are struggling are concrete learners and require a basic step-by-step explanation of both "why" and "how."

Whelage, Smith and Lipman (1991) recommended what they called "authentic" work, that is, work that connects with real life and concrete experiences. The at-risk youth in particular seem to need this type of approach.

Undergraduate teacher training teaches that students are motivated by introducing variety and novelty to class presentations. Techniques such as cognitive dissonance, stimulus variation and engaging student's emotions are encouraged, as are using gaming situations and puzzles. The students surveyed in this research asked that teachers find alternates to the traditional lecture style of teaching. They suggested more group work and more projects. It seems that once in the classroom, teachers revert to the old "tried and true" methods to which they themselves were exposed. Perhaps it is time to question how "true" these methods are. We know that most low-achieving students prefer activities in which they are actively involved, that they do not learn well when passively engaged. Consideration may further be given to including the students in determining what will be studied and how. If given a sense of control, it is more likely that they will become engaged in their studies and more active learners.

It is also important to make the student aware of progress on an ongoing basis. Feedback is important to this population and waiting until a unit test to inform a student is inappropriate. At a minimum, such students should be informed weekly of what they have accomplished. If possible, it is desirable to have a weekly progress meeting with each student at which time progress is reviewed and goals set for the upcoming materials.

Wlodkowski (cited in Smey-Richman, 1988) stated that low achievers generally receive less frequent and qualitatively inferior feedback. When it is considered that feedback encourages motivation and performance, this is an important finding. Awareness of progress often serves as an incentive which can result in increased effort.

In all of these discussions, it must again be stated that the teacher is the vital ingredient. For teachers to implement and teach in this fashion requires dedication and skill. While such strategies are necessary, they are not sufficient. Teachers will have to

work in an environment that supports change. With support, both methodology and programs can change.

One recent innovation in teaching involves cooperative learning programs. This, some practitioners suggested, is not a new program, merely a variation on an old theme, that of working in group situations in a regular classroom. Learning takes place in a social context. Cooperative learning requires students to work in heterogeneous groups to reach mutual goals (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Bockern, 1990). Such groups often have four members, one high achiever, two average students and one low achiever. The group is responsible for learning the material and ensuring that all group members know it. An essential feature of such an approach is that the success of one helps others to achieve success (Smey-Richman, 1988). Such programs involve more than group work. They require students to actively discuss ideas, to verbalize why and how they arrive at their thoughts. This interaction and peer involvement is thought to create positive learning environments and develop social and academic gains. It is suggested that students will develop more positive attitudes toward both teachers and peers, that self-esteem increases as do prosocial and social skills. Achievement levels also tend to increase (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Bockern, 1990). The problem with using this strategy however is that most teachers simply do not know what cooperative learning is.

The benefit of cooperative learning for the low achiever lies in the emphasis on cooperation as opposed to competition as a means of functioning in schools (Fine, 1986). Most schools are characterized by competition, which is especially damaging to the at-risk student. In cooperative learning activities competition is de-emphasized and self-directed learning is encouraged. Negative self-evaluation is thus avoided.

We often hear that we live in a competitive society and further, that we are not doing students favors if we shield them from "the real world," from competition. We know however that competition is not a motivator for the low achiever and the goal of educators is to develop each individual to the fullest extent possible. It is also reasonable to

challenge the notion of the competitive world. Is this not perhaps an outdated and simplistic notion of how business is conducted in today's world? Many businesses and industries have developed collaborative strategies to survive in the marketplace. Many have also shifted to employee participation to increase productivity and increase staff morale. The old model may be under attack and educators may be clinging to an outdated competitive model.

Who Owns the Problem?

The preceding discussion concerned either general qualities and characteristics considered desirable for those working with at-risk students, or some programs thought to merit consideration. The researcher intended to make recommendations of a more specific nature and to identify the stakeholder group considered responsible for providing the primary or lead role. This, however, proved to be a difficult task, because often there exits a shared responsibility among the players. The lines of demarcation are not as obvious as they initially appear. The author wrestled with assigning primary responsibility to various stakeholders, then decided to consult with some experts in the field. Accordingly, a list of recommendations was assembled and two senior officers of the school district were consulted (Director, Continuing Education and Superintendent of Schools). They both worked in central administrative posts and were asked to assign primary, supportive or participatory designations to the recommendations. While there was consensus on most items, there were several items where the roles assigned varied considerably. This serves to illustrate the difficulty of determining which stakeholder should take the lead role in any changes to be considered. Indeed, it is probable that if such confusion exists, change will be more difficult as not all the players will agree on what their role is. If the players consider the lead role to belong elsewhere, change will inevitably be slow.

The following recommendations, therefore, are submitted as being approximate descriptors regarding prime ownership of the lead role and may vary considerably from one school jurisdiction to another.

School Policies

While the teacher in the classroom may be the critical actor in determining the success or failure of a program, administrators have the responsibility for effecting policies and programs to facilitate the efforts of the teachers. Administrators can establish policies that either exacerbate or ameliorate the problem. Administrators need to develop several types of relationships to develop successful programs.

- Positive individual relationships with staff are necessary. In addition, administrators must develop a solid sense of teamwork among the staff. Collaborative models and an interdisciplinary viewpoint should be fostered. Staff members must be encouraged to look beyond their particular subject area, to look at the total picture. To develop a successful rapport with staff, administrators should seek not only to support them, but to work with them as collaborators. Adults treated with respect will be more inclined to treat their students similarly.
- It is the responsibility of administration to develop a "vision," and to convey that vision to staff, parents and students.
- In addition, administrators need to develop a team approach with parents. A program's success can only be enhanced with input and support from parents. The slogan of "Partners in Education" needs to be taken literally. If it is accepted that dropouts are a societal problem, not merely a "school" problem, then it is necessary to not only acknowledge the importance of home influences, but to connect, to work together with the home to address the problem. Parents of high school students are often distanced from the school, for teens often no longer wish to have their parents "involved" in their schooling. The administration must therefore develop ways of breaking down the barriers felt by parents, and make them part of a constructive program to help their at-risk children. A series of seminars for parents on what they can do might be one way to accomplish this. Establishing regular communications with the home, beyond the dreaded "phone call" stating that their child has again violated school rules could be another way. The

administration must get the parents involved. As [illegible] Pollack and Rock (1986) concluded, a student's home environment [illegible] although critical impact on the decision to stay in school. It was recommended that policies be developed to help parents increase their interest in and monitoring of their child's progress. Support for parental involvement is discussed by a number of writers (Freeberg, Prokosch and Treister, 1989, Ciccheli, Baecher and Baratta, 1990).

- It is widely recognized that in many instances home factors are critical determinants of why students drop out. The student drops out because there are variables in the home that act as barriers to schooling. These often go unrecognized by school officials or are not considered to be a school concern. Accordingly, a school official (a vice-principal or perhaps a counsellor) could conduct an intensive at-home interview to determine whether or not there are barriers at home that interfere with the student continuing their enrollment. Possible interventions could be suggested and the school could serve as a liaison to available community resources.
- As mentioned previously, schools could promote parental connections. However, it would be most helpful if a standardized program were developed. If one is asked to teach a course on, say parenting, there exist a number of prepared programs from which to choose. The school system could assume a primary role by surveying what programs are currently in existence and making them available to schools which in turn could offer these to the parents of at-risk students.
- Elementary schools tend to make extensive use of volunteers, while senior highs make almost no use of this resource. At the elementary school, parents of kindergarten through grade 3 students are actively encouraged to participate in the school's operation. It becomes significantly more difficult for parents to remain involved by the time the students enter division two and this difficulty continues throughout the child's school career. Many parents want to be involved, but have no idea how to do so. It may well be that students do not wish to have their parents sitting with them in class as they often do in an elementary

setting, but there are a number of talented and skilled people in the community who would likely volunteer some of their time on a regular basis to help a young person. There are many educated and willing adults in the community who could serve as role models for struggling students. Consideration could be given to tapping this resource. Such contacts need not be made during school hours. A program that helped students and broke down the generational barriers would certainly be good public relations for the schools.

- A vital and important part of administration is working with students, for it is the administrators who most often see students who violate school rules. It sounds trite to say that students learn best from natural consequences and not from arbitrary punishment, but often there are no obvious natural consequences. If not, then the consequences should at least seem logical. If a student chooses to skip a class repeatedly, what is the sense of suspending the student? Is that a logical consequence? When students violate school policies, are the typical "out-of-school" suspensions of any value to the individual? Is this analogous to repeating a grade, which tends to benefit the system, not the child. When punishment is used, it must be used judiciously and the administrator using it must convey an acceptance of the student, if not the behavior. The administrator must be authoritative, but not authoritarian.

The above discussion dealt with guiding principles that could underlie interactions with the various stakeholders. The following discussion targets specific initiatives which schools could consider.

- First, as the students recommended, attendance and skipping must be addressed. Given that attendance patterns begun in grade 10 tend to become established and escalate each subsequent year, and further, that 80% of the grade 10 dropouts in this study were male, it would seem appropriate to monitor grade 10 absenteeism and to be particularly vigilant about male attendance patterns. While the overall absentee rate for Midpoint High was about 6%, the overall dropout absentee rate of 19% is excessive. If as McCaul and Davis

(1990) observed, the earlier a student drops out, the less likely they are to return, then the need for early interventions is critical.

Whelage and Rutter (1986) felt strongly that discipline in schools reflects a fundamental problem and they suggest:

> ...at a minimum schools must find ways of preventing the widespread truancy that has become a norm in many schools. The very students most at risk must not be allowed to undermine their own chances of success through either misguided permissivism or outright neglect on the part of educators (p. 390).

Hess, Lyons and Corsino (1990) further support the idea of focusing on students with high absenteeism, for as they noted, absences portend a high risk of later dropping out.

• When this research was conducted, a new program was being implemented at the school the research was being conducted in, called the Student Improvement Plan. Under this scheme, any teacher that had a concern about a student's behavior could implement an improvement plan. The mechanics were as follows. The teacher would, in writing, submit their concerns to a counsellor, who would then interview the student, determine if there were any intervening variables that might account for the concerns and make possible recommendations. An administrator would then meet with the student and determine if the student wished to remain in that class. If they did, the administrator would draw up the terms of a contract with the student. Most often (but not always), the concern involved attendance. A review date was established, usually three or four weeks in the future. Parents were advised of the contract and a copy had to be signed and returned to the school. A copy was also provided to the teacher. At the review date, the teacher, and the teacher alone, determined whether the student had met the terms of the contract. The terms had to be met to the teacher's satisfaction. If not, the student was removed from that class. The terms remained intact for the duration of the semester.

While a formal review of this program was not conducted, both staff and students felt it to be a success. The staff liked the program as it gave them some input and some

power. They had previously tended to view the administrators as unsupportive and now, at their discretion, such problem students could be removed from their classes. The administrators favored the program as it required the student to accept the responsibility for their behavior. It also avoided the "knee-jerk" reaction on the part of irate teachers who had typically discovered a student skipping yet another class, and demanded that administration remove the violator from class. It provided "due process" to the policy and procedures, and provided a uniformity to what happened throughout the school. The students, once they became familiar with the Student Improvement Plan (which came to be known as the "I.P."), felt that the program was fair and that it worked. They did not like to be on the plan, but they acknowledged that it was a good idea. Students came to realize that their behavior was the deciding factor and they knew that they were in control of whether they were to remain in that class.

- Another suggestion concerns student portfolios. In conducting this research, it was discovered that no standardized set of guidelines are followed. Many student portfolios were incomplete. If a student repeated a grade or was in a special education program, there is often no record of it. There was one student for whom a whole year of schooling was unrecorded. The records also tended to be full of outdated and irrelevant information. The feeder schools may have felt that everything in the student portfolio was sacrosanct and too valuable to be discarded. It is of no value, however, to discover a Metropolitan Readiness Test administered in the first year of schooling in the student's portfolio in grade 10. There is a clear need for schools to develop a policy on what to weed out of such portfolios, when to weed it and who is to be responsible for doing this.

In a similar vein, there seemed to be no standardized method of entering data into these portfolios. Some feeder schools recorded the information, such as year end grades on the folder. Others however, place a copy of the final marks in the folder. This can also create problems, for not every piece of paper is dated or indicates what the information is. Also, paper tends to get mis-filed, if not at the feeder school, then at the high school. It is

not uncommon to find the final marks of one student in the record of the student who is alphabetically next. In short, it is a clerical nightmare.

• In 1992 the funding scheme to Alberta schools was changed. Previously, each school would supply an official count of how many students it had registered as of September 30th. The province would then release school monies. As of 1992, the province implemented what is known as the "double count," whereby it tallies the number of students as of September 30th and as of April 30th and takes the average of the two. This forced schools to develop plans to retain their students or lose money. It is a moot point as to whether this was aimed at high schools or designed to save money in financially conscious times. Perhaps it was intended to do both. As a consequence however, schools in Alberta have been forced to develop some stay in school initiatives.

Previously, when a student was at-risk of being removed from one or more classes, that student and his or her parents would meet with a counsellor. The only real option the student had was to agree to go back to class and "do the job." There was no middle ground and "doing the job" seldom worked.

As a result of the double count, Midpoint High developed three stay in school initiatives. These initiatives evolved from the school's strategic plan which involved parents, students, teachers and administrators. It was determined that there be a shift in philosophy away from a punitive model to a reward model. These strategies are illustrated not because they are considered models, but because they chronicle what has happened at the school where the research was conducted.

• The first initiative involved creating an invitation to the students to belong. The aim was to create a friendly and inviting atmosphere and to convey to incoming students that this is "their" school, and that there are people in the school who care about them. Accordingly, an advisor system was created for the at-risk grade 10 students. About two-thirds of the teaching staff (about 30) volunteered to participate. Junior-high counselors were asked to prepare lists of those students they considered at-risk and these students were paired with

staff members. With most of these students, it was likely that they would fail. Many of these students were from the Basic Core program in junior high, a modified program for students with limited academic successes. The idea behind the advisory program was to convey to these students that there was someone who cared about them, who would coach them on how to be successful and perhaps intervene on their behalf if needed. The program attempted to provide structure and caring. If the student did begin to "slip through the cracks," they would not go unnoticed. Such an advisory approach is supported by Tanner (1989) who submitted that with the many factors associated with dropping out, students need an advocate to help them sort through it all. Whelage, Smith and Lipman (1991) view a fundamental underpinning of reform that schools nurture respect, support and advocacy for students.

• The second initiative was termed "Plan A," the "A" standing for "alternative." The school assigned the equivalent of one full time teacher (one FTE) to the program. In fact two teachers shared the position, one working mornings and one afternoons. These staff members were selected as they had a history of working well with at-risk students and they volunteered to participate in the program. The program addressed academic courses only and the method of instruction was home education. The two staff met regularly with the students, provided support and made individual arrangements. For example, students who had failed a course were allowed to re-do only part of the failed course, enough of it to complete missed work and to satisfy the teacher that they had now earned a passing grade. The program has received favorable reviews from students and from teachers. The students felt it to be a fair system and the teacher's were satisfied to grant passing grades to a student who demonstrated they had done the requisite work, without having to sit through the course another time.

At this time, the future of the program is yet to be determined. For the program to continue it must reduce the dropout rate and it must pay for itself. The grant money

received for the students via the double count must pay for the staff involved. Third, the program must be perceived to do some actual good, that is, not just be "window dressing."

• The third initiative involved attendance incentives. Many proposals were suggested by the administration at staff meetings and all ended with objections and some feelings of hostility. Finally, a staff member put forth the following proposal to reward good attendance. In each semester, students were allowed a fixed number of missed classes. If they kept their absences below the established targets, students could opt out of writing a number of final exams. Those students (not the staff) with exemption status were allowed to decide the course(s) from which they wished to be exempt. The exemption criteria are displayed in table VIII-1.

Table VIII-1: Examination Exemption Criteria at Midpoint High

# of periods missed	# of exams exempted
0-8	3
9-12	2
13-16	1

The only proviso attached to the above scheme was that students have a minimum of 55% in the courses for which requested an exemption. No considerations were given to special situations, such as illness, hospitalization, etc., which caused disagreement among some parents.

The above initiatives are discussed not because they are considered to be "the answer" to the dropout situation, but rather to illustrate the kinds of thinking that are occurring in high schools across Alberta. It is interesting to note that the initiatives developed above are "user-friendly," they are not "old school," they are not punitive in nature. It has long been heard that if we want to improve our schools, we have to revert to

the basics and that we have to "get tough." These strategies do not reflect that vein of thinking.

There has been a concern about drop outs at at high schools provincially for several years and now that the government has implemented the double count, all high schools are having to develop similar strategies to either retain their students or lose funds. There seems to be a growing awareness of the problem and schools are now forced to develop local initiatives to deal with it.

- Consideration could be given to how students earn their marks. For the most part, about three-quarters of a student's marks are earned during the semester by regular on-going evaluations. We know that the marginal student often lacks persistence regarding task completion. Poor achievers lack an active approach to problem solving, and lack self-direction, which often results in incomplete tasks. If they were in an environment where: (a) progress was monitored regularly, (b) it was made abundantly clear how they could earn marks and (c) the program was structured for them in a manner that encouraged them to submit everything for evaluation, then more students might well earn better grades. Whelage and Rutter (1986) advocated that students respond to teaching with a high degree of structure characterized by clear, demanding but attainable expectations. It is further contended that the current use of norm-referenced tests promotes only superficial rote learning (Whelage, Smith and Lipman, 1991).
- The Partnerships program currently in place could provide numerous opportunities for at-risk youth and could be promoted by individual schools. This program seeks to provide exposure and experiences for staff and students to business and industry. Such a program could help students to see the relevance of what they study, to see that school subjects do have a connection to business and industry. In addition, such a program can help break down the barriers between these institutions. If employers criticize educators for not developing graduates who are employable, then employers must help to define the needed skills and to address how they might be incorporated into the program of studies.

An extension of this partnership concept calls for schools to form coalitions among the total community; schools, students, employment agencies, parents, community-based organizations, business and industry (Mann, 1986, Neufeld, 1992, Streeter and Franklin, 1991). It is recognized that the problems are complex and solutions are thought to be most effective if they include everyone. This concept may also be extended to increasing the interaction between schools and employment training organizations. Such tactics would require a reorganization of both the school system and the other agencies involved, it would require an inter-disciplinary approach.

• As the dropouts surveyed in this research recommended, consideration could be given to restructuring junior and senior high such that teachers are not required to see as many students during the course of a day. The recommendation made by the dropouts was to consider the model of the elementary school, where each class has a home room teacher who is largely responsible for all instruction for that class. A variation of this model might be to have junior and senior high school teachers teach more than one subject to a class, and to include the advisory program with the home room concept. This would allow the staff to know their students better, and it would make instruction more familiar. With a greater exposure to a select group of students, teachers could focus more on the needs of the individual and be less concerned about "getting through the curriculum." It would provide the teacher with greater flexibility, for they would have a larger block of time with each class and thus be able to assign time to whatever task needed. As any elementary teacher can attest, when they need more time to develop a concept, they "borrow" it from another subject they teach.

The School System

Each school system in the province is responsible for the policies in their jurisdiction and as such, can play an instrumental role in determining the extent to which they choose to address the dropout situation. The schools alone do not own the problem, and the policies and directives from The Board of Education and from central office are

influential in shaping what individual schools can do. To the jurisdiction in which the study was conducted, the following recommendations are offered.

- The school system could provide on-going workshops or in-services for teachers regarding the teaching methods most effective for working with at-risk students. Most staff have had limited training regarding techniques that are most useful for working with this population and unless they have experienced teaching such a group, they are most likely using techniques better aimed at the competent student. Only high school teachers who teach senior academic courses are likely to be exempt from working with this population and most find the experience of teaching at-risk students to be a challenge, one most often met by stating that by high school, the responsibility lies with the student. While this may be true in part, it does little to help either the exasperated teacher or the frustrated student. Unless teachers enrol in university courses designed to address this population, it is unlikely that they will get the necessary skills and attitudes.
- If as Bellan (Alberta Education and Career Development, 1993) indicated, the dropout rate is highest over the summer, then perhaps the school system in concert with the schools could mount an active campaign in September to contact all the "no shows" and encourage them to consider enroling for the semester.
- As mentioned, there is no accord among educators regarding retention policies. While there seems to be a general consensus in the school system that failure may be acceptable at the division one level, Reynolds (1990) found that children retained between kindergarten and grade three are likely to experience lower achievement. At levels beyond division one however, it is debatable whether retention is of any benefit (Afolayan, 1991). In this study, dropouts were most likely to have repeated grades one, seven and nine. Given the correlation between entry age and dropout behavior, retention policies may need to be carefully assessed. Consideration may be given to continuous learning as opposed to promotion by grade. In both high school and post-secondary programs, promotion is by

course rather than by year. Such a proposal may be viable if alternate provisions are available for students to repeat a course and remain with their cohort.

Several researchers (Baker, 1991, Hammack, 1986, Streeter and Franklin, 1991, Tanner, 1989) feel that retention policies must be examined for their negative impact. Afolyan (1991) found that at least 50 percent of dropouts were retained in at least one grade and Mann (1986) stated that, in addition, retentions for two grades increased the probability by 90 percent.

- The researcher found the maintenance of the student portfolios to be unacceptable. The school system could develop policies to address this situation.
- There are a number of characteristics common to dropouts. Researchers have found the following school based problems: retentions, poor marks, truancy, and behavior problems (O'Sullivan, 1990). However, as Raber (1990) cautioned, not all dropouts share these characteristics. What is known however, is that dropping out is a process rather than an event. This developmental process most often begins in elementary school, continues throughout junior high school and culminates in high school. As such, each division plays an important role in the process. A miserable experience in elementary school can translate into a low achiever throughout junior high and a dropout in high school. There are a number of warning signs of those at-risk and school systems could consider the development of an early warning system that could be incorporated into its current Student Information System (a computerized software program designed by the School system). This could be modelled after a program developed in Texas.

The state of Texas became concerned about the dropout situation and mandated criteria designed to identify at risk students. The criteria that appeared to be most meaningful in contributing to predicting dropouts were: being two or more years older than peers, having two or more failing grades in a semester, and being two or more years below grade level (Fraser and Wilkinson, 1990). Taite (1990) noted, however, that such predictors were unsuccessful in identifying imminent dropouts. Although the Texas

system was less than perfect in terms of predicting dropouts, it at least provided a model of a concept that may help identify students at an early age. Early identification of at-risk youth is seen as critical (Macdonald,1989) and interventions could thus be implemented soon enough to increase the retention rate.

• Finally, perhaps the School system could consider employing a dropout director for the system. Such a position could develop strategies and programs for all divisions. Consideration might be given to the development of an alternate and additional program to the Basic Core program currently in existence at the junior high level. This research did not address the volume of dropout prevention programs developed. Perhaps this is a task for the dropout director. McLaughlin and Vacha (1992) recommended that school systems develop a district plan and Mann (1986) outlined a timeline which included a system survey, a needs assessment and development a program. Such could be the tasks of the appointed director.

Whelage, Smith and Lipman (1991) posit an interesting role for a person in a central office capacity. It is submitted that educators must engage in more dialogue, that educators must challenge the assumptions inherent in the system, but that they can only do so with authorization from central office. It is this author's submission that such articulation could be fostered and mediated through the director's office.

Alberta Education

It is difficult to determine the audience for these suggestions, for some of them overlap. For example, it is quite clear that schools are responsible for attendance concerns and for assigning marks. However, the school system has a responsibility to see that the marks are determined in a similar fashion in all its schools, to develop policies that each school implements. Thus there is a shared responsibility, an overlap. This same situation applies to Alberta Education, which sets directives for the school systems throughout the province. It is not always clear where the primary responsibilities belong, to the school

systems or to Alberta Education. Furthermore, acknowledging that there are mutually shared areas does not absolve the players from assuming the initiative to make changes.

• Alberta Education should take a leadership role in determining the dropout status in this province. We read in the paper that the dropout figures vary from a low of 5% to a high of 35%. What is the dropout situation in Alberta? If the figures are 5% then obviously different resources are called for than if it is 35%. It is entirely likely that different definitions are being used to calculate these figures. Do any school jurisdictions amend their statistics if a student leaves one semester and returns the next? What happens if this student drops out three semesters running? How is that counted in the statistics? How should it be counted?

Ligon, Stewart and Wilkinson (1990) identified numerous terms which are components of the definition of dropouts and further, four major categories of formulas used to calculate rates. Identifying and calculating the dropout rate is a difficult task and there is a need for consensus. Alberta Education could poll each school jurisdiction in Alberta to determine how they arrive at their dropout statistics. It could then, after consideration regarding the method that appeared to be most reasonable, mandate a province wide definition, and a similar method of gathering and reporting this information. We would then have a more accurate and sensible (consistent) notion of the situation as it currently exists in Alberta.

The call for a commonly accepted definition of a dropout and for uniform accounting procedures dealing with the statistics has been made by many (Bloch, 1991, Hamilton, 1986, Neufeld, 1992, McDill, Natriello and Pallas, 1985, and Morrow, 1986). It appears obvious that this confusion needs clarification and that the government has the mandate to address the problem.

• Alberta Education could also play a role in the development of an early warning system, such as the system developed in Texas. This could ensure provincial standardization and help identify at-risk students in a timely fashion such that interventions could be

implemented. McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1986) suggested that dropout behavior is predictable in the elementary years and Conant (1992) suggested that those most likely to drop out could reliably be identified by seventh grade. Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock (1986) and Neufeld (1992) have similarly called for early interventions. Early identification of at-risk youth could be possible with the development and implementation of a computer program designed for the task. If as Mann (1986) maintained, the best way to improve our schools is to make the elementary schools more successful, then we must look for ways to recognize the early warning signs in this population.

- In keeping records and recording information, Alberta Education could promote the use of a nation-wide student portfolio record. Families today tend to be mobile and inter-provincial transfers common. If all students had the same record card, teachers would more likely complete them accurately. As it now stands, a record card that accompanies a student from another province is decidedly difficult to comprehend without considerable study. Consequently, it tends to be ignored or, if used, erroneous clerical entries are made. This was the case in several of the student portfolios studied in this research. In the most extreme cases, the records were not only incorrect, but contained omissions. Alberta Education could promote attempts to standardize this seemingly clerical function and, in so doing, help identify those considered to be at-risk.
- Given that Alberta Education sets the curriculum for the province, should greater emphasis be placed upon vocational guidance for all grade levels? Admittedly, there is a vocational component identifiable at each grade level up to high school, but the information is not generally pervasive across the curriculum. Rather it is a discrete unit buried within the health curriculum. Some schools actively promote a Career Week, many do not. Suffice it to say that vocational guidance is, at best, given lip service at most grade levels in most schools. In this study, one trademark of dropouts was that they were vocationally illiterate, yet they had been exposed to vocational guidance for a minimum of 10 years.

The request was made for vocational guidance to be integrated across all subjects and all years. Such is not the case at this time.

• Not to be confused with vocational guidance are the vocational education programs, which appear to slowly being dismantled in Alberta. In the 1960's vast sums of money were poured into the development of such programs. Composite high schools sprang up all across the province, with shops teaching pre-vocational skills in a number of trades. Today, many of these shops are sitting idle. These programs can no longer attract students for a number of reasons. One reason offered by students is that, since the academic requirements for a high school diploma have increased, they feel they no longer have the "time" to do both the qualifying courses for the diploma and a vocational program. Many dropouts viewed the vocational education program as vital to retaining at-risk students. This is currently one of the few areas where non-academic students can develop experiential learning, learning that they consider relevant to the workplace. Many researchers consider the vocational component an essential part of dropout interventions. Afolyan (1991) noted that successful programs often mix vocational and academic studies, and that alternate programs offer vocational studies coupled with specialized subject matter and teaching methods. Hamilton (1986) made the case that vocational education is more effective with the marginal student than an abstract academic education and further contended that "...without vocational education many more students would drop out" (p. 423). In addition, Whelage and Rutter (1986) adopted the position that:

> ...a re-definition of school work is needed to be responsible to the broad range of youth the school is mandated to serve. A central problem with schools today is that success is narrowly defined and restricted to the few at the top of their class ranking...Unfortunately, vocational education, the most obvious alternative, is currently in a dismal state in many schools. Moreover, where there are strong vocational programs, they often exclude those students most in need of an alternative that provides success and positive roles (p. 391).

Perhaps Alberta Education, unless it has intentionally decided to dismantle this program, could give consideration to developing an alternate route through high school that would allow such students to maintain greater contact with vocational education.

There are several possibilities. One, the credits required for a vocational program could be reduced. Second, the diploma requirements could be relaxed, with fewer courses being required in academic areas. This would allow greater numbers of students to consider vocational education. Third, a separate diploma could be issued for those electing a vocational education program. Fourth, the vocational component could be shared with industry, with credit given for the time spent in the workplace. There are other possibilities, but the current arrangement is eliminating the program. Maybe that is the goal. If so, then it should be stated publicly.

- Re-structuring the junior and senior high schools to more closely resemble the elementary model, which has a limited number of teachers responsible for a class. This may be another topic that is shared between school jurisdictions and Alberta Education.
- Alberta Education may be well advised to re-examine the issue of raising the academic standards needed to acquire a high school diploma, to consider alternative programming for the at-risk student.

Several researchers who work with at-risk students (Levin, 1987, Madak,1987, McDill, Natriello, and Pallas,1986, Archer and Dresden, 1987) maintain that increased academic requirements will exacerbate the situation. It is suggested that schools should offer a wider variety of options and that schools adapt to the needs of the student rather than students adapt to the needs of the school. The latter method may be particularly damaging to the low-achieving, at-risk student.

- A common complaint voiced by employers is that high school graduates have inadequate skills: that they are illiterate, cannot read a technical manual, cannot write or do basic math. It may be that employers need to understand that a "high school diploma" does not reflect the homogeneity of students who earn the diploma. At the very least, employers need to be

trained to look at the courses the student has taken and the marks earned. Alberta Education could promote awareness of the skill levels associated with the various courses offered in an effort to de-mystify the diploma. An alternative would be to issue various "levels" of diplomas, so employers could better understand the academic demands associated with each level. Also, schools must address the question of whether it is their function to make students "firstly employable" or "continuously employable." The expectations for the latter are significantly higher than for the former, and business and industry may have a significant role to play in developing the skills needed for employees to be continuously employable. The government has a responsibility to define and develop these concepts with the various stakeholders.

• Alberta Education currently funds schools on a per-student grant basis. The recent change to the double count has forced Alberta schools to develop initiatives to increase their holding power or to receive less money based on a lower head count. Under the current School Act, schools are required to register any student who, as of September 1, is younger than 19 years of age. Another alternative would be for the government to issue 12 education-year grants to each individual. This would re-define the dropout, for students who did not use their 12 years of grants could do so at any time, regardless of age. They would not be dropouts as currently defined, but rather somebody on leave, somebody who has yet to use their full grant allocation. This would remove many of the barriers currently faced by those who plan to return to school and complete their education. Currently, those who are adults and wish to return have limited options. They feel too old to sit in a regular class, may not be allowed to do so, and do not have the money to attend continuing education, which is considerably more expensive. Under the educational grant scheme, it is likely that there would be a number of adults attending regular classes, as they would be entitled to use the balance of their 12 educational grants. Those students who required more than 12 educational grants would be required to pay for each additional grant at the going rate for adults, which is considerably more expensive. This might serve as an

incentive to students to graduate in their twelfth year of schooling and could remove many of the current re-entry barriers faced by dropouts.

- It seems fair to consider whether or not the current school system is designed to produce failures. We now use a norm-referenced system, which, by definition, mandates that half of the students must be below average. This is not motivating to an at-risk student. Such students are not encouraged to apply themselves because they are in the bottom half. What if schools were to consider a criterion referenced system, mastery learning or outcomes based education?

The current system is designed to produce winners, so it must by definition, also produce losers. Marks are a finite commodity. We are preoccupied with averages. It is a zero sum gain situation. For every winner, there has to be a loser. Thus, failure is built into the system and the problem seems to be, how to get the losers to buy into such a system. Perhaps there is no way given our current model. If there is, then a change in philosophy is needed, and the government will have a lead role to play.

Whatever initiatives the government proposes, it seems fairly likely that such initiatives are going to require considerable financial commitment. This is most unlikely to happen in the current financial climate and it appears that this situation will continue for at least the immediate future. It is unfortunate, but unlikely that dramatic developments will occur regarding dropouts without some interest, participation and direction from the government.

The government has, intentionally or otherwise, stimulated schools into creating or adopting some dropout prevention measures as a result of its "double count." This creates a situation where as Pine (1986) observed, schools with high dropout rates are financially punished rather than assisted. While the development of dropout initiatives is laudable, it is unlikely that significant developments can occur beyond the initiatives already taken without a financial commitment to the situation. It will be necessary to strengthen school resources, for as Wheloge, Smith and Lipman (1991) submitted, significant change will

require additional material and additional human resources. Tanner (1989) concluded that top quality professionals with limited resources can do little to solve the problems associated with at-risk students.

University Training Programs

At a time when all institutions are being forced by economics to downsize, they are deciding on how to best deliver services. The universities are certainly not exempt from this introspective process. Faculties of education must consider how they can best train teachers to deal with the diverse needs of all students. It is recognized that some of the recommendations made have a direct impact on the delivery services of the university. Some of these recommendations are not easily implemented and would suggest that the university change how it trains teachers.

- The current body of teachers will likely need extensive in-service re-training to deal effectively with at-risk students. The university can help fulfill this role. In addition, the university can re-examine the program it currently offers its undergraduates in the faculty of education, changing the program of studies so future teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to improve the education of low achieving students. If teachers possess such skills, coupled with a people orientation, then they will be well equipped to deal with the bureaucracies of teaching and to ameliorate the problem.
- Future teachers could be trained as generalists. Secondary teachers now specialize in one subject, or in the case of science, perhaps only one specific science. For example, many high school biology teachers teach only biology, physics teachers teach teach physics and chemistry teachers teach chemistry. Could not such teachers teach all the sciences required at high school? Furthermore, is there not a large component of math central to the sciences? Could not one teacher instruct both science and math to fewer classes. Similarly, could not one teacher teach both English and social studies? Are the benefits of having specialty teachers at the high school level greater than the benefits of students having fewer teachers?

Summary Comments

The Debate in Alternative Programming Revisited

As discussed in the opening chapter, alternative programming is currently a controversial topic. Furthermore, the matter of raising the academic standards required to earn a high school diploma has both its advocates and its critics. The Reform movement, according to McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1989), was initiated to counteract a perceived deterioration in academics which was believed to result from an overemphasis on equity in education. The back to the basics emphasis of the reform movement is thus a question of both equality and quality. It was felt that schools were more concerned with equality than with quality. The cry for excellence in education was acclaimed by many, but according to McDill et al (1989), it failed to achieve a balance between excellence and equality.

Those favoring higher standards recommended that all students be required to take a basic academic curriculum, that social promotions be eliminated, that testing programs be established to monitor that students meet curricular objectives, that "soft" courses be eliminated, and that the amount of time spent in school be increased. Goodlad (cited in McDill et al, 1989) however, "suggested that before we spend more time, perhaps we should use our existing time more effectively."

In an earlier document, McDill, Natriello and Pallas (1986) found qualified support for the position that higher standards could lead to greater student effort and achievement, under restricted conditions. They acknowledged that while raising standards may have the positive effect of encouraging greater effort, it may also increase failures and offers no apparent additional aid to help meet the more demanding standards. It was submitted that high demand classes can often lose low-ability students.

Levin (1987) noted that the at risk are typically performing at the 25th percentile or lower, and as such the probability of completing school is about fifty percent. He stated:

> Although the 1980's have been characterized by a wave of educational reforms, they have little to offer the educationally disadvantaged. The reforms stress raising standards at the secondary level, without providing additional resources or new strategies to assist the disadvantaged in meeting the higher standards. Any strategy for improving the educational plight of the disadvantaged must begin at the elementary level and must be dedicated to preparing children for doing high quality work in secondary school. Simply raising standards at the secondary level without making it possible for the disadvantaged to meet the new standards is more likely to increase their dropping out (p. 3).

There seems to be a consensus in the dropout literature that raising the standards may have grave consequences for the at-risk student. Tanner (1989) summed up this position with the statement "...the unintended consequences of raising educational standards may result in a larger percentage of 'at risk' students in the near future than prior to the excellence movement of the 1980's" (p. 65).

Directly related to the reform movement is the issue of alternative programs, of whether all students should pursue a basic academic curriculum. Radwanski (1987) proposed that high schools follow one stream, a collegiate stream. Tanner (1989) suggested that policymakers consider what percentage of students should be exposed to a collegiate stream, implying one stream for all to be inappropriate. It would appear that we need an alternative to the college focused stream, that we need a better technical orientation. It would seem that we need students who are adequate at their academics, who are literate and numerate, and we are not getting these out of our current educational system. The current academic stream provides well for the top one-third of students, but falls short for the remaining two-thirds. Simply trying to teach them all as a homogeneous group may not be the best model. It does not produce good results. Perhaps we need a system that meets students where they are at academically, teaches them and moves them from that point towards a wider range of options.

Support for alternative schools or programs can be found in much of the literature on dropouts, and as Burkam and Lee (1990) observed:

> A promising challenge for public schools may lie in a renewed effort for different and more effective alternative school options...Indeed, alternative schools were suggested in the 1960's and 1970's as one potential solution to the drop out problem; they might be essential components of the solution to the conjoined problem (p. 22).

Conclusion

The literature on dropouts calls for reforms that range from reasonable to radical restructuring. Bloch (1991) contended that schools must not be content to merely ask questions about the characteristics of groups of students, rather they need to ask why this is so. He suggested that schools need to ask questions, not only about the dropouts, but also about the schools. Questions need to address the kinds of schools and programs that are successful, and to determine the methods that lead to success. Bloch (1991) among others also suggested that schools engage in an active institutional self-examination. As Whelage, Smith and Lipman (1991) contended, there is a need to challenge the assumptions inherent in the system.

Whelage, Smith and Lipman (1991) further proposed that there exists a need for institutional change beyond new programs. It is submitted that change is required at all levels of the system, and what is needed is an interactive top-down/bottom-up approach. Neufeld (1992) felt that changes should be led by a grassroots movement, but such a movement will necessarily involve policymakers. Mann (1986) contended that the system cannot be driven from the top nor led from the bottom. It seems clear that these authors concur on not only the need for change, but agree that it will involve many stakeholders. Levin (1990) commented, perhaps skeptically, that "...it is always easier for an institution to seek to change its clients than to seek to change itself" (p. 17).

Whatever changes are considered, it would seem appropriate to heed the advice offered by Natriello, Pallas, and McDill (1986), who stated,"...we can only begin to make progress in developing effective school programs for any population of students if we

engage in the systematic design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of school programs" (p. 434).

The obvious conclusion to be drawn from this study is that this is an extremely complex issue about which we know very little. As Neufeld and Stevens (1992) asserted, most researchers agree that the factors contributing to dropout rates to be long-term, complex and numerous. It is a truly "wicked" problem. There exists an inter-connectedness between students, their families, schools and society at large. Schools are central to the problem, but there are many critical variables beyond their control. It appears that the factors associated with dropping out vary from student to student, and that the final decision to leave is probably a result of an interaction of variables which has occurred over time.

What becomes apparent is that the whole issue is not going to be resolved with any expediency. As the Ferguson report (Calgary Board of Education, 1989) stated, the issues are too large to be handled by the school alone and will require collaborative efforts involving the student, the home, the schools and the policy-makers in government.

This study adds nothing new to the extant body of knowledge. It merely confirms what is already known and the dropout situation is not specific to Canada. With minor variations, the situation in America is not markedly different from the situation in Canada. It is hoped that the study reveals the plight of these individuals and sheds some light upon the tragic cost associated with this intractable problem. It is not a problem that can be solved by the schools alone, but there is much they can do if they have both the will and the support. As Mann (1986) so aptly stated, "if the problem is complex, so will be the solutions." (p. 311). There is no single or simple solution.

If nothing else it is hoped that educators will be more informed and more sensitive about this issue as a result of this study. The uninformed are among the obstacles. The researcher recalls only too clearly making a presentation to a group of teachers on this topic. When completed, one teacher, a teacher who "did not suffer fools gladly" asked if

the dropout rate were so minimal (5% or 6% annually), why bother with them? Let them walk. Who needs them? This attitude must be eradicated if the schools are to address the problem and it is sincerely hoped that this work may help serve that cause.

The costs are enormous. One typically thinks of the cost to the victim, oblivious of the staggering societal costs. When one contemplates the greater costs, perhaps we need to ask if we, as a society, can afford not to seriously address the problem?

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Appendix A

Cumulative Record Data Summary Form

Student's name _____ Gender _____

Last First

School last attended _____ Date last attended

_____

Age when left? _____ Grade when left school _____

Residing with (Check): both parents _____ Mother only _____

Father only _____ guardian _____ Other _____

Core subject marks

	Grd. 7	Grd. 8	Grd. 9	Ave.	Grd.10	Grd.11	Grd.12	Ave.	Σ Ave.
English									
Social									
Math									
Science									
Ave.									

Grades repeated? (Years above/below grade for age)

_____

Special Placement Programs?

_____

Department:

	Grd. 10	Grd. 10	Grd. 11	Grd. 11	Grd. 12	Grd. 12
	#	%	#	%	#	%
lates						
absences						
suspensions		na		na		na

Credits held: _____ Number of credits failed: _____ IQ:_____

Notes:_____

_____

_____

Appendix B

Student Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. None of this information will be discussed with the school or your parents. Your name is not needed. The information is for research purposes only.

1. What grade were you in when you left school? _____
2. Gender: male_____ female _____
3. When did you leave school? _____
4. Do you plan to return to school? If so, when? _____
5. Why did you leave high school? Please write down the most important reasons

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

6. Did you participate in any clubs, sports activities (besides Phy. Ed.), or any school sponsored events at school? If "yes," what were they?

_____

_____

_____

7. Would you recommend to your friends that they leave school before graduating?
yes_____ no _____ maybe, depending on their needs_____
Please explain why or why not.

_____

_____

8. Do you have any friends who have left school? If, "yes," please explain if their decision influenced you

_____

_____

9. Were any of the following reasons important in your decision to leave? Please check the answer that comes closest to describing your situation.

	For sure.	Yes, sort of.	No, not really.	Not at all.
I had transportation problems.				
I had poor grades.				
I needed a job.				
My friends encouraged me to leave.				
I had problems with teachers.				
My teachers suggested that I should leave school.				
I had health problems.				
I was suspended.				
Other students at school were unfriendly.				
My teachers were unhelpful.				
My behavior in school got me in trouble.				
I felt too old.				
I was in trouble with the law.				
I had too many job responsibilities.				
I skipped too many classes.				
I had home problems.				
The work was too difficult.				
I was unwilling to do the work				
School was boring.				
I had alcohol problems.				
I had problems with my parents.				
I didn't have the self-discipline.				
I had drug problems.				
Pregnancy was a problem.				
I had difficulties studying.				
I was depressed.				
The subjects I was taking were irrelevant.				
I had boyfriend/girlfriend problems.				

Other reasons?_____

_____

10 Please circle the response on the scale that best describes how you feel about each statement. There are no right or wrong answers.

Directions for Recording responses:

Circle SA if you STRONGLY AGREE

Circle A if you AGREE Circle U if you are UNCERTAIN

Circle D if you DISAGREE Circle SD if you STRONGLY DISAGREE

My expectations about school were too high.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I felt lonely when I was in high school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
My teachers at my school were open to me.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I believe education has played a meaningful role in shaping my life.	SA	A	U	D	SD
If I wished to speak to my principal, I felt comfortable in doing so.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I believed it was important to work for good grades in high school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
My high school encouraged its students to be active in school affairs and activities.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I believe it is important to graduate and receive my high school diploma.	SA	A	U	D	SD
If I wanted to speak to my counsellor, I was sure that he/she would speak with me.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I was not interested in school by the time I reached high school.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I believe learning is important.	SA	A	U	D	SD
I have the abilities required to graduate from high school.	SA	A	U	D	SD

11. Since leaving high school have you done any of the following?

	yes	no
enroled in a technical school		
enroled in an adult school		
sought employment		
enroled in regular school		
enroled in night school		

other?_____

_____

_____

12. Please check the response or responses that best describe you.

_____ Employed full-time. _____ Employed part-time.

_____ Not employed

Other:_____

13. If employed, what kind of work are you doing? _____

_____

What is the wage paid for this work? _____

How many hours per week do you work on average? _____

Are you satisfied with this job? _____

_____

How long do you intend to stay with this job?_____

Please complete each sentence:

14. I want to return to school because _____

_____

15. I do not want to return to school because

16. In the future I will

17. What do you remember as the best features of your high school?

(Please give three answers).

a)

b)

c)

18. What do you remember as the worst features of your high school?

(Please give three responses).

a)

b)

_____

c)_____

_____

_____

19. What suggestions would you make to school officials to increase the chances of students graduating? Please give three answers.

a)_____

_____

_____

_____

b)_____

_____

_____

_____

c)_____

_____

_____

_____

THANKS FOR YOUR COOPERATION.

Please return your questionnaire to your counsellor immediately after completion.

Would you be willing to get together and talk about this information? We can set up a time and place to have a cup of coffee whenever it is convenient for you. If interested, please fill in the information below. Thanks.

Name:_____ Phone number_____

Appendix C

Interview Guidelines/questions

Current Feelings

- how do you feel about your decision to dropout? Was it the right decision for you?
- would you recommend it to others?
- how do you feel about the term "dropout"?
- what are your plans now, short term and long term?
- how satisfied are you with your current life?

Strategy:

- when did you decide to drop out?
- did you have a plan?
- did you discuss it with anybody?

History:

- tell me about your school career
- mobility in first three years of school?
- grades repeated?
- special ed. classes?
- which "track" were you on in high school (general, vocational, academic)?
- extracurricular
- did you feel prepared for high school (transition)?
- did you feel capable of the work?
- what got in the way?
- what were the most important reasons why you left high school?

Employment: unskilled, retail or manual labor?

- wage?
- hours/ week of work

-what do your parents do ?

-family finances

-clothes and dress

Career plans?

Home:

- has someone else in your family dropped out of high school?
- are your parents involved in your education?
- help with homework?
- check homework?
- discuss discipline problems?
- discuss educational problems?
- discuss your class schedule?
- what are your parents educational expectations of you?
- what are your educational expectations?
- would you like your parents to be more involved with your education?
- parent-teacher interviews?
- career discussions?
- enforce attendance?
- to what extent did your parents supervise you?
- to what extent did your parents care about school?
- are your parents interested in your education?
- did your parents make you go to school?
- was hard work in school important to your parents?

How did your parents respond to your grades?

- are there rules for watching TV in your house?
- what is your relationship with your parents like? Many dropouts come from difficult, homes where there may be problems of divorce, separation, death of a parent, sexual abuse, physical or emotional abuse, or overuse of alcohol or drugs? Do any of these sound familiar?

- did alcohol or drugs affect your performance in school?

- domestic problems: have you run away from home at least once?

Home responsibilities: babysitting?

meal prep?

housework?

chores?

Peers:

- was there peer pressure to skip classes or drop out of school?

--was there peer pressure to use alcohol or drugs?

- what do your friends think of your decision to drop out?

- do you have friends who have dropped out, or who are considering dropping out?

School:

- do your teachers care about you as a student?

- was your junior high a supportive place?

- was your high school a supportive place?

- school discipline (attendance, lates, suspensions, etc.)

- relations with: teachers? administrators? counselors?

- do increased grad requirements make it more difficult for some students to graduate from high school?

- how much time did you spend on studying?

- is there a quiet place in your home to study?

- what were your grades for the past year?

- who helped you with your homework - parents, friends, or, didn't do any?

Attitude towards school

- alienation/ connected or part of the high school scene in your school?

- co-curricular activities

- what would have kept you in school?
- what changes would you recommend to the school to keep more students in school?
- what do you think of the current ads on TV re: dropping out?
- many people view dropping out with horror. Dropouts themselves however may not see it this way. Some see it as a "matter of fact." Some feel a sense of relief. For some it's no "big deal," for they feel they can always come back when they're ready. How about you?

END

27-08-96

FIN