THE DROPOUT CRISIS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND THE ACQUISITION OF LITERACY

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Abstract

As the federal law No Child Left Behind (NCLB) fast approaches its goal of 100% proficiency for all students by 2014 and over thirty states have applied for waivers to provide relief from the law’s adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements, more attention is being paid to the increasing number of students choosing not to graduate from high school (Lauren & Gaddis, 2012). Failure to graduate has been termed a national crisis by many, including President Obama (Obama, 2010). This doctoral research project describes this phenomenon by investigating the lived experiences of students who dropped out of high school and their acquisition of literacy. This phenomenological study took place at a comprehensive suburban high school near Boston and at a correctional facility. Data was collected through interview transcripts of ten participants who failed to graduate from high school under NCLB’s definition. Other sources of data include written field notes and memos. As a phenomenological study, the information assembled contributes to the literature about high school dropouts using the lens of Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory (1997). The authentic voices of recent dropouts are heard through the application of Seidman’s (2006) three-interview method. The data was analyzed following Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data. The study’s findings indicate that drop-out decisions converge around several themes, leading the researcher to conclude that educational experiences, family support, and peer relationships influence the decision to drop out of high school. The literacy level of the participants was part of their educational experience, but not itself a sufficient reason for dropping out. This study’s findings augment the understanding of the lived experience of dropping out of high school and suggest areas for additional research.
Keywords: high school, dropout, diploma, graduation, dropping out, at-risk students, literacy, reading ability, reading difficulty, academic success, adequate yearly progress.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of Problem

Currently there are an increasing number of students for whom the course of study found in high school is not leading to a diploma within four years. In Massachusetts, the 2011 four-year graduation rate is only 83.4%, and, although indicating an increase of 1.3 percentage points from 2010, this is not deemed a high enough percentage by educators or community stakeholders in this era of high accountability (MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MA DESE], 2011).

The remaining 16.6% of the students in Massachusetts are failing to earn enough credits to graduate on time with their peers. The completion of credit-recovery courses or a General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) may be a solution for these at-risk students to receive their high school credential (Davis, 2012). However, the literacy level of these students may preclude any such benefit (Shanahan & Hynd-Shanahan, 2006). According to Fleishman (2005), the majority of those who drop out of high school are poor readers. This statement is supported by the Alliance for Excellent Education (2010), which places below-grade-level readers as twice as likely to drop out when compared with peers reading at or above grade level (Fleishman, 2005).

Significance for Practice

Earning a high school diploma is a significant milestone in the lives of both current and former high school students; without it students are relegated to a lifetime of diminished earning potential as reported by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University (2009). Often referred to as a “crisis” (Wise, 2008, p. xi-xvii), or at the very least a significant problem, 6.2 million annual high school dropouts are cause for great concern in our country, especially since the U.S. has slipped to eighteenth from its first place ranking and no longer leads
industrialized nations in high school graduates (Wise, 2008). Many current students are labeled “at-risk,” which for the purpose of this study is defined as failing to receive a high school diploma within four years of entering ninth grade, the definition used under the federal law No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

Looking at the alarming number of students dropping out, it is apparent that the traditional forms of instruction found in our high schools are no longer meeting the needs of many students, a significant number of whom come from low-income families (Scheel, Madabhushi, & Backhaus, 2009); have high rates of absence (Joftus, 2008); have special needs (Fleishman, 2005); possess low literacy skills (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007); and/or are students with failing grades (Gallagher, 2009), medical issues (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009), emotional problems (Downey, 2008), and phobias (Daniel, Walsh, Goldston, Arnold, Reboussin, & Wood, 2006). Many students, then, choose dropping out of school rather than earning enough credit to meet diploma requirements. This situation is a true crisis resulting in a bleak national picture (Wise, 2008). According to Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik (1999), adults working with these at-risk students should make a fervent commitment to support the literacy of all adolescents because they deserve to be “healthy, strong, and independent readers and writers” (p. 9).

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experience of students making the choice to drop out of high school. This is worth investigating, especially with the current economic situation when jobs for dropouts and even high school graduates are diminishing rapidly, and the completion of high school must be viewed as a national priority (Levy & Murnane, 2005; Northeastern University Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009; Wise, 2008).
Significance for Policy

Since the passage of NCLB, high school graduation rates have been scrutinized more than at any other time in the history of American schooling. This informs current policy, as “graduation rate” is now defined by statute in Section 1111(b)(2)(C)(vi) of NCLB. Completing a General Education Development (G.E.D.) program does not fulfill the NCLB requirement, and only students graduating “on time” (i.e. four years after beginning grade nine) are included in the graduation rate calculation (Swanson, 2003). After examining literacy failures at her school, Carroll (2007) asserts that the federal government through NCLB conveys “an impossible eventuality” (p. 69). In her view, the expectation of 100% proficiency by 2014 cannot be met, particularly since all students do not make progress at the same prescribed rate. Although states including Massachusetts have recently received waivers concerning the expectations to be met by 2014, the intent of NCLB has not changed (MA DESE, 2012).

According to Bob Wise, the past governor of West Virginia, the dropouts from the class of 2008 will cost Americans nationally about $319B by their failure to earn a diploma, including the cost of healthcare and incarceration (Wise, 2008). In addition, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) has determined that three-quarters of state prisoners and three-fifths of federal prisoners are high school dropouts (Gill, 2009). Reynolds, Temple, Robertson and Mann (2002) also found that students with weak literacy skills are more likely to find themselves underemployed or in the criminal justice system.

Significance for Theory and Research

Beginning in 2000 when the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) released its assessment of reading instruction, research has shown that proficient readers are more likely to succeed in school while those with poor literacy skills are at a greater
risk for dropping out of high school. This has resulted in further research in order to spotlight the reasons for poor literacy (Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig, & Morrison, 2012).

When interviewed by Azzam for the Gates Foundation in 2007, thirty-five percent of high school dropouts cited academic failure, which often includes low literacy, as one of the top five reasons for leaving school without a diploma. Without strong literacy skills, much of the high school content area curricula became inaccessible to them (Azzam, 2007).

**Purpose Statement**

Numerous studies have shown that literacy instruction and support are needed throughout schooling and should not be limited to English classes when students reach the secondary level. The connection between poor literacy and dropping out has been studied to some extent for the juvenile offender population, but this needs to be studied more extensively for all students making the choice to drop out of high school. To this researcher’s knowledge there is a dearth of research concerning high school literacy and dropping out. No one appears to be asking dropouts and those threatening to drop out of high school about a connection between their choice to leave school early and their acquisition of literacy. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between dropping out and literacy by giving a voice to those who have experienced leaving high school without a diploma.

**Research Questions**

The first research question guiding this study is: *How do high school dropouts reconstruct their lived experience of leaving school without a diploma?* This research question focuses on the particular phenomenon of dropping out of high school and concentrates on each individual participant’s experience. The second research question is: *As described by the participants, what is the role of literacy in their experience?* Participants were asked to describe
their acquisition of literacy beginning with their earliest recollections up until the present time. The selected participants were interviewed using Seidman’s (2006) three-interview process.

**Theoretical Framework**

The guiding theory applied to this research on dropouts is Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy theory is part of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and is viewed as an outgrowth of Social Learning Theory (SLT), dating back to the late 1800s (Bandura, 1986, 1987). According to Miller (2002), “Social learning theory peaked in its direct influence on developmental psychology in the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 208). More recently, only a few studies have “sporadically” (Miller, 2002, p. 208) used this theory with respect to children. This is lamentable to Miller (2002), as “no other approach provides such a testable account of social behavior… and addresses emotions and motivation” (p. 209).

Miller (2002) reports that Bandura has contributed three key concepts to the behaviorist movement of which SLT is a part. First, observational learning is much more than imitating another person’s behavior. Second, children are self-regulatory, meaning that through their observations, they can extract rules, calculate their efficacy, and devise goals for themselves to meet their personal expectations for behavior. Finally, their behavior is changed through triadic reciprocal causation where “the person, his behavior, and the environment – interact” (Miller, 2002, p. 210).

**Self-Efficacy Theory**

The definition of self-efficacy is “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 131). Self-efficacy theory serves as a lens to better understand the factors leading adolescent students to drop out of high school. Definitions for several of the terms used are provided in Table 1.
Table 1

Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Term</th>
<th>Definition used for this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>at-risk</td>
<td>being in a dangerous situation; having a status that is hazardous; being in jeopardy or at a loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diploma</td>
<td>credential earned through the completion of high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dropout</td>
<td>any student who leaves school prior to completion of the highest grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dropping out</td>
<td>leaving high school prior to completion/graduation; permanently ending school attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.E.D.</td>
<td>acronym for General Education Development tests; consists of five subject tests (writing, reading, social studies, science, and mathematics); when these tests are passed, they certify a level of academic skills often considered the equivalent of a high school diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graduation</td>
<td>a time or ceremony when a high school diploma is conferred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high school</td>
<td>the years following middle school or grade 8; generally grades 9-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literacy</td>
<td>reading, writing, and critical thinking; reading ability is the initial skill required for literacy and is defined by the International Reading Association as the ability to read and write, to comprehend and interpret written text, and to communicate meaning through text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCLB</td>
<td>the federal No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001 requiring every public school and school district to reach 100% proficiency in English Language Arts and Mathematics by 2014; high school attendance and graduation rates are part of the proficiency calculation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>self-efficacy</td>
<td>the perception of confidence in dealing with one’s environment; Bandura’s formal definition is “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) provides the framework to examine the lived experience of students at risk of dropping out. The selection of students for this study was initially purposive and the interaction/reciprocity between their personal beliefs, including their cognitive skills, behavior patterns, and their environment, forms the basis for this study. This environment influences not only students’ behavior but also the entire milieu for learning, which includes a person’s behavior and their personal attributes. All three factors, personal
characteristics, behavior, and the environment, though independent, influence and are influenced by each of the others (Miller, 2002, p. 183).

Through the researcher’s application of Bandura’s self-efficacy theory, students’ perceptions of their own abilities were examined for their influence on learning. According to Bandura (1986), many things influence life and provide the framework for understanding the world. He describes three that continuously influence learning. They are personal, behavioral, and environmental factors and are the basis of what is referred to as either *Triadic Reciprocal Causation* or *Triadic Reciprocal Determinism* in the literature. This is the foundation of self-efficacy theory. In this theory the environment (E), personal factors (P), and behavior (B) interrelate and influence each other throughout life. As further described by Tademy and Clark (2008), this triadic reciprocity is of use in understanding human nature (pp. 78-79).

**Triadic Reciprocity**

This model demonstrates Bandura’s relationship between P, B, and E (Bandura, 1997) as adapted to dropping out of high school:
This diagram interconnects the three vertices of the triangle that is formed and demonstrates the interdependence of all events. As noted in the diagram, personal factors, including cognitive, affective, and biological events; behavioral patterns; and social/environmental events are bi-directionally related but are not equal or simultaneous (Bandura, 1997). All of these factors are examined from the perspective of each of the participants in the study.

When students view themselves as competent, they are more likely to succeed in whatever task is presented to them (Bandura, 1986; Giddens, 1984). Without self-efficacy, despite having the requisite skills, students may give up easily never attempting the tasks before them because they are afraid of failure (Bandura, 1997; Pajares, 1996). Additionally, some may
“not perceive themselves as capable of actually using their skills to master the task” (Miller, 2002, p. 189). Students often use their prior successes or failures, their observations of the success and failures of others, pep talks, and their own physiological state to judge their own efficacy (Miller, 2002). When examining literacy levels, poor readers in elementary school may continue to believe they are inefficient readers, even well into adulthood (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1984; Malmgren & Trezek, 2009). For all students, the school years are a decisive time for them to develop and confirm their literacy and other cognitive abilities (Bandura, 1997).

Bandura proposes another two-way relationship between the environment and behavior. As described by Robinson (2010), people both influence and are influenced by the environment in which they find themselves (p. 2-3). A basic premise espoused by Bandura is that individuals learn from watching what others do in social contexts within three domains: the environment, personal (cognitive, affective, and biological) factors, and behavior. He states, “Exposure to actual or symbolic models who exhibit useful skills and strategies raises observers’ beliefs in their own capabilities” (Bandura, 1986, p. 93).

Bandura first referred to the relationship among the three domains of personal factors, environmental events, and behavioral patterns as reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986); later in the literature they became known as triadic reciprocal causation (Tademy & Clark, 2008). With cognitive events included as personal factors, the theory then embraces self-efficacy as part of the process that helps to explain human functioning (Bandura, 1990, 1997). Bandura’s triadic reciprocity then furthers social cognitive theory and showcases the relevance of cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory, and self-reflective processes within all individuals (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 361). Cognitive and other personal factors, as well as behavior and environmental
events as shown in Figure 1, all contribute to the decision to drop out of high school as well as work interactively to produce change (Bandura, 1997).

Throughout Bandura’s work, cognition is described as strongly influenced by self-belief of efficacy (Bandura, 1990, p. 101). He postulates that people are then simultaneously producers/agents and products/objects of their environment (Bandura, 1990), and defines perceived self-efficacy as “personal judgments of one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated goals” (Zimmerman, p. 83). Bandura (1986) further explains that all three (personal, environmental, and behavioral factors) have a direct influence on each other bi-directionally (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 362).

Summary

This study explores the lived experience of a group of high school dropouts using a phenomenological approach. The intention of this research is to contribute to the body of literature on dropouts by examining the dropout decision in light of educational experience and literacy while giving a voice to those who have actually dropped out of high school. An overview of Bandura’s self-efficacy theory has been provided. This theory provides the theoretical framework for the study.

Chapter Two reviews the current literature explicating the drop-out phenomenon as well as adolescent literacy and the factors leading students to leave school without a diploma.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The review for this study rests upon two distinct bodies of literature including an examination of the significance of dropping out of high school and its relationship to self-efficacy. In conducting this literature search, the key words “high school,” “drop out,” “diploma,” “graduation,” “dropping out,” “at-risk students,” “literacy,” “academic success,” and “self-efficacy theory” were employed.

Dropouts have been of great concern since the term first appeared in the literature in the late 1950s (Stout & Christenson, 2009). At that time the United States was ranked first in the number of high school graduates when compared with the industrialized nations of the world (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, and KewalRamani, 2011; Wise, 2008).

Literature Review Questions

Understanding the decision to leave high school without a diploma requires an examination of the impact that dropping out has on students, including the possible personal factors that led them to drop out. Thus, the first question to be answered in this literature review is: Which personal or individual factors influence the decision to drop out of high school? The second question seeks to determine the influence of families, schools, and the community on such a decision. In other words, what are the institutional influences that the family and the schools have on the decision to drop out? Due to the incarceration of a large number of high school dropouts, incarceration has been included as one of the institutional factors. The third question to be answered in this literature review is: What is the relationship between literacy and dropping out of high school?
While the first literature review question is focused on the individual and personal dropout factors related to dropping out, the second question addresses the institutional factors and includes literature related to families, schools, and the greater community. In order to answer the third question, this chapter provides a review of literature pertaining to the existing state of literacy instruction at the secondary level, particularly as it affects students in grades nine through twelve. At-risk readers are examined, explicating the literacy-dropout relationship. The fourth and final literature question is: *What is the link between self-efficacy and student success?* Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy is examined in relation to both literacy and dropping out of high school.

**Individual Factors Related to Dropping Out**

The first literature review question examines the individual factors that influence the decision to drop out of school; it was found that there is a large body of evidence linking individual student reasons with dropping out. As reported by the American Psychological Association (APA), “The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to an education that develops their ‘personality, talents and mental and physical abilities’ to their fullest potential.” By leaving school without a high school diploma, over a million American students annually are giving up that right (APA, 2010).

It has been difficult for those in education and the general population to accept that the United States has slipped to eighteenth among the industrialized nations of the world in the percentage of high school graduates (Wise, 2009). With respect to the question of which personal or individual factors influence the decision to drop out of high school, numerous interventions have been attempted to stem the tide of students leaving high school without a
diploma, with the intent to avoid their relegation to a lifetime of diminished earning power without this necessary credential (NU Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009).

The income potential for a high school dropout has been well documented in the literature and found to be considerably less than for graduates (Wise, 2008). In addition, dropouts represent an ongoing, significant cost to taxpayers in terms of public assistance, incarceration, and unemployment or under-employment. According to Wise, the United States has been ignoring warnings about this situation for many decades (Wise, 2008, 2009).

Individual students’ perceived academic success is another factor influencing perseverance toward a diploma. Bloom (2010) found that students complained that uninteresting classes caused them to fail. This is supported by Stout and Christenson (2009), who determined that student engagement is directly associated with high school graduation. Students reported that they felt the coursework they were expected to complete was irrelevant; thus they had difficulty keeping on task (Stout & Christenson, 2009). Students interviewed by Knesting (2008) shared that whatever they produced was accepted and this lack of challenge made it easy for them to lose their determination to earn a diploma. These studies echo the findings of Fine (1986), who discovered that dropouts have no personal connection with their school, resulting in the failure of some or all of their classes.

In 2009, Sheel, Madabhushi, and Backhaus conducted a phenomenological study that linked academic success with motivation. They found that counseling students suspected of becoming dropouts makes a difference in their desire for academic success, and in some cases it is enough to prevent them from leaving high school. Those who do drop out are later known to experience delinquency, lower earnings, dependence on public assistance, drug and alcohol issues, and imprisonment (Sheel, Madabhushi, & Backhaus, 2009). These findings were
corroborated by Downey (2008), who asserts that students with literacy issues have a need to be assisted in classrooms because they face difficult futures without strong literacy skills. She found students’ academic success relates to their resiliency, a strong, positive rapport with teachers, and supportive environments that foster academic skills (Downey, 2008).

School suspensions, most often due to behavioral difficulties and infractions of school rules, were determined by Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, and Pagani (2009) to begin a cycle of being rude to teachers, disrupting classes, skipping classes and then skipping school altogether. For more serious violations of student handbooks these behaviors escalated to expulsion from school, particularly when these students were seen as a threat to the learning and safety of the other students (Archambault et al., 2009).

According to Rumberger and Lim (2008), dropout studies can be arranged into four categories of individual student factors: background, attitudes, behavior, and performance. He and his colleagues have written about these reasons extensively (Rumberger 2004a, 2004b), and these four general categories have been consistently cited and examined by researchers. In analyzing these individual factors, background factors including socio-economic status (SES), demographics, ethnicity, prior school experiences, and health issues such as depression, suicide ideation, substance use, pregnancy, and parenting were found to have an influence (Daniel et al., 2006; Finn, 1989; Littky, 2004; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009; Rumberger, 2004a, 2004b; Scheel et al., 2009).

With respect to attitudes, students’ values, self-perceptions, and present and future goals have been the focus of multiple studies. Committed, caring teachers provided more successful academic experiences for students, even when compared with the benefit of additional counseling services (Croniger & Lee, 2001; Knesting, 2008). Through interviews with students,
McCabe (2006) determined that self-efficacy has a powerful influence on the motivation and success of students. Student behaviors generally included engagement with learning and with school; conflicts with and rudeness toward peers, teachers, and/or administrators; as well as issues related to any employment (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2009; Wirths & Bowman-Kruhm, 1987).

Performance factors discussed in the literature include student achievement or failure as described above, disengagement from learning, school attendance, and repeating one or more grades (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Bloom, 2010; Bost & Riccomini, 2006; Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Fine, 1986; Finn, 1989; Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, & Tankersley, 2010; Peng, 1983; Rumberger, 2004a; Stout & Christenson, 2009).

There are students who have not dropped out of high school despite being equally at risk for leaving school prior to obtaining a diploma. These students have been labeled “resilient” in the literature and are worth considering in conjunction with those who have actually dropped out (Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin & Royer, 2009). Student resilience frequently appears in current educational literature, and Downey (2008) associated the lack of resiliency combined with the increased number of demands for students’ attention in today’s world as leading to school failure. She provided twelve recommendations for promoting student resilience in the classroom: building healthy interpersonal relationships with students; setting and communicating high, realistic expectations for academic performance; using students’ strengths to promote positive self-esteem; showing students that they are personally responsible for their success; developing a caring classroom community; providing opportunities for meaningful participation; setting clear and consistent expectations for students’ behaviors; using cooperative learning strategies; involving students in cross-age tutoring; teaching transferable life skills;
encouraging students to participate in extracurricular activities; and emphasizing effective literacy skills. As concluded by Downey (2008), these are not new concepts but good teaching practices that can go a long way toward improving students’ self-efficacy and help them to overcome the individual factors influencing the decision to drop out.

Institutional Factors Related to Dropping Out

At a time when increasingly sophisticated 21st-century skills are demanded, U.S. high schools are leaving many adolescents unprepared for their future and not fighting back when students make the life-altering decision to drop out (Bloom, 2010; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). The students who are allowed to leave high school without every effort being made to keep them enrolled are labeled *push outs* (APA, 2010). When interviewed by Fine (1986), many of these students said they saw no connection between school completion and their future income. Burgess (2008) warned that if nothing is done and this situation is allowed to continue, there will be a significant increase in the number of dropouts by 2020.

Research question two (What are the institutional influences that the family, the schools, and the community have on the decision to drop out?) guided the examination of relevant literature and determined that parents, family, and the community influence dropouts along with high stakes testing used as a graduation requirement. Families, previously included only as an individual factor, influence high school performance at the institutional level as well. Dysfunctional families, including those with an incarcerated or absent parent, have been shown to provide a major drop-out influence on at-risk high school students (Meeker et al., 2009; Lesley, 2008). Students with parents who have themselves dropped out of high school are equally influenced (Wirths & Bowman-Kruhm, 1987). Seaman and Yoo (2001) believe parent reading and writing levels, parent involvement with their child’s teacher and with homework
completion, parental self-esteem, and parental expectations all have an important role in students’ school experiences. A lack of family resources, often necessitating the need for students to become employed, impacts high school performance as well (Meeker et al., 2009; Rumberger, 2004a; Rumberger, Ghatak, Pouls, Ritter, & Dornbusch, 1990).

In the past it may have been possible to have a fulfilling career without graduating from high school. Today’s job market, however, has very few if any jobs that provide a decent living without requiring the minimum of a high school diploma. Such jobs currently do not lead to a career or provide enough income to live comfortably using today’s standards. Experts believe that dropouts tend to perpetuate a cycle of poverty that may continue through generations to come (APA, 2010; Bloom, 2010; Dorn, 1993; Wirths & Bowman-Kruhm, 1987).

The atmosphere found in schools represents another strong institutional factor. Evidence of conflict between students and teachers and/or administrators, often including frequent discipline referrals, has had a significant impact (Meeker et al., 2009; Strom & Boster, 2007). Rumberger (2004a) examined the eventuality of dropping out in light of teacher quality and turnover and uncovered a strong relationship existing between the two. Prior to that, Croninger and Lee (2001) examined the likelihood of graduation as related to teachers’ support and guidance. Stout and Christenson (2009) encouraged teacher support and guidance as a prerequisite for successful school completion, since a positive interpersonal climate for students is a necessity. Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) reported student irritation with uncaring teachers. Students expected reciprocity when they treated teachers and other school adults with respect. One student questioned, why he and his peers should be expected to respect the mandatory attendance requirement while, at the same time, the system was not required to educate him (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). Hamre and Pianta (2001) cited teacher-student relationships as an
important element of school success (p. 636). Since schools are vital to adolescent development, such relationships must develop at school. One-third of dropouts interviewed by Croninger and Lee (2001) reported that they left school because they lacked any supportive relationships with their teachers or other students.

The adoption of high stakes testing as a graduation requirement also has an impact on the decision to drop out of high school. K. Gallagher, when interviewed by Rebora (2011), cited an over-emphasis on testing as the reason for declining reading ability overall. He asserts that schools are producing test-takers rather than readers, and decries the “unattainable standards” being applied by NCLB (Rebora, 2011, p. 4). Flippo (2011), Camangian (2011), and Shriberg and Shriberg (2006) concurred, criticizing the emphasis on test preparation, teaching to the test, and an inappropriate use of test results. Graduation testing in the state of Massachusetts has been faulted for narrowing the curriculum because the amount of learning time used for test preparation has led to a growing number of students not qualifying for a diploma (Capodilupo & Wheelock, 2000; Nathan, 2008). In addition, Warren and Halpern-Manners (2009) found that the graduation rate continues to decline as a result of the need to pass an exit exam.

A causal relationship has been demonstrated between dropping out and the juvenile offender population (Vacca, 2004). Common traits among prisoners are the absence of a high school diploma and poor literacy or illiteracy (Keith & McCray, 2002; Shippen, 2010; Vacca, 2004, 2007). For Whitehouse (2009), middle school is the “tipping point” when juvenile delinquency begins, leading to court involvement and possible imprisonment.

Christle and Yell (2008) observed that the majority of court-involved youth had experienced academic failure, grade retention, suspension or expulsion from school, or had dropped out altogether. In addition to individual factors, they cited family, community, peer, and
school factors as the precipitating events for students’ court involvement and incarceration. They also indicated that a climate of negative reaction and punishment currently prevails toward these adolescents (Christle & Yell, 2008). This is in opposition to many years, even decades, of research aimed at prevention over punishment (p. 149). Foley and Gao (2002) found that the atmosphere in many correctional facilities is a “get tough approach” (p. 131) that espouses the following:

- Juvenile offenders are responsible for their actions and should be punished.
- Many juvenile offenders cannot be rehabilitated.
- Rehabilitation is not effective.
- Deterrence is needed.
- Violent juveniles should remain in prison into adulthood. (p. 131)

With this mindset, incarcerated adolescents are not receiving the educational services they deserve and need in order to overcome their academic difficulties, even when services are documented as part of an individual education program (IEP) or by NCLB, which promotes high quality services for all students (Foley & Gao, 2002; Leone & Cutting, 2004). Just as NCLB mandates public schools to move beyond the “one-size-fits-all” model of education (Allen & Steinberg, 2004), correctional institutions must offer improved learning environments as well. Appropriate services have been known to prevent adolescents from returning to prison in the future and save the correctional institution’s limited resources overall. Many believe that prison facilities should operate as successful academic schools, leading adolescents away from criminal activity. Such programs, however, are not often found in correctional facilities (Coley & Barton, 2006). For Krezmien and Mulcahy (2008), the reduction of inappropriate behavior and the
decline of recidivism are emphasized in prison, rather than the promotion of literacy or a high school diploma (p. 223).

Leone and Cutting (2004) determined that large numbers of youth entering correctional institutions have disabilities and had been receiving special education services prior to their incarceration. Those having experienced past school failure and poor academic skills, including very low reading skills, have been known to make strong educational gains in their reading performance within relatively short periods of time (Allen-DeBoer, Malmgren, & Glass, 2006), particularly when there is communication between the sending school and the corrections facility and when IEP goals are addressed. Unfortunately this is not the norm (Leone & Cutting, 2004), although Allen-DeBoer et al. (2006) estimate that the percentage of inmates qualifying for special education ranges between 30% and 70% (p. 18). Also, despite the NCLB mandate that all students be served and reach the 100% proficiency target in English language arts and mathematics by 2014, there is often little or no academic support within correctional facilities (Leone & Cutting, 2004).

The majority of educational programs provided to incarcerated adolescents center around G.E.D. test preparation. Fueled by a strong interest in future employment, many incarcerated youth are also highly motivated to take part in training and education programs when offered (Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2003).

Looking deeper at the risk factors for incarceration, Christle and Yell (2008) categorized them as internal and external, with the total number of factors being directly associated with involvement in the juvenile justice system (p. 149). They found that, “When students do not learn to read by the end of elementary school, a snowball effect occurs, increasing frustration and vulnerability to later risks such as maladaptive and aggressive behaviors” (Christle & Yell, 2008,
According to Krezmien and Mulcahy (2008), frustration is most likely due to reading failure and that leads to delinquent behavior (p. 220).

Some additional external family factors placing adolescents at risk for incarceration include parental criminality, ineffective parent discipline, and family conflict (Christle & Yell, 2008). Community factors include violence, drugs, and a lack of positive role models. Peers can lead adolescents to deviant behaviors including gang membership (Christle & Yell, 2008).

School risk factors include excessive use of exclusionary discipline, few instructional strategies, outdated and ineffective teaching methods, and irrelevant coursework that often leads students to drop out (Christle & Yell, 2008).

**Literacy and Dropping Out of High School**

In consideration of the third research question (*What is the relationship between literacy and dropping out?*), literature explicating the relationship between adolescents’ literacy level and the decision to drop out was examined. Bost and Riccomini (2006) indicated that up until now remediation of secondary students’ reading skills has not been aggressive enough and not enough research has been completed. At a time of widespread job insecurity and the lessening of job availability, strong literacy skills are equated with currency by Draper (2002), who notes:

> Literacy has become currency in our society and just as people who lack money lack the resources needed to purchase the items necessary to meet their basic needs, those with limited literacy skills are likely to find it more challenging to pursue their goals. (p. 379)

Many leading authorities have determined that the underpinning for future academic success commences in early childhood when literacy instruction begins (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). According to Eric Jensen, most brain development occurs before kindergarten or before a child’s fifth birthday. The right instruction at this significant time is crucial and may have long-
term effects (Jensen, 2005). Although literacy instruction is both a subject and a tool used across all subject areas at the elementary school level, it is rarely explicitly taught at the secondary level. Some experts maintain that this is when adolescents need it the most (Rutenberg, 2009).

Kamil (2005) and others have identified five necessary skills that predict reading success by the end of grade two. They are:

- letter identification,
- sentence imitation,
- phonological awareness,
- rapid naming, and
- mother’s level of education. (p. 1)

These predictors, however, are far removed from the actual event of dropping out of high school. Adolescent literacy has been a neglected area especially in consideration of the federal dollars that have been spent on early literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Joftus (2008) urged that high school graduation be attainable for all students and that literacy assistance no longer be limited to early readers, currently the only ones targeted and supported by most federal programs.

At the secondary level the focus continues to be content learning. Brozo (2010) implored all teachers to teach literacy and provide students with reading instruction along with content instruction. According to experts, adolescents deserve teachers who all teach literacy skills within their content areas (Brozo, 2010). With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 45 states and 3 territories (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010), all teachers are now mandated to incorporate literacy instruction into their content teaching. This has not been the case, despite much experimentation, since the early 1900s (Moje, 2008). Secondary teachers have argued that teaching literacy within their content area
has been passed over due to the pressure they continue to feel to cover concepts and a large amount of information within their content (Moje, 2008).

McCoss-Yergian and Krepps (2010) assessed the beliefs and attitudes of secondary teachers toward incorporating literacy in content instruction with their instrument, *A Scale to Measure Attitudes Toward Reading in Content Classrooms*, developed specifically for this purpose. Of the thirty-nine teachers responding, 46% indicated that “teaching reading strategies squanders instructional time” (p. 12), with about 75% of the teachers identifying teaching literacy skills as a misuse of their teaching time. Eighty percent asserted their belief that only elementary and English teachers were qualified to teach reading, not themselves (McCoss-Yergian & Krepps, 2010). Hall (2005) noted similar teacher beliefs. She found that secondary content teachers firmly believed that only English teachers should be responsible for literacy instruction, often stating that the teaching of reading was not part of their role. Some secondary content teachers faulted students for their poor reading skills or blamed their previous teachers. Others indicated that students did not even need reading instruction to be successful in their content area course (Hall, 2005).

Numerous reading experts have studied the reading proficiency of adolescents and concur that there can be no mastery of content if the material is not accessible to students (Biancarosa, 2003, 2005; Boling & Evans, 2008; Cassidy, Valadez, Garret, & Barrera IV, 2010; Fleishman, 2005; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Lawrence, Rabinowitz, & Perna, 2009; Lesley, 2008; Malmgren & Trezek, 2009; Miller & Veatch, 2010; Moore et al., 1999; Pitcher, Martinez, Dicembre, Fewster, & McCormick, 2010; Shanahan & Hynd-Shanahan, 2006; Vacca, 2002; Wilson, 2011; Witte, Beemer, & Arjona, 2010). Draper (2002) indicated that struggling readers in high school are often left on their own without support in content classes and are thus denied
the power to learn. This is especially true when the materials being used are too difficult for them (Boling & Evans, 2008; Christie, 2007; Hall, 2005; Miller & Veatch, 2010; Rutenberg, 2009; Witte et al., 2010; Wilson, 2011).

In addition, the Commission on Adolescent Literacy and the International Reading Association (IRA) jointly issued a position statement that reading instruction is a continuum that does not end with early skill instruction or by the end of grade three (Moore et al., 1999). Faggella-Luby, Ware, and Capozzoli (2009) examined eleven studies of adolescent literacy. They cited the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) finding that more than two-thirds of secondary students are at risk of failing because of the literacy challenges they face in middle and high school and also called for core literacy instruction in every content area (Faggella-Luby et al., 2009).

The IRA’s 1999 Position Statement on Adolescent Literacy (Moore et al., 1999) has now been revised, reaffirming the importance of secondary level reading instruction (IRA, 2012). Recommendations are to provide adolescents with the following:

- a wider variety of material,
- instruction that not only builds literacy skill but also instills a desire to read for different purposes,
- formative assessment data shared to help them recognize their own strengths and weaknesses while assisting teachers with planning effective instruction to help them advance their literacy skills,
- modeling and practice with comprehension and study strategies across all disciplines,
- access to reading specialists to overcome individual reading difficulties,
• caring teachers who respect individual differences and differentiate instruction to address their needs, and

• family and community support that advances literacy and achievement. (IRA, 2012)

Since reading is a pre-requisite for “active citizenship, career success and satisfaction” (Horning, 2010, p. 27), these literacy needs of adolescents cannot be ignored. At the state level, the members of the National Governors’ Association have called for a strong literacy focus in every state to curb the progression of poor reading from elementary through high school, leading to dropping out (Christie, 2007). This scenario directly impacts earning potential as an adult (Walberg, 1996), especially at a time when jobs without strong literacy requirements are disappearing (Kirsh & Guthrie, 1984; Levy & Murnane, 2005). Slavin, Cheung, Groff, and Lake (2008) point to a paucity of research in this area despite some limited and unfunded interest in offering remedial courses at the high school level.

One researcher, R. Penty, as early as 1960, connected reading ability with dropping out of high school. Interviewing high school dropouts about academic difficulties and using reading and mental maturity test scores, she determined that all had the aptitude to improve reading performance but chose to drop out. Students’ statements indicated a connection between dropping out and reading, including:

• I couldn’t remember what I read.

• I had difficulty in reading.

• I had trouble getting the ideas from my reading.

• I didn’t know some of the words so I couldn’t understand them.

(Penty, 1960, p. 3)
For tenth graders involved in Penty’s study, the ratio of poor readers to good readers was 3:1. No difference was found between the average reading scores for tenth grade dropouts and those who went on to graduate two years later. Few other studies have specifically identified reading performance as the sole indicator for dropping out of high school (Penty, 1960).

There are numerous studies of students placed at risk due to their reading failures, but most are quantitative and rely on standardized, norm-referenced, multiple-choice tests and letter or word identification assessments (Daniel et al., 2006; Strom & Boster, 2007). Reading skill involves far more than recall of literal knowledge. In order to truly assess reading and literacy, multiple measures are needed. A combination of criterion-referenced tests and informal reading inventories where students are asked to read orally and silently, give oral retellings, and share think-alouds should also be included with the aim that reading deficits can be identified and remediated so that students have the necessary skills to compete successfully in the global marketplace (Klingner, Vaughn, & Boardman, 2007; Williams, 2007).

Based upon this review of literature, a large gap can be found between the literacy instruction provided during the early years of school and the literacy instruction given to adolescents. The individual needs of older students are not being met and there is a pervasive belief that these students do not require additional instruction in literacy beyond their early years of schooling.

Although reading programs at all three government levels, local, state, and federal, have recognized and supported the importance of reading instruction in the primary grades, reading at the secondary level has not received the same level of scrutiny and assistance. Without continuing support beyond grade three, students will continue to reach middle and high school with poor literacy skills and remain at significant risk for academic failure.
Self-Efficacy and Student Success

As provided in Table 1, Bandura’s (1997) definition of self-efficacy is “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3), which has two implications for students’ development:

First, in Bandura’s view, the efficacy judgments most conducive to development are slight overestimations, because these motivate children to try moderately challenging tasks that could hone their present skills. The second implication concerns children’s motivation to become self-directed learners. High self-efficacy is essential for persisting in the face of rejection. (Miller, 2002, p. 189)

Presented at the beginning of this chapter, the fourth literature review question is: \textit{What is the link between self-efficacy and student success?} Students assemble their self-efficacy in four ways. They learn from: direct experience, which is the most valid and may represent a success or a failure; observation of others vicariously; verbal persuasion by others; and the information gleaned from their own state, e.g. anxiety, fatigue, arousal, or physical pain (Miller, 2002).

Several factors exert a strong influence over students considering the decision to drop out of school. Probable factors include: failing grades; grade retention; disengagement with school; lack of academic motivation; anxiety; depression; and reading difficulties, including dyslexia.

Self-Efficacy and Literacy

Despite these factors that place readers at risk, no studies have discussed the relationship between literacy, including reading difficulties, and self-efficacy. These seven probable factors represent hardships that result in low self-esteem and self-worth, relating closely to Bandura’s self-efficacy theory, and have been known to cause students to doubt their abilities (Miller, 2002). Students’ development is often affected in the following ways. First, self-efficacy
motivates them to attempt somewhat challenging assignments in order to sharpen their skills and increase understanding. Second, self-efficacy provides the motivation to persevere despite the possibility of rejection (Miller, 2002). Students with a low sense of efficacy are also prone to anxiety because they are unable to meet the demands of academic achievement placed upon them (Bandura, 1997).

For Hall (2010), such self-efficacy is a precursor for increased student engagement, more learning, and better achievement. She provides recommendations for helping at-risk students raise their self-efficacy beliefs. The recommendations include:

- monitoring comprehension while reading and re-reading for self-correction,
- asking questions and for help when needed,
- persevering to understanding,
- reflecting upon what has been read, and
- contributing to class discussions. (Hall, 2006, 2010)

Similar recommendations were also issued in a position statement drafted by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) in 2008 including:

- learning to draw inferences and state conclusions;
- sequencing;
- writing introductions and conclusions; and
- mastering grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Adopting and incorporating these recommendations into instructional practice may reduce the number of at-risk students currently enrolled in high school.

At-risk readers also exhibit emotional and behavioral problems. Arnold, Goldston, Walsh, Reboussin, Daniel, Hickman and Wood (2005) found depression and anxiety as well as
delinquent behaviors to be associated with at-risk readers, especially males. They also found inattention and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to be co-morbid with reading disability when such students were compared with typical readers (Arnold et al., 2005; Downey, 2008).

For all at-risk readers, comprehensive remediation programs that are consistent and conducted over time are recommended (Barry, 1999; Lesley, 2008; Lyon & Chhabra, 2004). These programs must have the specific goal of raising reading skill. As found by Bandura (1997), “Children from remedial classes who receive instruction in reading comprehension achieve higher perceived efficacy and reading performance… than do children with only a general goal in mind” (p. 217). According to Kamil (2005), such programs must consist of direct instruction to address all areas of weakness. As described earlier, these programs cannot end with the completion of grade three. The grant funding provided to districts through NCLB must be allocated to secondary students as well, since the sanctions for not meeting the required NCLB targets are more stringently applied to students beyond the third grade (NCLB, 2001).

For adolescents, failing grades and the let down that comes with not meeting grade level expectations lead to disengagement with school (Gallagher, 2009) and both have been shown to be a catalyst for dropping out of school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). In addition, Reschly (2010) and Gallagher (2009) have found that repeating a grade is a significant risk factor for dropping out. Starting in the early grades, retention has been linked with reading ability. For many dropouts, the negative feelings associated with retention later surface at the secondary level in the form of lack of motivation and disengagement from learning (Carroll, 2007; Lesley, 2008; McNulty, 2003; Reschly, 2010; Waters & Harris, 2009).
According to Denti and Guerin (1999), the highest dropout rates have been associated with learning disabilities and emotional disturbances as well as poor reading and delinquency. Because the students in their study were not literate by the end of third grade, they were automatically labeled as “learning disabled,” which escalated to school failure and dropping out of high school (Denti & Guerin, 1999).

Through interviewing dyslexics, McNulty (2003) determined that struggling students became disengaged because they felt different from their peers, were labeled as learning disabled, and suffered genuine trauma when expected to read aloud in front of peers. In such instances, Hall found that students were “likely to avoid reading or behave helplessly with text” (Hall, 2006, p. 424).

For Guerra (2012), urban fiction is an untapped source of reading material that can position at-risk and incarcerated adolescents for literacy gains (p. 386). Urban fiction is defined by Guerra as, “a genre that emerged in the 1970s with… writers who captured the ghetto experience with all its crime, poverty, gangs, prostitution, incarceration, and drug use” (p. 386). The topics found in urban fiction have been shown to be popular with incarcerated adolescents and have been known to build their interest in leisure reading. Although the content is labeled “incendiary” by many educators, it has been shown to engage this high-risk population as well as motivate them to learn again, practice their comprehension strategies, and participate in meaningful discussions (Guerra, 2012, p. 387, 391). Since most reluctant readers have spent time avoiding reading (Gambrell, 2010), urban fiction has been known to lure students into reading and at the same time improve their literacy ability (Guerra, 2012, p. 392).

Rumberger and Lim (2008) completed a study for the California Research Project entitled *Why Students Drop Out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research*. As stated in the title, the
goal of this project was to synthesize the sizeable and growing body of dropout research conducted over the past twenty-five years, attempting to determine why students drop out of school. Of the 203 studies that were analyzed, only one discussed the assessment of reading difficulties as a predictor for dropping out (Daniel et al., 2006). All studies analyzed were quantitative with large sample sizes. They focused on “multivariate, statistical studies that sought to identify predictors of high school dropout and graduation” (Rumberger & Lim, 2008, p. 13) and the project purposefully did not include studies utilizing descriptive statistics or a qualitative research paradigm. Many of the studies cited achievement and academic background as student predictors. These factors were only represented by course grades, test scores, grade point averages (GPAs), and the experience of grade retention (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

**Self-Efficacy and Dropping Out**

Bandura (1997) states that, “substance abuse, unprotected sexuality, and delinquent and violent activities” (p. 177) place adolescents at risk during what can be a difficult time in students’ lives. Teenage parenthood represents another challenge since “young child bearers are more likely to drop out of school” (Bandura, 1997). In addition to these emotional and behavioral situations, high rates of absenteeism, repeated suspensions from school, negative peer influences, lack of positive relationships with teachers and administrators, and expulsion were additional reasons that Suh and Shu (2007) identified for placing students at risk of dropping out. Since adolescence brings increased independence with it, students tend to engage in more high-risk activities (Bandura, 1997). These include:

- Alcohol and marijuana use, smoking, tooling around in automobiles, and early sexual activity… drinking [that] goes with partying… and heavy partying detracts from serious studying. …Adolescents who are insecure in their efficacy
are less able to avoid or curtail involvement in drugs, unprotected sexual activity, and delinquent conduct that jeopardize beneficial life courses than are those who have a strong sense of self-regulatory efficacy. (Bandura, 1997, pp. 182-183)

Christle and Yell (2008) have identified what they term “protective factors” that work against delinquency. Internal protective factors include self-control, goal setting, high self-esteem, and social and cognitive competence in the form of self-efficacy (p. 155). Feeling competent, especially with respect to language acquisition and reading ability, is a powerful factor that improves self-efficacy (Waugh, 2002). As stated by Bandura (1993), there are four ways to encourage self-efficacy:

1. directly by providing success experiences,
2. vicariously by showing students with low self-esteem that others like themselves can succeed,
3. verbally by reminding these students of their achievements, and
4. physiologically by explaining that painful or difficult tasks get easier with practice. (Christle & Yell, 2008, p. 155)

Bandura goes on to say, “a reciprocal relationship exists in which academic success can help promote self-efficacy, and self-efficacy helps promote academic success” (Christle & Yell, 2008, p. 155). From this it can be inferred that the behavior of teachers directly influences students’ self-efficacy because regular feedback and clear expectations indicate a clear cut relationship with students, facilitate improved academic performance and diminish misbehavior and/or delinquency (Christle & Yell, 2008).

External protective factors also play a role in self-efficacy. These can be found within the students’ families, their community, their relationships with peers, and their
school environment. Each of these protective factors has the ability to safeguard students from delinquency and incarceration (Christle & Yell, 2008). When students experience relationships that are caring, they demonstrate resiliency and the capacity to meet high expectations (Christle & Yell, 2008). Experiences within the family such as the divorce of the parents can undermine rather than protect against students’ delinquency and the decision to drop out of high school. Without rules in the home and a strong sense of belonging, self-efficacy can be diminished for these students (Christle & Yell, 2008).

Schools have been known to be protective factors for students, lessening any propensity toward delinquency, especially when the instruction provided promotes student learning through meaningful content and explicit teaching (Rosenshine, 1997). Christle and Yell (2008) conclude that schools provide a protective factor against incarceration when they work to prevent arrests. Providing reading remediation is another protective factor (Walker & Sprague, 1999).

Of particular note is an exploration conducted by Harlow, Jenkins and Steurer (2010) that included a literature review, the administration of a questionnaire to correctional education leaders, and an analysis of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) that was carried out in 2003 comparing G.E.D. holders in prison with the general population. They found that offenders were “as or more competent than their community counterparts with respect to academic performance” (Harlow et al., 2010, p. 70). Despite representing the three lower achievement factors of being male, minority, and incarcerated, these offenders outperformed their counterparts in the general population in terms of reading comprehension (Harlow et al., 2010, p. 71). Learning disabilities were also evaluated for both populations, and again, prisoners with disabilities outscored the general population with respect to their ability to read (Harlow et al., 2010, pp. 77-78).
Harlow et al. (2010) also found that prisoners had more time available to them to engage in the types of activities that have been known to increase literacy, and their television viewing was more limited than for their household counterparts. For both of these reasons G.E.D. holders in prison were better able to practice and hone their literacy skills (pp. 82-83). Harlow et al. (2010) concluded that the incarcerated exhibited more motivation and commitment with respect to literacy practice, had fewer distractions, and had more time to study. This resulted in higher levels of performance and was not deemed unusual or unexpected; and although correctional facilities are often criticized, more reading was found to be encouraged in this setting (Harlow et al., 2010, p. 89). In addition, the notion that “education reduces crime” (Harlow et al., 2010, p. 91) was upheld.

The studies cited, as well as many others read in conjunction with the four literature questions previously described, contain elements of self-efficacy as defined by Bandura, especially considering the myriad of reciprocal interactions that exist (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy represents a personal factor that directly influences a person’s, in this case a student’s, behavior. When examining the decision to drop out, the studies referenced indicate strong feelings on the part of students making such a choice. Persistence in school, application of effort, and attainment of literacy are some examples of student behaviors that are well documented in the literature. Bandura’s definition of a bi-directional relationship within the model of triadic reciprocity is used to examine how personal, behavioral, and environmental events affect self-efficacy and to demonstrate that self-efficacy enhances these behaviors (Schunk, 2000).

In addition to the personal and behavioral vertices found in triadic reciprocity, the third vertex of Bandura’s triangular model is the environment. Theoretically, bi-directional
relationships exist between the environment and the person and between the environment and behavior. When a student has no relationship with his or her school, this may affect behavior. Feeling that no one cares, for example, may diminish any satisfaction that might be gained through trying hard and persevering to a diploma. When a student is truly invested in the school, he or she makes an effort to make it a better place, possibly joining student government, participating on a sports team, or contributing in a positive way to the favorable reputation of the school. Without such an investment many students see dropping out as a suitable alternative (Knesting, 2008).

Investigating the two-way relationship between behavior and environment, the culture of a school is reciprocally defined by the behaviors of the student body. If the students follow established rules and work to make the school a safe and welcoming place, their behaviors send a clear message about the school environment. If teachers are willing to mentor students, provide additional assistance after school, and help struggling students voluntarily, such an environment often impacts the behavior of the students in a positive way. These bi-directional relationships are all considered in the course of the interviews concerning the lived experiences of the student participants (Bandura, 1997). Through the careful analysis of the interview data collected, the researcher describes examples found in the actual statements made by those interviewed.

**Summary**

As shown in the literature reviewed for this section, the decision to drop out of high school has been examined from multiple perspectives and there exists a need for a more comprehensive look at the precipitating factors relative to dropping out of high school. An examination into the lived experience of dropouts in their own words should provide valuable insight into the high school dropout experience.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview of Methodology

This doctoral research is a qualitative, phenomenological study into the lived experience of high school dropouts and their acquisition of literacy. The research questions guided the choice of phenomenology. A qualitative approach was used. One-on-one interviews were conducted to describe the experiences of each participant with the acquisition of literacy and their drop-out decision. The personal and interactive nature of each interview reflects the Social Constructivist Worldview as described by Creswell (2009) and Mertens (2009). According to Creswell (2009), “Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. …The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (p. 8). Social constructivism fits with phenomenology and has been described as developing from Husserl’s groundbreaking work of phenomenology (Mertens, 1990). Later Moustakas (1994) recognized Husserl as a major influence on his work since the foundations of phenomenology can be traced back to him.

The participants chosen for this study were asked to describe the course of literacy acquisition in their lives, since the aim of phenomenology is not to explain, but to describe (Ehrich & Simpson, 1995). According to Husserl’s biographer, David Smith (2007), phenomenology is defined as:

The theory or study of consciousness as lived or experienced from the first-person perspective; especially focusing on pure consciousness and its characteristic intentionality, its structure in the stream of consciousness. (p. 441)

More specifically, he defines transcendental phenomenology as:
That type of phenomenology which stresses the pure or transcendental structure of consciousness, in abstraction from its realization in nature and culture; in his middle and later works, Husserl stressed the transcendental conception of phenomenology, especially where practiced by the method of bracketing or epoché. (p. 447)

For this qualitative, phenomenological study, Husserl’s (1983) theory of phenomenology informed the research as the experiences of students in their attainment of literacy and their decisions to persevere to a high school diploma were explored. Thus, at the heart of the research was an examination of literacy development from the earliest beginning of instruction through the point where dropping out of school became a consideration, and ending with their future aspirations. Husserl’s theory, as illuminated by Moustakas in *Phenomenological Research Methods* (1994), was central to this study’s design. As described by Moustakas (1994), first-person reports of life experiences provide the evidence of phenomenological research (p. 84).

The experiences of eleven students were collected and recorded following Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series to uncover the nature of each participant’s experiences with literacy and dropping out of high school (Creswell, 2009). The participants selected for this study either attended [name] High School, a comprehensive suburban high school, or were currently incarcerated at the [name] Correctional Facility. Participants were asked to describe their literacy experiences and then their decision to drop out of high school prior to graduation.

Although the researcher initially planned to transcribe the audio-recordings of the interviews, a professional transcriptionist was used. This shortened the timeframe for beginning data analysis and increased the accuracy of the transcriptions. Each of the participants gave written consent for using a transcriptionist in the research process and only the first two letters of each participant’s first name were used to label the audio-recordings. Last names were never
used by the researcher or included in any of the data, although the participants signed their first and last names to the Institution Review Board (IRB) approved consent documents. These signed documents remain solely in the researcher’s possession.

The audio recordings were reviewed on the evening following each interview and, when available, the written transcripts were read multiple times while listening to the recordings in order to check for accuracy as well as uncover the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon of dropping out as stated in their own words. In accordance with the format described by Seidman (2006), each participant was also asked to begin the first interview by reflecting on their earliest experiences with literacy and dropping out in order to reconstruct their memories and provide a focused life history. The second interview asked for the contemplation of the “concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 18) with literacy and dropping out. Interview three consisted of asking participants to reflect on the meaning of dropping out and the place of literacy in their lives. As stated by Seidman, “Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. …The third interview can be productive only if the foundation for it has been established in the first two” (Seidman, 2006, pp. 18-19).

Research Questions

The research questions to be answered were:

1. How do high school dropouts reconstruct their lived experience of leaving school without a diploma?

2. As described by the participants, what is the role of literacy in their experience?
**Role of the Researcher**

Within the constructivist paradigm, the role of the researcher is to serve as a co-creator, conducting interviews, taking extensive field notes, and writing memos in order to best understand the meaning of each participant’s experience. The researcher, then, is an active participant or co-researcher who retells each participant’s account from their point of view and without drawing any conclusions (Moustakas, 1994). During each interview, the researcher listened with concentration while following the interview protocols (Appendix B) and made at-the-moment decisions to follow up on certain responses or statements made by the interviewees. The researcher refrained from personal comments that would influence responses concerning literacy acquisition or dropping out. An attempt was made to establish a feeling of trust between the interviewer and the interviewees. This was aided by the researcher’s many years of experience with both literacy development and K-16 schools. As suggested by Moustakas (1994), the researcher bracketed all personal experiences related to this inquiry and became the research instrument, using what was seen and heard firsthand to make sense of the phenomenon while seeking to uncover the life situation of these students leaving school without a diploma (Moustakas, 1994).

**Site and Participants**

Purposive sampling was initially used for this study (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Since some individuals gave their consent and did not follow through, convenience sampling was later used to assure that there were 8 to 10 participants completing the study. The actual participants were deliberately invited to participate as they possessed the specific information needed for this study, and eleven self-selected themselves to begin this study (Maxwell, 2005).
The sites used for this study were one of the central administrative offices at [name] High School and a small office in the Programs Area at the [name] Correctional Facility. Interviews and meetings were conducted at mutually convenient times. The high school guidance department was asked to identify students who had recently dropped out or who had expressed their intention to drop out in the near future. Each was contacted either by the researcher or the Assistant Principal at [name] High School by phone and/or email and asked meet face-to-face with the researcher in order to learn about the study and its purpose. At the initial meetings, the university-approved consent document was shared and reviewed verbally, item by item. For potential participants under the age of eighteen, a phone call was made to the parent. When agreement was reached on the telephone, a parental letter of request was mailed home along with a copy of the consent document to be signed by both the student and parent and then returned. One of the letters that was mailed following the phone call was never returned. Since all of the actual participants were over 18, only the consent document was used and can be found in Appendix E. Once signed, all documents were kept in a locked file. A copy of both the letter and the consent form can be found in Appendices B and C. Prior to the study’s implementation, approval was received from the university’s IRB.

Although several students over 18 from [name] High School verbally agreed to participate and signed consent forms, they did not keep scheduled appointments. Only one of them participated in all three interviews, with a second former high school student completing only the first interview then stopping. Three others did not arrive at their appointments at all and did not return the phone calls made to them.

At the [name] Correctional Facility, the informed consent document was shared with the Deputy Superintendent at a face-to-face meeting exploring the feasibility of conducting the
research study with approximately ten currently incarcerated adolescents. The Deputy Superintendent had previously written a letter of support to the university’s IRB, which can be found in Appendix C. Once the university approved this additional location for the study, consent was given to interview members of what may be considered a vulnerable population.

The Deputy Superintendent at the [name] Correctional Facility placed a sign-up sheet in the Program Area, seeking volunteers to participate in a non-criminal justice research study. Nine inmates indicated interest and their willingness to participate, including their permission to be audio-recorded. On the first mutually convenient date, these nine inmates, all over the age of 18, met individually with the researcher, learned about the purpose of the study, reviewed the informed consent document, and gave their written consent.

Past experiences with public and private school students have heightened this researcher’s sensitivity toward students, as described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), because of the increased maturity of high school students and their eagerness to acknowledge their growth between middle and high school. Although researcher bias can never be completely eliminated, phenomenology calls for the bracketing or setting aside of the researcher’s beliefs and experiences in order to focus only upon the life experience of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Three of the original eleven participants who were interviewed had a previous relationship with the researcher. Two students had formerly attended [name] High School, but only one of the two, Ingrid, completed all three interviews. The other, Donald, ended his participation prior to his second scheduled interview appointment. One of the inmates at [name] Correctional Facility, Andrew, had previously been a student at [name] High School and was now incarcerated. The researcher only had limited contact with these three participants as an administrator during their middle school years, not as one of their teachers. At the end of the
three interview series, ten adolescents completed all three of the interviews: one high school student and nine incarcerated participants.

The criterion for purposeful sampling included: that participants have first-hand experience with dropping out; be interested in understanding the effect their decision would have on their future; be willing to participate in one-on-one interviews; give permission for the audio-recording and professional transcription of all interviews; willingly give consent and sign the university-approved informed consent document; and agree that the data could be published as long as their name was not revealed to anyone other than the researcher. All of the participants were comfortable with pseudonyms being used instead.

All information was gathered through Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series and the interview sessions were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The researcher also took written notes during each interview. All participants were offered the opportunity to review copies of the written transcriptions of their interviews to strengthen trustworthiness, but each of the participants declined the opportunity. Interviewing in the setting of the jail was a new experience for the researcher. The participants only discussed their educational backgrounds and their drop-out experience. The nine incarcerated participants were never asked to share anything related to their incarceration. Their legal status was not related to this study and the study had been publicized as a non-criminal justice study. The selection of participants was based only upon their dropping out of high school.

Data Collection Procedures

As indicated above, data was collected using Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series. Only one participant withdrew following his first interview session. Each of the interviews was audio-recorded by the researcher and later professionally transcribed with prior written
permission being granted by each participant. The same questions were asked of each participant and can be found in Appendix B. As described by Seidman (2006), this is a process in which the interviewer must scrupulously plan ahead and be thoughtful about seeking answers to the what, why, how, who, when, and where questions. Instantaneous decisions were required based upon the answers/evidence provided so that the providers’ interests were tantamount at all times (Seidman, 2006, p. 39).

After each interview was conducted, the audio-recordings were listened to and notes were reviewed the same evening and prior to any formal analysis of the data gathered (Seidman, 2006, p. 113). An interview protocol for asking questions and recording answers as described by Creswell (2007, 2009) was followed, as well as the completion of a Contact Summary Sheet to summarize a particular interview or event (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These provided the opportunity to reflect upon what had transpired during the interviews. Such memos have been found to be a “very natural and necessary process” by Corbin (p. 32), serving as a self-check for misinterpretation or the possible skewing of information (Corbin & Strauss, p. 32).

Data Analysis

The Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data as modified by Moustakas (1994, pp. 121-122) guided the data analysis. A copy can be found in Appendix A.

The first step in this method describes the researcher’s experience with the phenomenon of dropping out. Since the researcher had never considered dropping out of school at any time, this was not part of her lived experience and provided new horizons to be examined. The second step of this method was completed for each of the eleven participants, including Donald who did not participate in the second or third interviews. This second step consisted of seven parts listed as “a through g”: 
a. Each of the participant’s statements were reflected upon and considered for their inclusion in the description of the experience.

b. All relevant statements were recorded after marking and highlighting notable testimony.

c. Each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statement was listed; these became the meaning units or invariant horizons.

d. Themes were developed by clustering and relating the invariant meaning units.

e. The invariant meaning units and themes were synthesized into a textural description of the participant’s experience and included the participant’s verbatim quotes.

f. The textural description was reflected upon and, using imaginative variation, a description of the structure or essence of the experience was written.

g. The meanings and essences of the experience were re-evaluated and a textural-structural description was composed for the participant.

The third step was to use the verbatim transcripts and repeat this seven-part process for each of the other participants in the study. The final step in this method was to construct a composite textural-structural description combining all of the co-researchers’ experiences into a universal description of the meanings and essences for the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

As described by Moustakas (1994), the examination of the students’ lived experiences “is derived from first-person reports of life experiences” (p. 84). This examination follows four steps:

...
- **Epoché**
- **Phenomenological reduction**
- **Imaginative variation**
- **Synthesis**

The *epoché* is the first step in coming to know things by accepting that all preconceptions and prior ideas must be put aside and given no status. Researchers recognize bias and then begin the “process of setting aside predictions, prejudices, predispositions” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 85-90). One then becomes painstakingly aware of new feelings and understandings. Events are fresh and pure (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 87-88).

As defined by Smith (2007), *epoché* is:

Husserl’s basic method or technique for the practice of phenomenology; I bracket, or make no use of, the thesis of the existence of the world around me, and thereby I turn my regard or attention from objects in the world to my consciousness of objects in the world around me; adapting the Greek word “epoché” meaning “to abstain”; also called bracketing. (p. 432)

Although very difficult to achieve, newness is a goal of phenomenology, which as stated earlier is not to explain, but to describe (Ehlich, 1999, p. 22). Having at-risk students describe their experiences as they have lived them placed them in the center of this study. The researcher’s role was to carefully listen without any preconceptions. Experiences were viewed as something not seen before.

Husserl’s next step, as followed by Moustakas (1994), is entitled *phenomenological reduction*. Reduction involves providing an accurate description of both what is seen and what one can experience from many angles. This is then reduced, hence the name reduction, or
reflected back to one’s own beliefs (Moustakas, 1994, p. 91), so that the entire phenomenon can be understood. Phenomenological reduction includes “horizontalization” as new horizons appear following reflection and every statement is initially given the same value (Moustakas, p. 97). Horizontalization is then:

The range of possibilities left open for an object of consciousness, for example possible properties of the back side of an object as I see it and possible relations of the object to other objects; the horizon of an act of consciousness configures the object of consciousness as having possible properties and relations beyond those explicitly presented in the act, properties compatible with the content. The inner horizon is that part of the horizon of an object of consciousness which includes possible further properties of the object, such as the size or color of the back side of an object of vision. The outer horizon is that part of the horizon of an object of consciousness which includes possible further relations of the object to other objects, such as the relation of an object of vision to objects behind it, say, objects that are not currently visible.

(Smith, 2007, p. 434)

Van Manen (1982) describes participants in this phase as “living human beings who bring schemas and frameworks into being and not the reverse” (p. 297). In this study, each phenomenon was examined in the context of its own horizon. The lived experience of each student, therefore, has its own horizon and was examined on its own without reference to other students.

According to Moustakas (1994), imaginative variation is the next step in the research process and involves looking at the phenomenon from different perspectives and using one’s imagination to come up with multiple possibilities. Four steps are followed:
1. Systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textural meanings;

2. Recognizing the underlying themes or contexts that account for the emergence of the phenomenon;

3. Considering the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts with reference to the phenomenon, such as the structure of time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or relation to others; and

4. Searching for exemplifications that vividly illustrate the invariant structural themes and facilitate the development of a structural description of the phenomenon. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99)

At this point, the imagination is allowed to be free and guided by intuition. The remaining feature is reflection.

The fourth and last step in the research process is the synthesis of meanings and essences. The essence describes what an object is, including its unique qualities, and is also known by the term “eidos.” “Meaning” refers to the content of an act of consciousness. “Synthesis” represents the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon at a particular point in time, following the comprehensive study of all possibilities and based upon reflection (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). This represents the point where commonalities in the experiences of the participants were examined. Without all four of these steps, phenomenological research cannot take place.

The transcriptions were then read and reread multiple times. Following Husserl’s (1983) process as interpreted by Moustakas (1994), the researcher attempted to avoid judging anything that had been said. In this stage, the epoché or first step, “everyday understanding, judgments, and knowings are set aside and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide-open sense,
from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (p. 33). The transcription data were analyzed following Moustakas’ procedure for phenomenological analysis. Beginning with horizontalization or recognition, every statement that was made was treated as new and of equal value. Each horizon added meaning and provided a clearer vision of the unfolding situation with respect to the thoughts and feelings of each participant (Moustakas, p. 125). Horizontalizing the data included finding the relevant statements and giving them equal weight. A list of meaning units was created and then the meanings were clustered into themes with the overlapping and repetitive statements removed. Textural descriptions of each participant’s lived experience were developed, followed by the writing of structural descriptions of their essences. Finally by combining both the textural and structural descriptions, the composite meaning and essence of the drop-out phenomenon was constructed (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 118-119).

For each transcribed interview, all of the statements were reviewed multiple times and reflected upon, incorporating the researcher’s background and experience. Memos were then written that provided a form of analysis and a means to retrace information later (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 119). The memos also provided a trail of records to be used in establishing confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319). Confirmability is discussed further in the section labeled Trustworthiness, Limitations, and Delimitations.

Between the interviews, follow-up questions were generated and written down, then asked by the researcher during the subsequent interviews. Additionally, as suggested by Seidman (2006), all of the interview tapes and field notes were reviewed just prior to the ensuing interviews so that all information was fresh. Care was taken to ensure that the participants’ own words rather than the researchers’ summations were used. The participants’ words provided the
researcher a complete recreation of the events and the best knowledge with respect to the intent of each participant (Seidman, 2006).

Once an interview was completed, the corresponding memo was written incorporating information from field notes. Audio-recordings were all transcribed. Participants were encouraged to examine the transcriptions for accuracy but all of them stated that they were not interested in doing so. Some time was given, however, at the beginning of subsequent interviews to review and confirm earlier information.

As indicated by Miles and Huberman (1994), all of the information being collected “piles up geometrically” (p. 55) and requires a system for organization. This necessitated a coding process in order to effectively analyze the data. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* by Saldaña (2009) was used to code the information gathered from the interviews conducted. Saldaña (2009), in summarizing van Manen (1990), recommended “the winnowing of themes down to what is ‘essential’ rather than ‘incidental,’ the former making the phenomenon ‘what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is’” (p. 140). The written reflective memos described earlier assisted with the coding of information by providing headings that were used to retrieve information and for cross-referencing (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 121).

*Themeing the Data* as defined by Saldaña (2009) was used as the first cycle coding method to review all of the transcriptions, field notes, and memos. For this method, themes are defined as “descriptions of behavior within a culture, explanations for why something happens” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 139). This method fits with phenomenology because, “Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” (van Manen, 1990, p. 9). In considering what would be themed, Saldaña (2009) indicates the qualities of “repeating ideas, participant or indigenous terms, …theoretical issues (e.g. interpersonal
relationships, social conflict, and control), and even what is missing from, not discussed or present in the data” (p. 143).

From the first cycle of coding approximately 60 categories emerged. These were then recoded and collapsed into 32 codes that were then regrouped into personal codes, behavioral codes, and environmental codes. Under the overarching theme of personal codes, seven codes emerged: background; drop-out decision; substance use/abuse; regret; moving or changing schools/school acceptance; self-perception; and future goals (school, job training, work). For behavioral codes, seven emerged as well: addiction; boredom; absences/attendance (including suspensions and expulsions); attitude; school performance (reading, homework, motivation, G.E.D.); arrests; and relationships with family (divorce, role modeling, support, freedom, parenting, childcare), friends (hanging out, partying, influences), and with teachers/school adults (role models, interest/caring, willingness to help). The codes for environmental events, eight in all, were: preschool and kindergarten; elementary school; middle school; high school; post-secondary school; on the street; in jail/after release; and at work/home.

The qualitative software package MAXQDA (http://www.maxqda.com) was used for the systematic analysis and interpretation of the interview texts that were generated. The program helped with organizing files; developing a system of categories; coding segments of documents using the personal, behavioral, and environmental system previously described; writing and organizing memos; and conducting searches during the research process (MAXQDA, 2010).

The codes established provided a full description of the experience of dropping out for each of the participants, including the overarching themes, and the connections between events. This resulted in a composite of the meanings and essences of the participants’ experiences as described under Moustakas’ adaptation of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of
Phenomenological Data (Moustakas, 1994). The textural, structural, and composite descriptions illustrated the recurring themes found during the code analysis.

**Trustworthiness, Limitations, and Delimitations**

**Trustworthiness.** Trustworthiness is paramount in any research study so that the results can be considered worthy of attention (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In phenomenological research, the *epoché* process leads to trustworthiness and requires that, “The world is … cleared of ordinary thought and is present… as a phenomenon to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly through a ‘purified’ consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). For the researcher this necessitated emptying the mind of any previous influences “to become completely and solely attuned to just what appears, to encounter the phenomenon as such, with a pure state of mind” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86). This included listening carefully to each interview participant, using verbatim recordings of interviews, and attempting to write field notes and memos without bias.

Following Gibbs’ (2007) procedures for trustworthiness, the accuracy of all findings was tested by checking all of the transcriptions for any errors, consistently comparing the data with the established codes, and keeping written notes containing the codes and their definitions. Additionally, because a three interview series was used (Seidman, 2006), prolonged engagement increased the probability of credible findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301). The researcher has spent a considerable number of years working with adolescents and teachers of adolescents as both a teacher and an administrator in the public school setting. In addition, the researcher is an experienced reading specialist who has worked with students of all abilities and educators from kindergarten through the university level. Interviewing students who had dropped out or were giving it strong consideration was a new experience with no predilections, thus the
researcher was in a position of “learning the culture… and building trust” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301).

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research. Credibility indicates confidence in the findings; transferability means the ability to apply the findings in other contexts; dependability is defined as consistency such that findings can be repeated; and confirmability means researcher bias has been addressed and the study participants generated the results themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was addressed through employing Seidman’s (2006) three-interview technique described above. Thick description was used to create a paper trail of descriptions so that other researchers would be able to replicate the procedures followed in this study. This provides transferability because through these descriptions the researcher has provided, “sufficient information about the context in which an inquiry [was] carried out so that anyone else interested in transferability has a base of information” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 124-125).

In terms of dependability, an experienced public school teacher and administrator, who was unfamiliar with this research study, was asked to examine all of the data and transcripts collected for this study. Her first responsibility was to examine the fairness of the processes undertaken. Secondly, as an auditor, she examined the actual records for accuracy and identified misspellings and inconsistencies that did not affect the actual content of the interviews. This examination assisted with the establishment of confirmability, through the development of an audit trail. The trail included the six Halpern audit trail categories as found in Lincoln and Guba (p. 319-320): raw data, including field notes, memos, and transcriptions; data reduction and analysis notes and summaries; data reconstruction and synthesis products such as themes,
definitions, findings, and conclusions; process notes including procedures, designs, and rationale; personal notes and reflections; and schedules and interview forms (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 314-320). After spending three weeks reviewing the materials, the auditor met with the researcher to discuss her findings and point out the few issues noted with grammar and spelling.

**Limitations.** Limitations are evident in most research and “no one methodology has all of the answers” (Ehrich & Simpson, 1995, p. 10). The researcher had no control over these elements. One limitation is that all of the data in this study was collected through interviews due to this study’s phenomenological investigation into the lived experience of the participants.

School records were not available nor were any participants able to be observed in a school setting. Since the setting for nine of the ten participants who completed the study was the correctional facility, the results could not be generalized to the majority of high school dropouts.

**Delimitations.** Delimitations are characteristics that can be controlled. Since each participant was interviewed based upon his or her decision to drop out of school, the sample size for this study is small. Using phenomenology as the method for this study did, however, assure that participants’ life experiences were presented in their own words and can thus serve as an indication of the factors to be considered when working with students contemplating leaving high school without a diploma. The data collected were not intended to be generalized to other populations. Thus, the standard for this work is “particularity rather than generalizability” (Creswell, 2009, p. 193).

Additionally, as mentioned before, the researcher knew three of the participants prior to the interviews. Two of the students had recently attended [name] High School, although one of the two ended his participation prior to his second scheduled interview appointment. One of the inmates at [name] Correctional Facility had previously been a student at [name] High School and
was now incarcerated. The researcher had only limited contact with these three participants as an administrator during their middle school years in grades six and seven, not as one of their teachers. Since each had volunteered their participation despite knowing the researcher, they were allowed to continue in the study.

Finally, the composite description produced from all of the participants’ experiences is merely a description of the phenomenon under investigation. Although merging individual accounts into a collective depiction may be cause for criticism, the composite description found in this research merely exists to illustrate the phenomenon of dropping out and its perceived relationship to literacy. According to Moustakas (1994), it “involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience” (p. 13). The researcher then forms the essence or structure that is universal to the experience by identifying the recurring themes. These themes were not rank ordered in any way nor were any of the themes given more weight. Each statement is given equal importance.

**Protection of Human Participants**

Following the ethical principles generated by the *Belmont Report* (1979), this study included respect for persons, beneficence, and justice as described in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46 (45 CFR 46). Having completed the National Institute of Health (NIH) web-based training course, *Protecting Human Research Participants* (Certification Number 344398, dated 11/27/2009, Appendix G), this researcher took all necessary steps to ensure the rights of the research participants. All references to the exact name of the school district, high school, and correctional facility have been eliminated. Anonymity of all participants has been preserved and aliases were used at all times. Only the first names of the
incarcerated participants are known to the researcher. Last names and the reasons for the incarceration of the nine participants were not collected to further preserve their anonymity.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary and the participants, all over the age of 18, were promised that all information collected would be held in the strictest confidence.

The eight major parts of informed consent (Seidman, 2006) were followed. They are:

1. An invitation to participate in what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom?
2. Risks, outlining any possible vulnerability or discomfort.
3. Rights, including voluntary participation and refusal would incur no penalty.
4. Possible benefits associated with participation.
5. Confidentiality of records including the steps to be taken by the researcher to keep participant’s identity confidential.
6. Dissemination, indicating how the results will be published.
7. Special conditions for participants under age 18, including parent/guardian consent, were arranged.
8. Contact information and copies of all forms so that participants and parents, if appropriate, could contact both the researcher and the university with questions.

(Seidman, pp. 61-62)

Appendix E contains a copy of the Informed Consent Document used. With these eight measures in place, it is believed that there was no risk to any of the participants in this study.

The Institutional Review Board at [name] University approved all documents as of January 2012.
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

Introduction

As indicated in Chapter 3, from the beginning, this research study was designed to examine the lived experiences of adolescent students considering and/or acting upon leaving high school without a diploma and to uncover any relationship between their decision and their development of literacy. The three-interview protocol developed by Seidman (2006) was used, beginning by asking the participants to describe their earliest experiences with literacy and then continuing their story up until the present time, including their personal experience with dropping out of high school. In the second interview, participants were asked to reconstruct the details of their drop-out experience and answer additional questions arising from their responses in the first interview. At the third and final interview, and as stated by Seidman (2006), participants were asked to reflect upon their experience and talk about the factors that led to considering or actually dropping out.

Following the verbatim transcription of the thirty-one individual interview recordings for the study participants, the analysis of data began. The transcripts were reread multiple times, horizontalizing or giving equal value to every statement made by the participants (Moustakas, p. 118). The next step was to establish a list of meaning units. These were then arranged into categories or what are often referred to by Moustakas (1994) as themes. Textural descriptions were written that included the exact words of each participant in order to illustrate their experience and provide specific examples of each participant’s lived experience with literacy acquisition and dropping out of high school. These textural descriptions of each participant were examined, reflected upon, and then used to compose a structural description or essential structure for each participant’s experience using imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). The structural
descriptions represent how each co-researcher grasped the meaning of his or her experience. As described by Polkinghorne (1989):

Phenomenological research is the search for those processes of consciousness that give the objects that appear in awareness meaning, clarity, and discrimination…the structures that produce a common appearance and similar characteristics to each person’s experience. (p. 51)

From the separate textural and structural descriptions, a textural-structural description was then written for each participant following Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis. These textural-structural descriptions provided the meanings and essences of each co-researcher’s experience (Moustakas, 1994). The final step in the analysis was the creation of one composite textural-structural description of the experiences of all participants, “integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).

Through the reading and rereading of the interview transcripts and this data analysis, seven codes or meaning units emerged representing personal factors, seven representing behavior patterns, and eight encompassing social/environmental events. These codes were present in varying degrees for each of the nine incarcerated participants and most were found in the interviews with the tenth participant.

As described earlier, Moustakas’ modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis was used for this research study. Other theorists have employed similar methods, as described by Polkinghorne (1989):
(a) The original protocols are divided into units,

(b) The units are transformed by the researcher into meanings that are expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts, and

(c) These transformations are tied together to make a general description of the experience. (p. 55)

The names of all participants as well as specific locations were not revealed and aliases have been used in order to assure confidentiality. The table below provides a brief profile of each participant. Each of the participants is briefly described using the vertices of Bandura’s triadic reciprocal causation diagram, personal (P), behavioral (B) and environmental (E), found in the last chapter.

Table 2:

Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Personal Factor</th>
<th>Social/Environmental Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Dropped out Grade 10</td>
<td>G.E.D. (1st try)</td>
<td>Retained in Grade 6; high absenteeism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Committed to DYS Grade 9</td>
<td>H.S. Diploma</td>
<td>Took night classes to graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Committed to DYS Grade 9</td>
<td>G.E.D.</td>
<td>Retained in Grade 1; expelled from high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Dropped out Grade 10</td>
<td>Disliked high school and stopped attending</td>
<td>Withdrew from study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduardo</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Dropped out at age 16</td>
<td>G.E.D. (awaiting results)</td>
<td>Attended four different high schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Dropped out at age 16</td>
<td>Plans on G.E.D.</td>
<td>Although he completed four years of high school, he failed to earn enough credits to graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alias</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Personal Factor</td>
<td>Social/Environmental Event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Dropped out at age 16</td>
<td>G.E.D. (awaiting results)</td>
<td>Everything changed for him in Grade 8; he started hanging around with the wrong &quot;crew&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Attended more than one high school</td>
<td>Plans on G.E.D.</td>
<td>Arrested, placed on probation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Dropped out Grade 12</td>
<td>H.S. Diploma with credit recovery program</td>
<td>Pregnancy and parenting responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Dropped out at age 16</td>
<td>H.S. Diploma</td>
<td>Retained in Grade 1; attended multiple schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Changed high schools</td>
<td>H.S. Diploma</td>
<td>Difficult transition from parochial to public high school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two of the students interviewed had previously attended the suburban comprehension high school described earlier. One of them, Ingrid, completed all three interviews while the other, Donald, withdrew prior to his second scheduled interview. Agreements were reached with three other students (two verbally, one in writing), yet these former high school students failed to keep their agreed-upon appointments and did not return the researcher’s phone calls.

Participation agreements were then arranged with the sheriff of a correctional facility to interview several adolescent dropouts currently serving time in the [name] Correctional Facility. A sign-up sheet was posted by the Assistant Deputy Superintendent seeking volunteers to participate in a non-criminal justice study. There were nine volunteers, ranging in age from 18 to 23, who indicated their willingness to be interviewed and gave their informed consent.
Following Moustakas’ (1994) first stage, the *epoché*, all preconceived ideas about dropping out of high school could never be completely eliminated by the researcher. A deliberate effort was made, however, to put aside or bracket all preconceived notions. The possibility of leaving high school without a diploma had never been personally considered by the researcher, thus the phenomenon of dropping out was solely and freshly considered as presented by each participant.

At this point, according to Moustakas (1994), textural description is used to tell exactly what has occurred in the lives of the participants. In other words, the textural description tells precisely what has been experienced in their lives and includes verbatim examples as described in part “e” of the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis of phenomenological data described previously under the section Data Analysis (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). During the interview, each participant reported his or her own life story and their actual words have often been included. These textural descriptions are then followed by structural descriptions for each participant, in which the focus changes to how the phenomenon of dropping out was experienced and includes the factors leading to such a decision. This is in keeping with van Manen’s (1990) belief that phenomenology research is the study of essences. He states:

> Phenomenology is the systematic attempt to uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning structures, of lived experience. A universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience. (p. 10)

As previously described, from the textural descriptions, the “what” of each participant’s experience was the information that the researcher then reflected upon to form the individual structural descriptions in order to provide the “how” of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994).
Both the textural and structural descriptions were reflected upon to produce a textural-structural description for each of the participants as described in part ‘g’ under Data Analysis. This thorough re-examination of all of the interview transcripts was completed in order to gain a deeper understanding of what each participant had to share. As a result, several themes became apparent. These clustered around literacy and school performance, home and family, friends/peers, and the educational experience of the participants including relationships with school adults. Although the exact words varied from participant to participant, these themes became horizons, giving a clearer picture of each participant’s lived experience.

Subsequently, in Chapter 5 there is a composite textural-structural description written following the last step of Moustakas’ modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). This composite textural-structural description takes into account the themes introduced throughout all of the interviews and synthesizes the meanings and essences common to all of the participants (Moustakas, p. 144).

**Participant 1: Andrew**

**Biographical Information**

Andrew is a 22-year-old white male currently incarcerated at the [name] Correctional Facility. He attended [name] High School and recognized the researcher from his seventh grade school year when she held the position of Assistant Principal of the middle school. Andrew left high school in tenth grade when he turned sixteen. He earned his G.E.D. in the spring of what should have been his sophomore year. He hopes to move within the next few months from the jail to a pre-release program and then be paroled, returning to live with his girlfriend and two young children.
Textural Description of Andrew

When asked about his early reading experiences Andrew reported that he did not recall anyone ever reading to him at home. He could not describe any literacy experiences that took place prior to his beginning school because as he pointed out, “no one read to me as a child.” His parents never modeled any reading and books were never available at home.

He described his elementary school experience saying, “I always had the smarts I think for school, but I didn’t like being there. I got into a lot of fights in school and stuff; I was in trouble.” He credited his elementary school teachers with teaching him to read. He remembered that his parents split up and later divorced when he was ten or eleven years old, just before he entered middle school. From then on he recounted, “I didn’t have the most guidance and had a lot of freedom bouncing between two parents.”

In middle school, Andrew failed sixth grade. He changed schools and repeated sixth grade. He returned to his previous school in grade seven. He shared that he and his friends did not value reading, adding, “I wasn’t really in the right group of friends.” He was smoking cigarettes and marijuana by age twelve, was not interested in reading or completing any schoolwork, and was suspended several times for fighting.

By the end of middle school and into high school he was getting into trouble regularly. In tenth grade he reported that he had so many absences and discipline issues that he knew he would fail for the year. He decided to drop out when he turned 16 and no effort was made to keep him enrolled. He did immediately sign up to take the test for his G.E.D. and indicated that he passed on the first try.

He has been doing some reading since he has been in jail and has even volunteered to read aloud during some of the group programs that he has been required to attend. When asked
to consider himself as a reader, he said that when he reads aloud during the group programs he often loses the meaning because he is concentrating so hard on his oral delivery:

Sometimes I’ll be reading and I’ll like be reading every word but I will have to sometimes go back a couple of paragraphs and read it again just to understand what’s going on. The groups here, sometimes we read out of a pamphlet or a worksheet or something and if I’m reading aloud like to the rest of the group, I will get done with what I’m reading and I won’t have a clue what I just read. Like, I will have to read it again and double look at it, you know. …I think the problem is that I’m concentrating more on what like actually reading what it says than taking in what it is saying. (Andrew, Interview 1)

Currently his future goal is to go back to school to learn a trade because he is “a hands-on person” who can usually pick things up by just seeing them done once. Now that he has had time to reflect, he acknowledges choosing the wrong friends because:

my priorities weren’t right. I realize a lot of things that were wrong. I’ve had time to look at myself. When I get out of here I will be able to like maybe go back to school. I’m trying to go back for a trade though. (Andrew, Interview 2)

Andrew refers to his jail experience as “a wake-up call and hopefully it has put me on the right track.”

**Structural Description of Andrew**

Since literacy activities did not take place at home, Andrew indicated that reading was not valued there. He felt the lack of books and reading materials and the absence of modeling by his parents put him at a disadvantage when he entered school. Many of his fellow classmates started school better prepared. The fact that he was fighting and getting into trouble at such an
early age indicates a lack of readiness to learn or an ability to understand the true purpose of school because as he explained, “I didn’t like being there.” He appreciates now that his elementary teachers tried to send the message that reading and learning were important, but he indicated that he was not interested at the time.

The separation and later divorcing of his parents made a strong impression on him and changed his life considerably. Because of the divorce, he had the unsettling experience of change at a vulnerable time in his life. Andrew’s grade retention and change of schools for sixth grade forced him to become acclimated to a new situation and an unknown group of peers. He left the suburb where he had always lived and moved to a nearby city. He chose absences and fighting to make himself known in this new environment. When he returned to his former school the following year, he quickly reestablished friendships with other students he described as getting into trouble and not interested in learning. He said reading and completing homework were not important, stating, “I have never been the most interested in reading, really.” Andrew indicated that he never read just for enjoyment or pleasure. For Andrew, school was not a place to learn but a place to go and socialize: “I wasn’t interested in actually being in school. I was always getting in trouble and I just wanted to do my own thing.” Things escalated when he got to high school. He would come to school, go to homeroom, and then leave for the remainder of the day. He said he saw no reason for being there or for getting an education. Looking back now with more maturity, he verbalized, “I think if I went to a trade school in high school I would have been more interested [in school]; I was never really that interested in like books and stuff like that.”

Andrew believes that the factors that influenced him to drop out of school were his drug use; getting into trouble as early as elementary school; the crowd with which he was hanging
around, who are now all dropouts themselves; and failing due to school absence. When asked about what could have been done better by the teachers and/or administrators, Andrew stated that it was entirely his own fault because his priorities at that time were not right. According to Andrew, it took being sentenced to the [name] Correctional Facility before he could experience the joy of reading, now often finishing a book in one or two days. Because of his jail time he now wants to go on to school and learn a trade when he is released. As a parent, he wants to do things differently with his own children. Andrew’s lived experience of dropping out of high school was strongly influenced by his earlier school experiences and failures, the people with whom he chose to associate, and his drug use beginning at an early age.

**Textural-Structural Description of Andrew**

Andrew had no experience in his home with reading. Reading materials were not available, and his parents didn’t model reading. His elementary school years afforded what Andrew described as the most positive time in his schooling. He recounted that although he was often in fights and getting into trouble as early as the first grade, elementary school provided his first experience with reading. He spoke positively about grades one through five, crediting his teachers for teaching him to read and trying to engage him in learning. He indicated confidence in his academic skill including his literacy, saying, “I didn’t have trouble, like with grades and stuff.”

Andrew’s transition to middle school and repeating the sixth grade coincided with his parents’ divorce. He said their divorce provided him with more freedom than he could manage. He moved in with his father and attended a city charter school where he was placed in grade six again. The next year he returned to his former school and friends for seventh grade. With the break up of his parents came what he termed the absence of parental direction. Andrew began to
smoke cigarettes and marijuana regularly with his friends. He was suspended for fighting and injuring other students. He indicated that repeating sixth grade and changing schools were difficult for him and that he chose the wrong people with whom to associate.

Andrew described his relationships during high school with teachers and administrators as strained, at best. He said that he got into trouble regularly and was always in danger of failing due to his absences from school and the numerous discipline referrals submitted to the office by his teachers. He remembered that no one at school or at home made any effort to encourage him to remain in school. Listening to his assistant principal, Andrew dropped out of high school when he turned sixteen. After making this decision he engaged in risky behaviors with peers, made what he called poor choices, and used marijuana regularly.

Now that Andrew has been incarcerated, he wishes that he had had more opportunities for hands-on courses while in school or that he had been given the opportunity to attend a vocational high school. He wishes that he had been encouraged to rethink his decision to drop out before leaving high school. Describing himself as an addict by the time he dropped out in tenth grade, Andrew shared that he had been arrested, sentenced, and committed to the correctional facility due to his poor choices. He referred to his jail experience as “a wake-up call.” He said was proud that he has earned his G.E.D. and has now begun to read for pleasure in jail. Andrew said he expects to provide a different life experience for his two young children when he is reunited with them.

Participant 2: Bruce

Biographical Information

The second participant interviewed was Bruce, age 23. Bruce is a white male of Russian heritage. Having spent the last nine months in the [name] Correctional Facility, he hoped to be
paroled within the next few months, but was not really convinced it would happen. Prior to his current sentence he had been placed in a state youth services lock-up several times and had also served time in state prison after being tried as an adult and found guilty of what he called “a serious crime.” He was able to complete his diploma requirements by attending school both during the day and at night until he accrued the required number of credits.

**Textural Description of Bruce**

When asked to think back to his earliest memories of school and reading, Bruce shared that he had been read to regularly by his mother beginning at a young age and prior to starting his formal schooling. He particularly remembered being read Dr. Seuss books. Bruce started school in pre-kindergarten and recalls that he liked school very much at that time. Since Bruce’s mother is half-Russian, he also mentioned that she attempted teaching him to be bilingual but that he never really stuck with it. He shared, “I was more interested in going out and doing other things.” He was quick to credit his mother and teachers for teaching him how to read, explaining:

I wouldn’t really credit myself because I’m not the one who taught me how to do it. To be completely honest with you, I hated reading growing up…I didn’t pay attention. So when I was younger, I didn’t read. I didn’t read my first book until I got locked up, like on my own. (Bruce, Interview 1)

Bruce did acknowledge having magazines available at home about motorcycles and cars. He shared, “Like if I read, it was something that intrigued me… yeah, it had to catch my interest in order for me to read. My mom read a lot.”

Bruce indicated that now as an adult, he thinks reading is very important, “but as a kid I was like, oh, why are we doing this kind of thing, like… I wasn’t really a fan of school until, you know, high school, until high school rolled around. I loved it.”
Having started hanging out with older kids and smoking cigarettes beginning in the fourth grade, he “didn’t have time to read and do school activities.” By sixth grade he started skipping school with his best friend, saying, “We were just being little rebels. …Sixth grade wasn’t too bad for me. It really was seventh grade. That’s when I started, you know, getting into a lot more trouble in school, fights-wise and the cockiness came out in me… I got put in an alternative program.”

Because he was suspended from school for an extended period of time, he was placed in an alternative setting for forty-five days, indicating that he was most likely a special needs student with an individualized education program (IEP). Bruce recalled that the alternative program was “really a negative environment because you were there with all the bad kids… you know [when] you are in an environment with those types of kids, you kind of strive to one-up each other. So it’s just bad, bad.”

After this alternative placement his family moved from the city where they had been living to a neighboring suburb. Bruce finished seventh grade there, commenting, “I didn’t really like it a lot because I had all my friends in the city where I lived; so [when] I got to there it was just different. It’s the suburbs, it’s not the city, and it is just two different animals.”

For the next school year Bruce moved back to the city. He said, “Oh, I loved it. I was back in my hometown; I was happy.” He remained in the city schools for eighth through tenth grade, returning to the same suburb as before for his junior and senior high school years. He started getting in trouble again in ninth grade and was committed to the state’s youth services again and:
…doing a little bit of time here and there. And like I was just …when you’re a kid you lose motivation when certain …I lost a lot of my youth from being a youth services juvenile detention, so I was discouraged to keep going back to school and I just didn’t want to do it. (Bruce, Interview 3)

He described himself as a rebel again in tenth grade: “I smoked weed and whatever, but I really didn’t start using drugs until my sophomore year.”

Through his mother’s perseverance, he completed high school by doubling up on classes that he had missed and attending night school at the same time. He said:

My mom pushed me to do it; she always emphasized, you know, you have to graduate high school. You have to; she always pushed it on me. …So, I give my mom a lot of credit for that. If it wasn’t for my mom pushing me, I wouldn’t have done it. …I’m not a dumb individual; I just choose to make stupid decisions. …My senior year was just ridiculous… I have been down and out and I understand if you push yourself to excel you can, so that’s what it comes down to. If you want something you can do it. It's just how bad you really want it. (Bruce, Interview 3)

Although Bruce started to attend college classes at a local community campus following high school, he engaged in illegal activities at that time. He said, “I caught a really serious case because I was doing illegal activities. I was looking for instant gratification; [it] set me back.”

Now that he has had time to think about it at the [name] Correctional Facility, he acknowledges his belief in the need to complete high school, stating, “Education and knowledge is power. That’s in all honesty, it is. Kids don’t understand. I mean, high school is the key. If you can’t graduate high school, if you can’t push yourself through that, then you aren’t going to push yourself to do things in the real world.”
When asked specifically about reading being an important skill, Bruce shared:

You have to read in your everyday life. I mean, if you can’t read, you can’t really do much. I mean, I know that I’m an intelligent person so like it makes me feel good. Like there are grown men in here who ask how do you spell this and how do you do that, like they talk to me and they are like you are a really smart kid and I’m like yeah, you know, reading is very important. (Bruce, Interview 3)

Presently, Bruce is considering whether he will go on to school to become a drug counselor, insisting:

I’m not just somebody who’s never been through it. I’m somebody who can explain it; I’ve been there and done that. I’m twenty-three years old and I’ve been in state prison already. And I mean now I’m back in the county jail, like I’ve been around the way so I can help others, I think. (Bruce, Interview 3)

**Structural Description of Bruce**

The series of three interviews asked Bruce to reflect upon the aspects of his literacy development in terms of his difficulties remaining in school as well as his drop-out experience. In each session Bruce was able to share his personal experiences, commenting upon his mobility being in and out of school, where he continually found himself in a position of fitting in. As explained by van Manen (1990), “Through hopes and expectations we have a perspective on life to come” (p. 104). With a jail record, however, he is concerned that many job opportunities are closed to him.

Being locked up has had both a positive and negative impact on Bruce. He specified that he has read his first book on his own while incarcerated. He has also used this placement to recognize his mother’s importance and the positive impact she has had on his life. First, she
initiated his literacy development at a very young age by reading to him. More recently she has been the person responsible for his completing high school requirements. He is aware of his relationship with her being the one positive influence among many negatives in his life. He has come to realize that his lived relationship with his mother provides him with “a fundamental sense of support and security that ultimately allows him to become a mature and independent person… without which it is difficult to make something of oneself” (van Manen, 1990, p. 106).

There are negatives to be considered, including his relationship to himself. He openly pointed out that he is an addict and, despite having a plan to become a drug counselor, helping others not to travel down the same road that he has, he offers no guarantees. Although he is encouraging his younger sister to stay in school, graduate, and go on to college, he has not yet completely made up his own mind about his future. He is proud that he has read over thirty books while at the [name] Correctional Facility. When asked about his own plans for reading on the outside, he said he would consider it, but could not promise. Bruce’s substance abuse and arrest record have intensely affected his life experience.

Textural-Structural Description of Bruce

Bruce demonstrated a strong and encouraging relationship with his mother, a single parent. He remembers her reading to him regularly prior to starting school and always having reading materials readily available for him at home. He enjoyed his beginning years of school, but did not enjoy reading. Bruce explained that his mother understood the value of having an education and attempted to interest him in literacy at a young age. Despite her efforts, he has spent time in juvenile detention centers, state prison, and now a correctional facility.

Throughout all of his incarcerations, Bruce’s mother insisted that he earn the credits to graduate. She went to his teachers, collected assignments, and brought them to him to complete
during his incarcerations. When he reached his senior year, she saw to it that he not only went to
class during the day but also attended night school. He is proud of his high school diploma and
now that he has reflected upon it, he is grateful for his mother’s intervention.

In terms of his educational history, Bruce shared that he did not pay attention in
elementary school and never read independently. By the time he reached sixth grade he was
skipping school and getting into fights. During middle school his family moved twice, once
from the city to a neighboring suburb, then returning to the city the following year. According to
Bruce, changing schools impeded his academic performance. Bruce indicated his dislike of the
suburban school that he attended for seventh grade, mainly because all of his friends remained in
the city. When he returned from the suburb to the city for eighth grade, he was happy to be back,
but said, “I chose to hang out with people that weren’t interested in, you know, going to school.
It wasn’t their top priority. So I was more interested in going out partying with my friends and
doing stupid stuff… illegal activities, getting high.”

Bruce did not intentionally make the decision to drop out of high school. His behavior
and illegal activities placed him in an alternative, locked setting. Upon his release he was able to
make up what he had missed by attending classes during both the day and night. Bruce now
appreciates his mother’s perseverance in getting him to graduate with a diploma. His
experiences have provided him with the understanding that reading is a necessity for everyday
life. He stated, “If you can’t read, you can’t really do much… reading is very important.” He is
now encouraging his sister to complete high school and continue her education beyond her high
school diploma.
Participant 3: Charles

Biographical Information

Charles, age 20, is a white male who had been committed to the Department of Youth Services (DYS) and was then expelled from his local high school; he did not share the reason. Despite his attempts to enroll in other public high schools, no other high school in the state was required to enroll him because of the expulsion on his record. He earned his G.E.D. and is now incarcerated at the [name] Correctional Facility.

Textural Description of Charles

Charles has many memories of being read to as a child prior to beginning his formal schooling. Both his mother and grandmother read to him regularly and he remembered that he would memorize the words and use the picture clues to announce when to turn the pages. His first school experience was pre-Kindergarten, where he recalled that he learned to write the alphabet and associate sounds with each letter.

He credits both his mother and grandmother with teaching him to read and providing educational things at home. He remembers “fun books” and playing Scrabble. Thinking back, he recalled that there were always books, magazines, and newspapers available at home and described his mother as having “like a library at home.” He credits his mother, grandmother, and teachers for instilling the value of reading in him and shared his perception that he is “able to read well.” He acknowledged that this was not the same for his friends.

Charles did not remember first grade, but he reported having problems the next year in Grade 2 and being out of school. He worked one-on-one with a tutor throughout the year and reported that he found it easy to learn that way. His next recollection was about middle school. When Charles got to middle school he did not want to read the books that were mandated. Not
going into detail, he shared that he was committed to Youth Services in Grade 10. It had not been a successful year for him due to his numerous absences. He was also not able to make up any of this work in summer school. He described eleventh grade by saying, “I never stopped liking school. …[but] no one has to accept you if you get committed and you get expelled.”

Charles did get his G.E.D. as soon as he was able. He acknowledged that he not only missed the academic part of high school but also the social, including playing sports. He said:

It’s the social part too; really, it’s just good for you really to be with those types of people. I can’t explain it, it’s just something I kinda liked the environment and everything. …I always thought it was good to read. English was like one of my favorite subjects, Language Arts. (Charles, Interview 3)

Charles’ present goal is to further his education and get his commercial driver’s license (CDL). He would like to become a truck driver or an electrician. He is also considering attending a community college when his sentence is complete. Since he has been committed to the [name] Correctional Facility, he has read quite a bit, stating,

I do it now in jail for enjoyment and in DYS I did it, but I barely read when I’m home. …I think it is important for most people to be able to read and write.

I think writing and reading are important. (Charles, Interview 3)

He is not sure whether he will keep up any independent reading once he leaves jail.

**Structural Description of Charles**

In considering the facts found above in Charles’ textural description and examining their meanings, “the Imaginative Variation process includes a reflective phase in which many possibilities are examined and explicated reflectively” (Moustakas, p. 99). Thus, of all the participants interviewed, Charles appeared the unhappiest with his life. Finding himself without
a high school diploma and serving time in a correctional facility has left him taciturn. Although perfectly willing to participate in all three interviews, he was the hardest participant to engage beyond very short responses. He was distressed by his current situation. He indicated that he would like the opportunity to go back to an earlier time, be at home with his mother and grandmother, and have the chance to complete high school in his community. Without actually using the word regret, his conversations exuded remorse. He clearly indicated that he recognized the value of having an education.

Charles indicated that time moved very slowly for him in the prison. Despite his willingness to take part in the interviews and answer questions, he often gave one-word answers and offered little about what he was anticipating beyond his release. His uncle had told him about a possible community college program in conjunction with a major utility but his unfulfilled need to earn a diploma rather than a G.E.D. left him only mildly interested in following through with his uncle’s suggestion. Outwardly he showed little enthusiasm.

He made it clear that he thinks being a reader is important. Upon self-reflection, Charles shared that he has read while he has been incarcerated and described himself as a good reader. He never explained the nature of the “problems” he encountered in second grade resulting in the one-to-one tutoring, nor was he forthcoming about the reason(s) for his expulsion from high school. He did express that he missed not just getting an education but missed the “social part” of school as well. His future goals remain somewhat of a mystery.

**Textural-Structural Description of Charles**

Like Bruce, Charles remembered being read to at home as a young child. He credited his mother and his grandmother with reading to him and providing educational books and toys. Through his responses, Charles indicated that he is close to his mother and grandmother and
appreciates what they have done for him. Additionally, he mentioned an uncle who has shown an interest in helping him with furthering his education beyond his G.E.D. when he is released. He described his home situation as supportive. Other than his mother, grandmother, and uncle, Charles made no reference to any other adults in his life.

Without providing details, Charles shared that he had problems in second grade and was tutored for most of the year. He felt that he accomplished more work in this one-to-one arrangement. His only memory of middle school was that he did not want to read any of the books that were mandated. During tenth grade he was committed to the state’s youth services department for an undisclosed reason. During all of his incarcerations, he did spend some of his time reading and considers himself a good reader. In his view, reading and writing are important skills to have. He was expelled from high school in the eleventh grade. Besides missing the academic aspects of high school, he regreted losing the opportunity to participate in sports.

Charles insisted that he did not choose to drop out and that he liked being in high school. His expulsion during grade 11 forced him to leave school without a diploma. Charles blames himself for his situation and regrets that he never earned a diploma. He has since completed his G.E.D. but would have preferred a high school diploma. He said, “reading broadens your vocabulary and helps you to write better.” He reads now in “lock-up” but doubts this will continue when he gets out of jail.

Participant 4: Donald

Biographical Information

Donald, an African American youth aged 18, was the youngest participant and had dropped out of the comprehensive high school mentioned earlier during the 10th grade. He did not attend school during the day with other students and preferred to work online from home,
visiting his teachers at school only after students had been dismissed for the day. Although agreeing to participate in three interviews and signing the informed consent form, Donald left a voicemail message discontinuing his participation prior to the second interview appointment.

**Textural Description of Donald**

Donald reported that his mother, a single parent, never read to him to as a young child. He did remember that he began reading in the first grade, describing himself as “very self-taught.” He reported that during middle school his friends described him as “slightly weird” because he liked to read. He stated that his decision to drop out of school was not related in any way to the development of his literacy.

**Structural Description of Donald**

Without the opportunity to complete the second and third interviews with Donald, it is difficult to reflect upon and describe Donald’s experience. Although he provided answers to the focused life history questions, he neither shared the details of his experience nor reflected upon the meaning of his drop-out experience. From his initial interview, it seems apparent that his emotional difficulty began at school at the same time as his peers overshadowed any literacy development issues.

**Participant 5: Eduardo**

**Biographical Information**

Eduardo, a 21-year-old Hispanic male, is currently incarcerated at the [name] Correctional Facility. He recalled being placed in a bi-lingual program when he started school. By second grade he was placed in regular mainstream classes where “everything was English after that.” Although he still understands, speaks, and reads Spanish, he feels less confident about his written Spanish. He stated that written Spanish is fairly easy though, because “you
pronounce the word and that’s basically how it is written.” He is married and the father of two children aged three and four. He is hoping to hear soon that he has passed the G.E.D. test that he recently completed at the jail.

**Textural Description of Eduardo**

Eduardo was quick to relate that:

> When I started school, I loved it. It was pretty good. You know from the younger grades it’s all good and fun until you get to middle school and high school. …When I was in school, I got encouraged because the teachers would make us read… as I read on I actually liked reading a lot. (Eduardo, Interview 1)

Eduardo had no memory of ever being read to at home. He remembered that his parents were always at work and the only reading he did himself at home was when he was doing his homework in elementary school. This continued into middle school when he still read and did his homework. When asked about high school he responded, “That’s when everything took a turn for the worst. I read in class and stuff like that, but I never take home nothing.”

He did recall that both English and Spanish reading materials were available at home. His mother read English magazines while his father read what he called Spanish novellas. His parents always told him to “do what I had to do to be in school and pass school.” He added, “but I think they was too busy working and had their own life to make a better life for us.”

Eduardo also credited his elementary and middle school teachers for sending him the message that reading is important. He particularly appreciated one middle school English teacher who encouraged him to read and write. He shared that his friends only valued reading “to be a singer or rapper.” He, on the other hand, said, “To do anything in this world you are
supposed to know how to read.” He also mentioned that reading has helped him “space out” while he has been incarcerated.

When asked about the factors leading him to drop out of school, he pinpointed his parents’ divorce. He reported:

I started like not caring, being rude to teachers, just wanted to go home and see what was going on at home. And that was the jump-start of me not liking school. I couldn’t wait until I was 16 so I could sign myself out. …It was all the negative thoughts that there was for school. I signed out as soon as I turned 16, yeah, Freshman year. I went back couple of times. (Eduardo, Interview 2)

When Eduardo did re-enter school he was assigned to a different high school in the same city, then another, and finally a third. From there he was assigned to an alternative program in yet another school. He reported that the alternative program:

was a better setting for me because there was only like 150 students in the whole school. It was smaller, you know, less fooling around. But at the end of the day I didn’t finish it either. I got kicked out. …It was a behavior issue. …I mean I never gave them a chance, to tell you the truth, to be honest. I would like go in for homeroom and they tried to switch their tactics, like they had homeroom first class and everybody would go to the first class, but then they would try to put homeroom at the third or second period. So I would like miss the first or second period and then go to homeroom just so I could be present and then I wouldn’t show up to class. They saw potential in me; they used to talk to me; but I was always fairly new in a school so they couldn’t get to know me and I never gave them the chance, to tell you the truth. (Eduardo, Interview 2)
Once he was kicked out, Eduardo spent his time on the streets. He remembers, “It was cool in the beginning, hanging out, going to parties and whatnot, but at the end of the day when I wanted to get a job, I couldn’t get one because I had no education.”

Eduardo also shared that he is married with two children, a son who is four and a daughter who is three. Having a well-paying job is a necessity and he plans to further his education when he leaves the jail. He wants “something good, but quick, about two years.” His older brother, now in Federal prison, has always encouraged him to get an education. He also feels that being bilingual could help him.

Originally he thought about studying psychology, because there was a short course. …I’m a recovering addict so I could really relate to people using drugs and all that. …But I don’t know, I guess I’m still young but I’m definitely going to see what I’m going to major in. I want something quick and good though, real good. …I love using my hands. I’m a real hands-on person so that’s why I think I’m siding more with the cooking. (Eduardo, Interview 3)

When asked if he’d had a chance to take hands-on courses in any of the city high schools that he attended, Eduardo reported:

That would have been good because [name] High School in the city, they got it as a vocational school. …I applied for that school and never got accepted. …I’m not gonna say that if I was in that school I probably would have gotten through it and did everything else, but … I never got accepted so I was like, you know what, forget it, whatever. I would have loved to go to a vocational school where I could use my hands and all that. (Eduardo, Interview 3)
While being incarcerated Eduardo has taken the classes and the test to earn his G.E.D. He is waiting to learn if he has passed and at the same time hoping to be paroled within the next two months. If successful, he plans to enroll in courses at a local community college.

**Structural Description of Eduardo**

The move from bilingual to regular education at such an early age indicates that Eduardo was successful during the early years of his schooling. He expressed that he enjoyed school through middle school and received encouragement from his teachers. Eduardo was able to articulate that his attitude toward school changed because of the events leading up to and following his parents’ divorce. The divorce gave him a feeling of instability that impacted his education from that point forward.

Additionally, Eduardo was aware that his large, urban school system greatly contributed to his alienation from school and his decision to drop out. Because he was unable to participate in the only possible hands-on learning experience at [name] High School and was then assigned to four different high schools and programs within a very short time, his chances of being successful were significantly diminished. He was not able to overcome this disappointment. His subsequent placement at several other high schools across the city made him feel unattached and resistant. He realized that no administrators or teachers ever got to know him personally or developed any relationship with him during that time. Although he blamed himself for not giving the various school staffs a chance, it was apparent to him that more could have been done on the school’s part. He felt that none of the environments to which he was assigned was conducive to his becoming a successful student.
Due to his past addiction and conviction, Eduardo’s earlier hope for a criminal justice career was now “out of the picture.” Currently he feels “less” without having earned his high school diploma. He hopes that he will receive good news about his G.E.D. soon and looks forward to continuing his education following his release. When he is reunited with his wife and children, his goal is to spend time reading with his son and daughter.

**Textural-Structural Description of Eduardo**

Eduardo’s educational journey began well. He was placed in a Spanish-English bilingual program when he began school, but by second grade he was placed in mainstream English classes. He loved elementary school and internalized the message that reading was important. Thinking back to middle school, Eduardo remembered one English teacher who supported him with his reading and writing. He was encouraged to work harder and recalled in detail a reading and writing project that he had completed under that teacher’s tutelage. By the end of middle school, however, he became disillusioned with school.

Eduardo was not accepted into the only vocational school program available to him. He gave up on his education with the rejection from that technical school, saying that, “everything took a turn for the worse” then. He signed himself out of school the first time when he turned sixteen, although he returned several times. Each time he returned he was assigned to a different high school in the city. He blamed himself for not reaching out more to his teachers and administrators, explaining that when he started each new placement, he never gave anyone a chance to get to know him. After returning to school at one point, Eduardo was placed in an alternative program, but ended up being kicked out due to his behavior. From that time he described his life as “hanging on the streets, going to parties.” His drug addiction began during that time.
When asked about his family, Eduardo remembered that his parents were always working to provide a better life for their family. He had no memory of being read to at home or completing any educational activities at that time. His life changed, along with his attitude toward school, when his parents were divorcing. While he was at school during that time, he recalled wanting to be at home to see what was going on. He said that because of the breakup, he started not caring about school and being rude to his teachers. Eduardo dropped out of school for the first time as soon as he turned sixteen and following the divorce of his parents.

With time on his hands at the [name] Correctional Facility, Eduardo has reflected and now understands that without completing his education he is at a disadvantage when it comes to securing a meaningful job. The time he spent on the streets was of no benefit to him. He said he now spends time reading because it helps him forget that he is in jail.

Because Eduardo is married with two children, he regrets not graduating from high school. When he is released he hopes to be able to further his education, get a good job, and provide for his family. He indicated that he knows he should have started reading to his children earlier and not just allowed them to watch TV.

**Participant 6: Francis**

**Biographical Information**

Francis, age 21, is a white male who grew up in a large city. He attended the same parochial school from pre-K through Grade 8 and his parents were together for most of that time. Although he had hoped to attend one of the city’s exam schools, he was not accepted. He attended three different high schools, including one in a southern state. His final placement before dropping out was in an alternative special education program at the last suburban high
school he attended. At the time of the interviews he was incarcerated at the [name] Correctional Facility.

Textural Description of Francis

Francis remembered reading Disney books with his father every night prior to entering school and then continuing until he could read on his own. His first experiences with school were “good,” beginning with pre-school, and he shared that he could read independently beginning in first or second grade. Although crediting his father’s help, he did mention reading with his mother as well.

Throughout his elementary years and up to the eighth grade, Francis remembered a lot of required reading as well as spelling, even having weekly spelling tests all the way through to the eighth grade. He indicated that he only read while he was in school, never at home after the third grade. He reported that his father always read the newspaper and that both of his parents valued reading, wanting him to succeed. This was the same message that he received from his teachers throughout his years in parochial school and into high school. He explained that he and his friends, although “they were smart kids,” did not really try.

Sixth grade brought about changes for Francis. He started not liking school when he took the exam for one of the city’s prestigious public secondary schools and did not get accepted. He verbalized this by saying, “I didn’t get into [name] High School so I just didn’t really care about school.” He remained at the parochial school for the next two years, then enrolled in a public suburban high school. At the same time his parents split up and he enrolled in a second public high school in the town where his father went to live.

He completed his freshman year at that high school, but failed and was scheduled to repeat. His mother then moved to a southern state and he accompanied her, completing his
second year of high school there. He thought it was all right there because “even if you are failing, you can play sports. And that’s what I did,” choosing to play baseball. Unfortunately he did not like the school and environment after a while because all of his friends had remained up north.

After that year he moved back and re-enrolled in his last school. After a short time he was moved to the school’s alternative program and from there dropped out. When asked about this decision Francis explained:

Like I just didn’t care. You know what I mean? The work wasn’t hard. I mean if I paid attention I would learn, but I just didn’t care to pay attention. All I could think about was looking at the clock you know. …I just should have paid attention. I mean it’s not like I dropped out my first year of high school. I did four years. I should have just graduated. …I didn’t care the consequences. I didn’t look at the future; I just looked at the weekends. (Francis, Interview 2)

He reported that his friends from parochial school had a much different experience. They all went to exam and parochial high schools in the area. When asked if attending a parochial high school would have made a difference for him, he responded:

Absolutely. Yeah, I absolutely do think it would have made a difference. I look at sixth grade as like a turning point. I kind of screwed myself, but I just... like that was such a huge thing, all my friends got in, you know. I was three away getting into City Academy. (Francis, Interview 2)

Francis shared that while he was in high school, his parents were not encouraging him to graduate and go on to college. He explained:
At the time of high school, like my parents were caught up like. My father was… at the end of his drinking and my mother, my mother was just gone. …When she separated from my father she thought it was going to be different for her, too, you know what I mean? And I just think it went downhill for kind of both of them. And now it’s coming back up. They would try to discipline me… I just didn’t… My father, he could tell me to do something, but it’s up to me to do it. You know? My mother was more of a friend then, than a mother. She moved down south and down there like my mom got prescribed all these pills. You know what I mean, because she got sick. She got addicted to them, and the doctor cut her off. She got clean and then she moved back here. And down there is where I got introduced to all the drugs and stuff like that, so I moved back here and I just got with the crowd that did the same things I did when I was down south. (Francis, Interview 2)

Despite his regret about not graduating, Francis has plans for earning his G.E.D. while incarcerated. He asserts that he is taking full advantage of what is offered because, “I just procrastinate on the street and just like say, oh yeah, I’ll go and do that and then I just never go and do it.” Beyond jail he has thought about going on in school and becoming something associated with athletics such as a coach or personal trainer. He shared that he “has a kid on the way” and would not want anyone to follow in his footsteps.

Thinking back over his complete school experience during the third interview, Francis concluded, “the parochial school didn’t really prepare me for public high school.” He found many things missing from the curriculum such as algebra and science. The biggest factors he cited for dropping out were drug and alcohol use followed by not caring about consequences or his future. Although acknowledging that reading is important, “not just for school, but for life,”
Francis reported no connection between reading and dropping out of high school. He said, “I just stopped going. I didn’t want to go to school. I didn’t like it. I didn’t do anything when I went there. I never read for enjoyment and [laughing] we had a summer reading list, but I just didn’t do it.” He added, “I just started reading in here. I read newspapers and stuff, but books, no. I’d like to say I want to read when I get out, but I just gotta stay honest and probably won’t.” He hopes to be released in two months, and, if so, he plans to enroll in courses at a local college.

**Structural Description of Francis**

Pre-school and elementary school were the least difficult times for Francis. His parents were together and sent him to the neighborhood parochial school for grades pre-K through 8. When the exam school rejected him after he took the entrance test in the sixth grade, his attitude toward school changed. Remaining for grades 7 and 8 at his original school, he experienced feelings of doubt that he was prepared to move on to a public high school. He failed his freshman year and then moved out of state where he knew no one and experienced feelings of not belonging. He completed the year, but did not earn enough credits to become a junior.

Francis’ thoughts about dropping out all took place during high school and resulted in his leaving school without a diploma after four years of attendance, but without enough passed courses or credits earned to graduate. Moving and changing high schools had a detrimental impact on him, as well as his time out of state when he was introduced to drugs.

He described his relationship with his mother as a friendship rather than that of parent and child. Later, he remembered being told to do things by his father and ignoring what he was told. The separation of his parents left him more on his own with increased freedom to do what he wanted. Both of his parents’ substance abuse issues with prescription medication and alcohol influenced him as well. His adolescence was filled with conflicting messages.
When Francis returned from attending school down south, he sought out friends who were also interested in drugs and alcohol, continuing the behaviors he had begun out of state. Despite being placed in an alternative high school program, he stopped going to school. Based upon his current placement at the correctional facility, he also has been convicted of a crime or crimes.

In addition to changing schools and feeling unprepared for public high school, he never indicated developing any strong relationships with teachers, counselors, or administrators. He has come to regret his decision to leave without a diploma and has begun the steps toward achieving his G.E.D. Due to his impending parenthood, he expressed an interest in taking advantage of educational opportunities and has set some goals toward this end. He saw no relationship between his literacy and achievement with his decision to drop out of school. Instead he cited his attitude and attendance for his failure to pass during his four years of high school.

**Textural-Structural Description of Francis**

Francis came from a two-parent family and was read to by both his mother and father prior to beginning school. He received a strong message that reading was valued in his home. During his early childhood, Francis was supported by both of his parents. Francis’ first eight years of school, pre-K through grade 6, provided him with the traditional education found at a parochial school. In sixth grade he suffered the disappointment of not being accepted to the exam school he wanted to attend for grades 7 through 12. His dislike for school ensued.

After eighth grade Francis attended a public suburban high school for one year, feeling that his parochial education had left him unprepared for the demands of a public high school. Other than his parents, Francis never mentioned any other adults taking an interest in him. When
things became difficult for him in high school, he was on his own. He never expressed receiving any guidance from a teacher, administrator, or counselor. Despite completing four years of high school in two different states, he was unable to qualify for a diploma. He blames his high school failure on his negative attitude toward school and his absenteeism.

Francis’ parents separated when he began high school. He indicated that both parents experienced substance abuse issues and he later developed them himself. Moving between both parents, he often failed to meet his father’s expectations, while seeing his mother as more of a friend than a parent. According to Francis, neither of them provided him with any impetus to graduate from high school or go on to college. They appeared to be caught up with their own issues.

Starting with his rejection from the exam school he desired, Francis felt somewhat “less” than his friends. Some of his friends were accepted to the exam school and those who did not go on to that exam school attended several private high schools in the city. When he arrived down south for his second year of high school, he associated with classmates who introduced him to drugs and alcohol. He failed to earn enough credits to pass his sophomore year. Returning north, he sought out companions who were interested in the same illegal behaviors.

After attending almost four school years without earning a diploma, Francis said he stopped attending. He denied that he dropped out. He indicated that he saw no reason to continue attending because he did nothing while he was in school. He now plans to earn his G.E.D. because in his words, he “sees things differently now.” He added that his reading had nothing to do with his decision to leave school.

Francis regrets that the parochial school he attended did not prepare him better for public high school. He also regrets that he did not pay attention or concentrate during the four years
that he spent attending various high schools. Describing that time in his life, he said, “I didn’t care [about] the consequences. I didn’t look at the future. I just looked at the weekends.”

According to Francis, the biggest factor in his leaving school was drugs and alcohol. He says now that he should have worked harder and gotten his diploma. Since his incarceration, he reads and sees himself as a good reader. Up until this jail sentence he said he had not read a book since he was thirteen or fourteen. Now that he is awaiting the birth of his first child with his ex-girlfriend, he revealed that he would not want anyone to follow in his footsteps.

**Participant 7: Greg**

**Background Information**

Greg is a 19-year-old white male from the city. He had no memories of reading prior to starting kindergarten. He did remember that kindergarten was something he loved. He said that by the eighth grade he stopped loving school and was often truant. Greg was not accepted at the exam high school he wanted to attend. He began attending high school at one of the city’s largest neighborhood public schools and dropped out as soon as he turned sixteen. At the time of the interviews he was incarcerated at the [name] Correctional Facility. He had taken the test for his G.E.D. two weeks earlier and was waiting to hear if he had passed.

**Textural Description of Greg**

Greg remembered seeing his parents reading newspapers at home and spending a small amount of time reading with him. The majority of his reading, however, was completed at school. He shared that the amount of required reading picked up considerably in middle school and even more was expected during his high school years. When asked whether his friends valued reading, he stated no. He reported that since his incarceration, he has a book with him
every night and manages to read the newspaper each day. He now describes himself as a competent reader.

Looking back, he describes things changing educationally for him in eighth grade when he started skipping school. He and his friends would spend the day at the mall or taking the train into the downtown section of the city. He stated that school was not a priority at that point in his life. He saw that some teachers cared more than others about his succeeding in school, but the materials used in his classes were of no interest to him.

Greg indicated he had been excited about starting high school. This was not for academic reasons. He stated that he liked being with more people, especially girls. He added, “It’s less structured, you know. You don’t have to… it’s just different from other schools; it’s a big step up. But I made it all the way to 12th grade and then I ended up getting locked up,” never completing high school.

Greg has taken the test for his G.E.D., despite wanting to have earned a diploma, and is now awaiting the results. He remarked:

I see so much more now about the value of having an education, than when I was younger. I wasn’t serious in my head then. It wasn’t embedded in my head that this is your life, this is your future, and I didn’t see it as that. I just saw it as oh, whatever, screw it. But now, I’m like you can’t do anything without an education, you can’t go to school, you can’t do anything. (Greg, Interview 2)

By accomplishing his G.E.D., Greg hopes to attend a technology school. He wants to study something hands-on like mechanics. He reported never having any options for vocational programs at his former high school. He recounted that his mother had been “adamant” about his completing high school and described her as, “heartbroken when I started not going [to school]
and stuff, but it wasn’t enough to make me change.” He expressed his regret at this decision and shared how he has encouraged his younger sister to be serious about getting an education and earning her diploma. He had some previous work experience at McDonalds and with construction, but he stated that he did not see that those types of jobs held a future for him, “unless I’m gonna be the CEO.”

During the final interview, Greg was asked to reflect upon his experiences to date considering his life-changing decision to drop out of high school. Without hesitation he disclosed:

I was just hanging out with the wrong crew, …picking up things like smoking weed, drinking and what I shouldn’t have been [doing] at such a young age. I started seeing the negatives to not going to school as a better reason, you know… putting those before school. And then I just started skipping a lot and then my grades were going down and eventually after that, screw it, I just wasn’t going at all. I was wondering what was going on outside of school when really nothing at all was. …Then after a while I just started going to school to get kicked out, which was dumb. …My only difficult subject was math. …I see everything more clearer now. I always wanted to graduate. (Greg, Interview 3)

Greg reported that he now reads every day and keeps a dictionary by his bed in the correctional facility because “I always see words in books and I’m like, I never heard them. I have a dictionary so I can look it up instantly to see what it is.” He expects that he may continue to read newspapers and books outside of jail when his sentence is finished.

**Structural Description of Greg**
After examining the factors associated with Greg’s decision to drop out of high school, many factors emerged. High school was a less than successful time in his life. He consistently referred to having a poor attitude and said that it had impacted his school performance, from middle school forward.

Although he mentioned using drugs and alcohol, he did not see his substance use as addictive behavior nor did he describe himself at any time as an addict. Such use, however, could have led to his expulsion from school. As in the case of Charles, with an expulsion on his record, he would have also been excluded from any other public high school in his state.

Greg indicated that he thought reading was important. He benefited from having reading modeled at home and having expectations set for him by his parents at a young age. At the jail, he now reads every day. He described reading as an outlet for him while he is incarcerated. By keeping a dictionary close by, he is educating himself, expanding his vocabulary as well as improving his reading comprehension.

Because his elementary school years included reading books, he was instilled with the message that reading was important. Greg shared that he loved school up until the eighth grade. Even after that he described having positive relationships with some of his teachers, while disclosing his belief that some of his teachers and administrators could have done more to keep him invested in school, especially during high school. A continued relationship with reading is part of his future plan. He has taken his G.E.D. exam and is serious about more schooling, viewing it as a necessity in order to achieve his employment goal of a successful career.

**Textural-Structural Description of Greg**

Greg received a clear message from his teachers that reading was important. He loved his early years in school. He felt the reading increased a lot in middle school and viewed himself as
a good reader when he got to high school and had to read longer texts and books. He pinpointed eighth grade as the time when he stopped trying in school. School was no longer a priority for him. Beginning that school year Greg and his friends would skip school regularly together. He described his friends as “the wrong crew” because with them he began smoking marijuana, drinking, and getting into trouble. Although he said he was excited to begin high school, he was not interested in the materials he was asked to read nor the courses to which he was assigned. Despite making it to the 12th grade, he was “locked up” that year and never graduated. Greg mentioned a few of his teachers trying to keep him interested in his schoolwork, but not all of them. He felt that more could have been done to help him graduate.

Books and magazines were always available to Greg at home. He often witnessed his parents reading as well. His mother was “heartbroken” that he did not graduate from high school. He has now begun encouraging his younger sister to remain in school and earn her diploma.

Greg placed blame for his not graduating mainly on his poor attitude as well as smoking marijuana. The marijuana caused what he called a “screw-it mentality” where he no longer liked school or cared about going. Greg now reads every night in jail and keeps a dictionary beside his bed so that he can learn the new words that he comes across. He expressed remorse that he did not earn his diploma. He still would prefer a diploma to a G.E.D. Greg plans on further schooling when released.

Participant 8: Harry

Biographical Information

Harry is a twenty-two year old white male currently sentenced to the [name] Correctional Facility. Up until the end of elementary school he and his siblings lived in the suburbs with his
mother. After beginning middle school in the same town, he was asked to leave. He completed middle school in a smaller suburban town while living with his father and stepmother. He had been arrested several times and placed on probation prior to this current incarceration.

**Textural Description of Harry**

Harry stated that he never had any trouble with learning to read. He found school very easy and credits his older brother with showing him how to read. Harry remembered copying his brother’s homework and asking to be shown how to do it. He stated, “I didn’t like reading until I got to high school.”

He described his elementary school teachers as forcing him to read and acknowledged that even from the beginning, “I was a little troublemaker. I was very rebellious and almost had to repeat the fourth grade. I got into a lot of trouble in elementary school, like police trouble.” He described his behavior as worse by the time he entered middle school. He shared:

> When I went to middle school I’d do my homework because I loved… once I got past elementary school… I loved school. You know, I was in honors classes in high school but I would still get suspended every week… was suspended almost a year through the whole thing. (Harry, Interview 1)

Harry remembered that reading materials were always available at home and as he watched his dad and stepmother read regularly, he got the message that reading was important. He also stated that his elementary teachers tried to send the message that reading was important, but he was not interested.

When he reached middle school he was asked to leave the school district due to his behavior. He then moved in with his father and stepmother. Remaining there for high school, he joined the wrestling, hockey, and football teams, but was ultimately kicked off each one for
behavior reasons. He shared, “all of my friends were more like the party every day, even if it’s a Tuesday.”

Looking back, even though he never stopped liking school, he “started to get in progressively more trouble” beginning as early as fourth grade. His mother decided that she was not able to care for Harry and his siblings when he reached middle school. Harry stated that was because “I was wild or whatever you want to call it, wild.”

Harry gave his teachers considerable credit, stating:

I think they tried but…’cause they always gave me a little bit of slack with everything. …They gave me a lot of leeway when I’d do stupid stuff. They didn’t make me give up hope, because if they kept failing you and failing you and failing you, then you might as well hang it up. But they would always give me opportunities to make up for things.

Yeah, well, it doesn’t make up for all the times you missed class. (Harry, Interview 2)

During his time in high school, Harry was arrested and then placed on probation. Although he never shared any further details, the arrest prevented him from being accepted into the Marine Corps. He indicated that due to this, things became worse for him. He insisted that he never gave up on his high school diploma, but has now decided that getting his G.E.D. will be the equivalent, saying, “It is really the easy way out. To pass the G.E.D. test is pretty easy. I’ve seen it. …It’s not that hard. I think it’s harder to do four years of high school.”

When asked about the advantage of being able to read and write, Harry said:

It definitely has an advantage, no matter what. No matter where you go, no matter what job you have to do, you have to be able to read, write and take care of it. If you don’t have good communication skills, no one is really going to hire you in the future. …If you can’t read and write and talk like a normal person, you can’t get anywhere in life.
Even if you work construction, you need to know big words, you know what I mean, normal communication skills. (Harry, Interview 2)

Harry also stated that he had been placed in a special education resource room as a sophomore. He described it as:

a study room where they help you out with stuff. I went to it and I ended up turning it down because it was just wasting my time. I would rather take a real class than sit around and do study. It was basically doing homework, so you got your homework done.

(Harry, Interview 2)

In addition, Harry indicated that he would often leave the class and go to the culinary arts area instead. He then was placed in what he described as “too many culinary classes.” Although he considered a career in culinary after working in several restaurants, he has decided that it would “barely pay the bills, even as a manager.”

When asked during the third interview to reflect upon his past experiences, Harry tied his difficulty in earning a high school diploma to his trouble paying attention and also his penchant for engaging in trouble, stating, “I was always getting my nose into something I shouldn’t do.” In his view his behavior led him to the loss of credits and ultimately to giving up on a diploma.

Now that he has been incarcerated, he indicated that he enjoys reading. When asked about continuing with his pleasure reading upon release, he said:

I won’t read nearly as much as I read here. …It’s just so much easier… I mean you can kill a whole book in a day if you really wanted to here because you got sixteen hours to read the book and nothing else to do. But at home, I mean, no, it will continue to a degree. I’m not going to say, oh, yeah, I’m gonna read and read. (Harry, Interview 3)
During the third interview, Harry shared for the first time that he has a daughter. She lives with his father now, and he stated that he is looking forward to reading to her when he is released.

**Structural Description of Harry**

Harry’s family and early reading background had been evident in his life and impacted his later behavior. Being a “trouble-maker,” to use his term, influenced his substance use, his self-perception, the goals he set for his future, and instilled in him a sense of regret. Being asked to leave one school and moving in with his father and stepmother in a different town also shaped his behavior. Moreover, the environment of his new school directly impacted him especially considering his choice of friends and partying. He felt this behavior helped him fit into his new situation.

Harry’s attitudes and school performance were affected by his environment. He found much of school, and especially his time assigned to a special education resource room, boring and less interesting than being with his friends, smoking marijuana and drinking. Even his athletic abilities were abandoned because of his behavior. His desire to join the Marines also ended due to his probation and arrest record and he expressed disappointment about this.

Although many of his previous behaviors have changed due to his incarceration, Harry does not see all of these changes as having a long-term effect outside of the prison environment. He declared that education is important, including the ability to read and write well. He has become accustomed to the idea that a G.E.D. will open as many doors for him as having a diploma, and wants to further his schooling in order to increase his earning potential. He verbalized his plan to spend two years in school to become an electronic technician.

**Textural-Structural Description of Harry**
Harry described his early years at school as easy, but said that he had to be forced to read by his teachers. He indicated that reading and writing had come easily to him. He portrayed himself as rebellious and a troublemaker, revealing that he was involved with the police as early as the fourth grade. His behavior continued to impact his school performance in middle school and he reported getting suspended from school every week. As a result, Harry was “asked to leave,” moving to another town and living with his father and stepmother. His mother said she could no longer care for him due to what he referred to as his “wild” behavior. Harry’s father and stepmother were role models with respect to reading, and reading materials were available to him in their home.

In high school Harry was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) yet refused the special education services he was offered, describing them as “boring and a waste of time.” Harry joined the wrestling, hockey, and football teams, only to be kicked off each one due to poor behavior. He described the people with whom he associated at the time by saying, “all of my friends were more like the party every day, even if it’s a Tuesday.”

Harry credited his high school teachers with granting him a lot of “leeway” in spite of his poor behavior. They created repeated opportunities for him to succeed. Harry blames himself for failing to graduate, not his teachers. He said he always liked school even up until the day he quit. He realized that he had lost too many credits to graduate with his class and could not make them all up by going to summer school. Even though he had wanted a diploma, he stated he would be happy to earn a G.E.D.

Now that Harry is incarcerated he reports that he reads all the time. He has ruled out culinary work when he is released as he feels that the pay is inferior. He hopes to go to school to
become an electronic technician and care for his young daughter, who is currently being raised by his father and stepmother.

**Participant 9: Ingrid**

**Biographical Information**

Ingrid is a 19-year-old white female who reached twelfth grade before dropping out of high school. In September of her senior year she was pregnant, working, and finding attending school to be too much. By the time of this study she had given birth to a daughter and now had the additional responsibility of parenting. She tried returning to high school one day, however, she fell asleep in each class. She dropped out and chose to participate in her high school’s credit recovery program to earn her missing high school credits. Through online credit recovery courses, Ingrid was able to complete all of her diploma requirements and graduate two and a half years after her classmates.

**Textural Description of Ingrid**

Ingrid’s earliest memory of being read to was from Christmas Eve when her parents would read the book *The Night Before Christmas* to her. She recalled enjoying Kindergarten very much, stating, “I went to kindergarten at [name] School… doing ABCs and 123s, you know. …It was fun and when I hit first grade, that’s when I really started reading.” At that time her parents were together but they divorced when she was in third grade. She attended two different elementary schools within her town, repeating third grade at the second elementary school.

Ingrid also recalled that she would read independently each night before bed. She remembered that her parents were always reminding her to complete her summer reading assignments and daily homework. Although reading materials were not prevalent at home, she
went to the public library every week and read two or three books between library visits.

Additionally, she witnessed her mother reading once in a while at home.

In her first year of third grade she worked in a small group with a reading specialist for additional reading support. She stated that she was a poor speller, but tried to learn from her mistakes. When she entered middle school she read only in school, no longer at home. She recalled being assigned a lot of reading by high school. Ingrid remembered that her teachers had always sent a clear message that reading is a valuable skill and that some of her friends considered reading to be important, while others did not.

At the beginning of twelfth grade Ingrid also started working part-time in a local business. She shared,

Well, it wasn’t like I wanted to drop out. It was more like I just couldn’t handle being pregnant and coming to school in the morning and then going straight to work and like… plus I had like a gallbladder issue when I was pregnant. So like if I ate the wrong thing I would wake up in the middle of the night feeling like I was having a heart attack. So, it was more like… I didn’t want to drop out; it was more like I couldn’t do it anymore.

(Ingrid, Interview 2)

Her guidance counselor called after the holiday vacation of her senior year to encourage her to come back. She did attempt to return once that spring, after the birth of her daughter in March, but fell asleep in every class. She said:

I thought about dropping out before but I never ended up doing it. Because I knew like I need to get an education, like. It’s going to put me somewhere in my life. Like, put me farther. And like, then I had my daughter and I was just like, you know, I want to make her life better, so I need to get this credit recovery done. (Ingrid, Interview 3)
Within four months of the third interview, Ingrid had completed all of her course requirements and was awarded her high school diploma.

**Structural Description of Ingrid**

Ingrid was the only female dropout to keep the interview appointments for this study. She would come back to her local high school following a full day of work to participate in each of the interviews and openly talked about her experiences. She was able to earn her high school diploma due to her ability to adapt in order to succeed. She views herself as a survivor and is determined to further her education, starting with taking courses at a local junior college.

For Ingrid, the relationship between environmental events and personal factors influenced her drop-out decision the most. She was moderately successful in school up until the beginning of her senior year of high school. She indicated that she would have preferred more personal choice of reading materials during high school, saying, “There were more books to read [in high school], like more papers to write and stuff like that,” but she did not enjoy most of the required titles. By December of her senior year, she found that the combination of attending school, being pregnant, and working were too much for her. Her health, pregnancy, and job proved to be stronger incentives for leaving school than the acquisition of high school credits.

Her daughter was born in March and by the following summer Ingrid expressed a strong interest in the school’s credit recovery program so that she would be able to earn a high school diploma. She disclosed that as her daughter was approaching her first birthday, Ingrid was even more determined to complete the work that would qualify her for a diploma. She also expressed a strong desire to read regularly with her daughter.

The behaviors of being pregnant, having experienced lower academic achievement, often being absent, and writing and spelling poorly also influenced her self-perception and her drop-
out decision. These behaviors affected her attitude toward school, beginning with pre-school and continuing to high school. Her job success and being promoted to full-time status has increased her perception of herself as a capable person; this encouraged her to set a goal to further her education.

Textural-Structural Description of Ingrid

Ingrid had memories of being read to by her parents as a young child. They read each night before she went to sleep. She credits her mother with bringing her to the public library each week so she would have reading material readily available. Ingrid and her daughter both continue to live with her mother and brother; her boyfriend, the baby’s father, has remained in their lives. Her mother has supported Ingrid with some childcare assistance and the time to participate in a credit recovery program to earn her high school diploma.

Ingrid enjoyed her early school years and received additional support from a reading specialist in the primary grades. She was retained in third grade, moving to a new school for her repeat year. Ingrid’s move to this new school coincided with the divorce of her parents. She then lived with her mother and brother. Regular school attendance was an issue for Ingrid throughout middle and high school, lowering her grades.

Ingrid dropped out of high school in the fall of her senior year. She stated that she could not handle being pregnant, working, and attending school. Her daughter was born during the winter of what would have been her senior year. Ingrid has maintained her job for close to a year. Her supervisor has recently increased her from part to full time.

Ingrid has worked regularly with the teachers in her school’s credit recovery program. They have praised her for her effort and the successful completion of the credits required for a high school diploma. She and her mother are proud that she recently obtained her diploma even
though she was awarded her diploma at a private ceremony, two years later than the students who entered high school with her.

Ingrid plans to continue working and begin taking one course at a time at a local community college. She expressed the desire to further her education in order to provide a better future for her daughter.

**Participant 10: Jack**

**Biographical Information**

Jack is a twenty-year-old white male who is committed to the [name] Correctional Facility and was just beginning his second month of incarceration at the time of the study. He had a plan to drop out of high school at age 16 when he was in the tenth grade. His first school experience was in the city. He was retained in the first grade and then repeated the year in a suburban school.

**Textural Description of Jack**

Jack began preschool in the city where he lived and continued at the same school through first grade. With his parents and grandmother, he then moved to a nearby suburb and repeated the first grade there. He liked the way the suburban school divided the first grade students into two reading groups, Group 1 and Group 2. He stated that he had always been in Group 1 because “Group 2 was for the kids who couldn’t read as well. I was never in Group 2, though, I always did good in school, except I didn’t try.” He had no memory of having been read to at home and thought he most likely began reading on his own during his second year in first grade. He credited himself and his teacher for teaching him to read, but definitely not his parents. The only reading he remembered completing at home was for his homework assignments in elementary school.
He said that by middle school he completely stopped doing any homework or schoolwork. He did remember that there were always newspapers available in his home and that he often saw his grandmother reading at home. By his own account, his grandmother always tried to get him interested in reading but he had no desire to read.

Jack noted that by the time he reached high school, “I kinda didn’t really listen to anyone in high school.” He did not read, despite the adults in his life trying to convince him to do so. Since his arrival at the correctional facility, however, he has read a couple of books, which he described as a completely new experience for him.

Jack’s second interview focused on the details of his literacy acquisition experience. He again reported that by middle school he’d lost all interest in school. Just as he had shared at the first interview, he repeated “…that’s when I stopped doing homework and everything, so I never really did any school work.” He had been placed in alternative programs during high school, including one program he said was “for students with emotional difficulties.” He felt that each of these programs merely provided a place to complete homework assignments. He said that being completely removed from all the mainstream classes bothered him. He said that by tenth grade, “I was using drugs but the teachers tried to keep me in school.” Despite their best efforts, he dropped out. He described this as a great disappointment for his father, who had always wanted him to attain his diploma and go on to college.

The third interview with Jack asked him to reflect upon the meaning of his school and literacy experiences. Although he indicated that he was not sure that reading was an important skill to possess, he admitted that he had never thought about it, stating, “I read, but I don’t think it is really important.” When asked about whether he ever did any pleasure reading, Jack asked, “What’s that?” When the question was rephrased to ask about reading for enjoyment, Jack
indicated that he was never interested in the books assigned in school, but that he had read a few
books of interest to him, such as books about boxing. Jack does not use the library available at
the Correctional Facility and has no wish to do so. He has borrowed and read books sent in to
the other inmates.

Despite many difficult years attending school and now having earned a diploma, he
shared that he began thinking about leaving in the tenth grade. He credited his teachers for
helping him to earn four years of high school credit and his diploma. He did not agree that
reading was an important skill to have and had no plans for continuing his education beyond high
school. Since he had only been incarcerated for the past month, he indicated that he had a while
before he would have to make any decisions concerning his future. Jack speculated that he
might be interested in carpentry but had no immediate plan in mind.

**Structural Description of Jack**

For the most part, Jack’s school experiences were unsatisfactory beginning when he was
kept back in the first grade, continuing through his thoughts of dropping out, and up until his
graduation. Though he said that he was not one of the kids who could not read well, he repeated
the first grade.

Jack blamed his drug use for much of his high school experience. He began using
marijuana in the tenth grade and said, “getting high with my friends was more important than
school.” He added, “dropping out was not something that my family wanted.” His lack of
strong academic performance as well as his decision to stop attending school made him feel
different from his peers. During this same time Jack developed a dislike for the special
educational programs to which he was assigned. He resented being segregated from his peers
and placed in substantially separate programs outside the mainstream. The fact that he was
moved to several different programs indicated that the one most appropriate educational environment for him was never found. Looking back at his educational history, he resisted the changes to both the schools he attended and the programs to which he was assigned.

**Textural-Structural Description of Jack**

Jack’s educational experiences began with pre-Kindergarten. He then completed Kindergarten and first grade in the same city school with the recommendation that he repeat first grade. Due to his family’s move from the city, he repeated grade one in a suburban public elementary school. By his own admission, Jack did not try in elementary school although he had no specific examples to share.

By middle school he stopped doing any reading or other schoolwork. This behavior continued into high school. Having no interest in school, he was placed in several alternative programs, including a class he described as being for students with emotional difficulties. Resenting his segregation from his friends and being excluded from mainstream classes, Jack seriously considered dropping out from the tenth grade when he and his friends began using drugs regularly. Jack said that he rarely listened to anyone in authority during high school. Although his teachers tried to interest him and keep him focused on finishing high school, he indicated that he never felt that reading was important. He credits the help he received from his teachers for his eventual graduation.

Jack remembered that his family supported literacy by providing reading materials in the home. He saw his parents and grandmother reading and they tried to interest him in reading. Despite their efforts, he refused. His father hoped he would go on to college following high school. Jack, however, indicated that he was not interested.
Jack considered dropping out of high school when he turned 16, but with the help of his teachers he was able to persevere to graduation. His stated that his drop-out decision was not related to his reading ability. He said he always considered himself a strong reader. He made no plans to continue his education beyond high school.

Reading has become important to Jack during his current incarceration. He currently reads every day and enjoys biographies, edgy fiction, and sports magazines. He explained this represents a change as he chose not to read in high school, nor had he been interested in the books prescribed for him while he was in school.

**Participant 11: Ken**

**Biographical Information**

Ken is a 22-year-old white male sentenced to the [name] Correctional Facility. He attended a local parochial school in his city beginning with preschool. He took the entrance examination for one of the city’s premiere secondary schools when he was in the sixth grade, hoping to be accepted and attend there for grades 7-12. He was not accepted and remained at the same parochial school through his eighth grade graduation. He attended a parochial high school in the same city for ninth grade and then transferred to a public suburban high. He decided to drop out in the tenth grade, however his teachers intervened. He graduated on time from this suburban high school.

**Textural Description of Ken**

When asked about his life history, Ken recalled that he went through the motions of reading in kindergarten and probably got reading “down pat” when he was in the first grade. He remembered his mother reading to him as a young child before he started school and both of his
parents helping him with his schoolwork. He also remembered seeing his mother reading all of the books in the *Harry Potter* series. He said he had no interest in reading them himself.

Most of his friends were either accepted to one of the city’s exam schools or moved on to several different parochial high schools both in and outside the city. He was accepted into one religious high school in his city. He began attending high school there and remembered a strong emphasis being placed on reading. In particular, he described taking an SAT study course. When asked about the best way to prepare for the test, the instructor advocated wide reading. Ken remembered being told, “Read. You know, that’s it, Read.” He added, “You know people pay hundreds of dollars for these tutors and that’s what they recommend.”

Ken chose to leave this private high school at the end of his sophomore year. He explained that it had been his choice and that the school told him he could come back. Instead, he enrolled in a public suburban high school. He described the experience as follows:

I just got caught up, small town, you know what I mean? I just got caught up in the BS, but I was still you know like hanging out with my friends, but… I don’t know, drugs… people started getting high and you know… you think like smokin’ weed and drinking is so innocent, but then… it turns into a whole other thing. (Ken, Interview 2)

When asked his opinion about whether the teachers and administrators could have done more or made more of a difference in bettering his experience or keeping him away from drugs and alcohol, Ken responded:

Yeah, I think, maybe like, there could have been a little more, like drug education. There was a little bit, but they didn’t really go into it extensively. …Yeah, I think they could have done a little better, but I think that high school is a good school, too. (Ken, Interview 2)
Ken went on to say that he had been able to develop a good relationship with one of the assistant coaches at the school. He described him as a “good guy. He understood. Like he understood how it was.”

Despite his thoughts about dropping out, Ken was able to graduate from this suburban high school with his class. He indicated, however, that he never followed through on applying to college, despite his family’s desire that he do so. He acknowledged that he had no direction. As a result he ended up working construction with his father. He described the work as taking a toll on him physically and reinstating a previous back injury that he said he received while he was playing hockey. He blamed this injury for his subsequent drug use. He said, “Because of that [injury] I got into using drugs and… the pills. …I got into the Oxy’s you know; then my drug addictions took over.” Being incarcerated has been difficult for Ken. He shared, “I just want to get out of this place. I never thought I’d end up here. …I came from a good family.”

As with all of the other study participants, the third interview session asked Ken to reflect on the meaning of the experiences discussed during the first and second interviews and what factors led him to consider dropping out. He immediately pointed to the differences he encountered between the environments at a parochial high school in the city and at a suburban public high school. He genuinely credited his family for supporting him and helping him “to ride it out.”

He understood from a young age that school was hard work but he never got any pleasure from reading. Just recently, with time on his hands at the correctional facility, Ken has discovered the meaning of reading for pleasure. He is also thinking about taking night classes when he is released, possibly in business management.

**Structural Description of Ken**
Environmental events strongly influenced Ken’s life experiences. His earliest memories of family, school, and literacy development were pleasant ones, although he said he had never derived any pleasure or satisfaction from reading. Things dramatically changed for him when he was not accepted into his desired exam school for grades 7 through 12. His disappointment was heightened because he remained in the same school that he’d been attending since preschool for seventh and eighth grade. These classes were structured in the exact same way as they had been during his elementary years. Ken resented being treated as just an older elementary child, not a maturing middle school student with more independence and choice of classes. He was accepted to and entered a religious high school in his city. The transition was smooth and he originally had few complaints. There was some discomfort, however, because he felt somewhat unprepared for the academic work. After attending for two years, Ken was restless and felt the need to transfer to the public suburban high school that his cousin attended in a neighboring town.

Ken experienced an immense change at this public high school. His attitude changed along with his self-perception. He was introduced to drugs and alcohol and struggled to remain in school. Looking back, he wished there had been more drug and alcohol awareness education incorporated into the program at this school, although he could not say with certainty whether such a program would have made a difference in his life. Upon reflection, he felt the people with whom he associated at that time had a stronger influence on his behavior than any drug awareness program could have.

Ken’s family still maintained some influence over his behavior at that time and compelled him to finish high school. He did nothing toward furthering his education after that. Because of what he described as a recurring back injury, he became addicted to oxycontin.
Dangerous behaviors that he did not specify ensued and Ken has now found himself sentenced to this correctional facility. He expressed disappointment in himself for letting his family down and not meeting their expectations. The jail environment has made him feel closer to his family and grateful for their support. He knows he needs to seek a future job that does not require so much physical labor and has started thinking about going back to school to study business management.

Personal factors have also influenced Ken’s behavior. He is proud of his family and that his siblings have all graduated from college. He regrets the path that he has followed and hopes to rebuild positive relationships with his family members. He now has an incentive to further his education and for the first time understands that it is possible to read for pleasure.

Textural-Structural Description of Ken

Like Francis, Ken attended a parochial school from pre-Kindergarten through the eighth grade, although his school was in a different part of the city. He remembered reading on his own during the first grade. Ken also took the entrance test and was not accepted into the same exam school to which Francis applied for grades 7-12. Ken, however, went on to attend a private parochial high school in the city. After two years he chose to leave and attend a suburban public high school, where he was introduced to drugs and alcohol. He was able to graduate, but did nothing about furthering his education beyond that.

During elementary school Ken was helped at home by his parents and has vivid memories of his mother always reading. Ken was close to his family and had seen all his siblings go away to college and graduate. He described himself as coming from “a good family” and expressed appreciation that his parents paid the tuition to send him to an expensive private high school. He showed remorse for being sentenced to the [name] Correctional Facility, indicating that he had
let his family down. He had high praise for his family because they continued to stand behind him and helped him to earn his diploma.

Ken’s life changed considerably when he enrolled in the public high school that his cousin attended. He and the people around him started getting high, thinking that smoking weed and drinking were innocent things that everyone did. He found himself addicted to those substances, along with the painkillers that he had been prescribed for a hockey injury.

During his last two years of high school, Ken developed a relationship with an assistant coach. He credited that coach with understanding what he was going through and helping him through the rough times. He also felt that the school administration should have done more with drug education and helping students avoid addiction. From his experiences, he felt that too little had been provided. Ken’s strongest relationships and support came from his own family.

Summary

Chapter 4 provided a brief biographical narrative for each participant. This was followed by the individual textural and structural descriptions for each of the subjects interviewed. These descriptions provided the “what” and the “how” found in the life events of each of the people interviewed. An individual textural-structural description for each co-researcher was then provided to present the meanings and essences of the individual’s experience. Because each person shared his or her own distinctive account, some themes emerged that were exclusive to that particular experience. Other themes became apparent that were common to all of the interviews. These themes are investigated in Chapter 5 to provide a composite or “universal description of the experiences representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). Table 3 indicates the themes discerned for each of the participants.

Table 3:
### Themes

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Chapter 5: Composite Descriptions of Themes

Introduction

Moustakas (1994) identified the last process in phenomenological investigation as the synthesis of meanings and essences into “a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (p. 100). Since the essences are extracted from the individual textural and structural descriptions at a particular time and place as examined by a single researcher, they can never be completely exhausted (Moustakas, 1994). The composite descriptions of the participants in this study then represent “how the co-researchers as a group experience what they experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 142).

Composite Textural-Structural Description

An examination of each participant’s description of his or her lived experience brought to light several themes as the participants progressed through the three interviews as designed by Seidman (2006). Applying Bandura’s model of Triadic Reciprocal, the interview transcripts were analyzed and coded according to personal experiences, behavioral patterns, and social/environmental events. Since all of the participants were concurrently agents and objects of their own environment (Bandura, 1997), they made particular decisions about their education and chose their own course of action or path. Bandura’s theory guided this analysis of the perceived self-efficacy across the participants’ life spans to date.

During their early schooling, literacy was modeled for them regardless of their pre-school experiences. Their elementary school teachers, at least, worked to cultivate a positive school experience and fostered a belief in their abilities. According to their individual testimonies, learning to read is important (Wood & Bandura, 1989). Positive secondary school experiences were not commonly reported. Only three participants, Charles, Eduardo, and Ingrid,
spoke positively about middle school, while only Bruce and Harry indicated that high school was something they enjoyed. Additionally, only Eduardo, Harry, and Ingrid reported receiving any academic or counseling support while enrolled in middle and high school.

The participants demonstrated their engagement with literacy, school, family, friends, and other adults in their descriptions of events from home to school; pre-Kindergarten through high school; and, for the nine male participants, into the [name] Correctional Facility. Common themes then emerged from the bidirectional relationships between personal factors, behavior, and environmental events as presented in Figure 1. These themes were all contributing factors in each participant’s lived experience including: transitions to new schools or programs; grade retention; peer influence; relationships with significant adults; lack of success in school; disengagement from school; problems at home; and other personal and institutional factors. Only Bruce and Charles reported being raised by single parents. Andrew and Harry indicated that a significant loss of credit precipitated their failure to graduate.

The themes common to all participants were found to be: educational experience, including the relationship with adults and the institution of school itself; transition due retention or change of school/program; family influence; relationships with peers including the sub-theme of drug and alcohol use; reasons for the drop-out decision; and future educational plans.

**Educational experience.** The educational history of each participant illustrates both personal and institutional influences on his or her experiences. For all but Bruce and Harry, preschool and elementary school were their happiest reported experiences with school. Ken even reported liking the school uniforms that he had to wear when he started parochial school. Andrew indicated that he had an easy time getting good grades then because he believed he had the “smarts” to complete the work successfully. Bruce remembered that he could read very well
and would raise his hand to volunteer in class. Charles reported that he always “picked things up pretty easily” and never had any difficulty learning in elementary school. Eduardo and Greg both said they “loved” being in elementary school, while Ingrid described it as fun. Jack said he was always good at reading when he started school. As indicated by Biancarosa and Snow (2005), literacy development at this time focuses on learning to read in the beginning years of education, primarily in pre-Kindergarten through grade three.

Late elementary and middle school were stumbling blocks for many of the participants because they no longer saw the value of what they were being asked to read or what they were required to do. Literacy education at this time focuses on reading to learn (Biancarosa & Snow, 2005). During this time the participants were not longer willing to be compliant, doing whatever they were asked without question. Bruce became friends with older students and started smoking cigarettes in fourth grade. In sixth grade he was skipping school regularly and by seventh grade he was getting into fights, saying, “the cockiness just came out in me.”

Andrew indicated that he began smoking cigarettes and later marijuana by middle school, leading him to get in trouble at school. Francis indicated that everything changed for him in sixth grade when he was not accepted to the exam school that he had hoped to attend for grades 7 through 12. He stopped caring about school. By his own report, Harry started getting into trouble in fourth grade, stating, “I started to get in progressively more trouble in school, not paying attention in class… fourth grade was probably the worst for me, then I got out of control.” By sixth grade he was asked to leave his middle school and then sent to live in another town with his father and stepmother. Ingrid said that for her, middle school meant “I would read the books when we were in class and stuff, but I really died down the reading at home.” Jack said, “Middle school was when I stopped doing homework and everything, so I never did any
schoolwork at home.” For Eduardo, one middle school teacher made a difference in his life. This teacher praised him and made him feel good about his work. According to Eduardo, “He really made me a better reader and writer. I appreciate that.”

High school began well for Ken, Bruce, Charles, and Jack. Jack indicated that he was excited to start high school because it was “a big step up, a lot more people, a lot more girls.” He said, “I liked it at first and then I started smoking weed and I got like the ‘screw it’ mentality.” Ken was pleased that his parents paid the tuition to send him to a private city high school but he left after two years, had trouble acclimating to a suburban public high school, and chose the wrong group of friends. Bruce reported, “I wasn’t really a fan of school until I went to high school, until high school rolled around.” Charles stated that he just missed the honor roll in high school and he never stopped liking school. The reason for his leaving school was due to expulsion.

Andrew and Eduardo dropped out as soon as they reached sixteen, the age when they could legally drop out. Eduardo did return but was ultimately expelled after attending three different high schools and an alternative program. Andrew and Harry had lost significant credit and would not have been able to graduate without repeating or doubling up on courses. Harry had his schedule adjusted to include what he disdainfully described as “homework classes,” which he considered a waste of time.

Harry: Yeah, a study room where they help you out with stuff. I went to it and I ended up turning it down my sophomore year because it was wasting my time. I would rather take a real class than sit around and do study. (Harry, Interview 2)
Relationships with high school teachers and administrators varied for the participants interviewed. Some of the participants spoke about their relationships with caring adults who mentored them or made a difference in their school experience.

Interviewer: What kept you in school, do you think?

Jack: The teachers.

Others expressed that no one had shown any interest in them throughout their entire school history. Andrew shared that the assistant principal at his school influenced him to drop out.

Andrew: I was kind of like a problem in school anyway, so I think it was [name of Assistant Principal] [said] I was at a point like there was no point coming the rest of the year because I was going to fail anyway. I got my G.E.D. the same year.

Most faulted themselves and were unwilling to pass any blame onto school personnel. Eduardo indicated that despite a successful relationship with a middle school teacher, he had never given anyone at the many high schools he attended a chance to get to know him.

Throughout the interviews the participants all indicated that they felt their reading ability was “medium” to “very good.” Only one, Andrew, specified some trouble with comprehension when asked to read aloud.

Andrew: Sometimes we read out of a pamphlet and if I’m reading aloud like to the rest of the group, I will get done with what I’m reading and I won’t have a clue what I just read. Like I will have to read it again and double look at it.

The others all shared a strong belief in their reading ability. No one reported having had any difficulty learning to read. Now with time for independent reading available to them either at home in Ingrid’s case, or at the jail for the others, they practiced reading every day and demonstrated confidence in their literacy skills.
This confidence demonstrated their self-efficacy because they each described themselves as capable readers who chose not to read during high school. The participants arrived at this decision from different paths and circumstances, but all were in agreement. Some had never experienced being read to as a child and none reported having extensive reading collections at home. If reading materials were available, they were generally for parental use, not theirs.

At the high school level, schoolwork did not interest any of the participants either in or out of class, and most gave up on completing any academic work or even attending school. Bruce said he knew how to read but hated doing it. He was proud to say that he has read his first book on his own since he has been incarcerated.

Bruce: When I was younger I knew how to read but it was harder. I have ADD so when I was younger I couldn’t… I didn’t pay attention. I wasn’t on point like that. So when I was younger I didn’t [read]. …now that I look back on it as an adult, I think it’s very important, but as a kid I was like, oh, why do we have to do this kind of thing.

Other incarcerated participants reported something similar.

Francis: I didn’t actually start reading until I came here [to the correctional facility]. I mean… my first book I read in here was probably the first book I read.

Greg: I think I’m a very good reader. [I read] everyday and I always have a book at nighttime. …[before] I wasn’t serious in my head then; …now I’m like you can’t do anything without an education.

Harry: I never really liked reading. I mean I enjoy to read, but I was never like, hey, let’s go to the bookstore on my day off. [But] if you can’t read, write and talk like a normal person, you can’t get anywhere in life. Even if you work construction, you need to know big words, you know what I mean, just normal communication skills.
Ken: I’m pretty confident in [my ability to read]. When I was studying for the SAT, I remember the guy at [private high school] he came in and he was like… everybody asked, what can I do for that to get ready for the SAT’s and he said, read. You know that’s it, read. Yeah, I like to read here. It’s kind of tough, I mean… the atmosphere. I like to have it be quiet.

Although the participants exhibited self-efficacy in terms of literacy, they did not demonstrate it with respect to their secondary school experiences.

Retention/transition to new schools or classes. Despite proclaiming their ability to read at the present time, several participants indicated that they had been kept back at some point in their education, forcing them to acclimate to new classmates, teachers, and/or schools. Others indicated that they had experienced transitions when they moved, changed schools, or had been assigned to alternative programs. As stated by Bandura (1997), “People’s beliefs in their personal efficacy play a paramount role in how they organize, create, and manage the environment that affects their developmental pathways” (p. 163).

Retention and transition represent institutional factors that influence students. As students, each one reported difficulty assimilating to new situations, leaving friends behind, being forced to make new friends, and enduring changes despite his or her wishes. Transitions required adjustments, imbued uncertainty, and obliged students to develop relationships with new friends and/or unfamiliar adults. They expressed worries about fitting into new situations both socially and academically. In the case of retention, older students experienced frustration if the work seemed too easy or too hard in their new school or program. Some participants expressed less motivation, wishing to return to previous settings.
Bruce: Nah, I really didn’t like [new town] a lot because I had all my friends in [former city], so, I got to [new town] and it was just different. It’s the suburbs, it’s not the city. … then I moved back to [city] and on to [high school]. It was the best. Oh, I loved it. I was back in my hometown. I was happy.

Eduardo: I signed out as soon as I turned 16, yeah, freshman year. I went back a couple of times. I went to [high school]. I got transferred to [high school] and that’s where I signed off at. In high school I was supposed to go to the Job Corps or something like that, but I never went to it. I messed up for the rest of the year and just… school started again and I went to another school which was [high school]. And then I went to an alternative school… but at the end of the day, I didn’t finish it either.

Interestingly, all of the participants in the study experienced either grade retention, a move to a new school or learning environment, or both. None of these transitions improved their chances of graduating from high school and, in most cases, impeded it. Each of the participants was faced with obstacles to overcome and diminished self-efficacy with respect to their educational experience.

**Family influence.** As explained by Bandura (1997), the family is the center of all initial efficacy experiences. The family represents both personal and institutional factors that influence the decision to drop out or persevere toward a diploma. Bandura (1997) states, “…the types of enabling experiences parents provide during the early childhood years contribute to the future direction the developmental course takes irrespective of the quality and stability of the early home environment” (p. 169). Several participants described the divorce or separation of their parents as precipitating a negative change in their attitude toward schooling and leading them to stop participating to their fullest ability in school. These family transitions provided additional
reasons for unhappiness. For some, the increased freedom and lack of supervision resulted in deviant behavior.

   Andrew: My parents split early, got divorced. I probably didn’t have the most guidance. I like had a lot of freedom. … I didn’t like having people telling me what to do. I was bouncing in between [my mother’s and father’s homes].

   Eduardo: When I first started having trouble, like in school… I based it on my mother’s and father’s divorce. …I started not caring, being rude to the teachers, just wanted to go home and see what was going on at home. And that was the jumpstart of me not liking school.

   Francis: My mother was just gone …when she separated from my father she thought it was going to be different for her too. …And I just think it went downhill for kind of both of them. My mother was more of a friend [then], than a mother.

For others, the custodial parent was no longer capable of raising and supervising them alone, especially during adolescence.

   Harry: I got kicked out of there [middle school] within months and moved. My mom couldn’t take care of us anymore so we moved to my father’s house. I was wild or whatever you want to call it, wild.

The lives of Andrew, Eduardo, Francis, and Harry were forever changed by the divorce of their parents. Bruce and Donald were raised by single mothers, never acknowledging the presence of a father or father figure in their lives. Charles was raised by his mother and grandmother and had some contact with an uncle who was helping him with his future education and job readiness.
Ken and Ingrid had the most family support and have been able to earn their high school diplomas. Ken completed his freshman and sophomore years at a tuition-based private school in the city paid for by his parents. His transition to a suburban public high school resulted in legal issues and drug addiction. He regrets what he has put his family through. Ingrid has been supported by her mother through her school years and now with providing childcare for her young daughter.

At the time of the interviews, Andrew, Eduardo, Ingrid, Harry, and Jack also indicated increased family responsibilities. They were all parents; and Francis shared that he “has a kid on the way” with his former girlfriend. The participants with limited or no family support have not fared as well as Ken and Ingrid.

**Relationships with peers.** The importance of peers grows considerably as each individual expands his or her world. As stated by Bandura (1997), “Peers assume an increasingly important role in [children’s] development of self-knowledge of their capabilities” (p. 169). Drug and alcohol use was prevalent for the incarcerated participants by the time they reached high school and was co-morbid with their sentencing to the [name] Correctional Facility. Non-academic activities such as partying and hanging out on the streets became more important to them. The participants in this study often sought out the company of others whom they felt were experiencing similar feelings about school, substantiating Bandura’s (1997) belief that:

Peers are neither homogeneous nor selected indiscriminately. Children tend to choose close associates who share similar interests and values. Selective peer associations will promote self-efficacy in directions of mutual interest, leaving other potentialities underdeveloped. …The social influences are undoubtedly bidirectional: Affiliation
references affect the direction of efficacy development, and personal efficacy, in turn, partly determines the choice of peer associates and activities. (p. 173)

The associations shared by the nine incarcerated participants led them to risky behaviors and the use of drugs and alcohol and, for Ken, prescription painkillers. High-risk activities, according to Bandura (1997), can lessen self-efficacy and “irreversibly foreclose many beneficial life paths” (p. 181). This in fact had already happened to Harry and Eduardo. The Marine Corps had rejected Harry, and Eduardo’s convictions had excluded him from a criminal justice career.

Other participants provided the following information:

Andrew: I wasn’t really in the right group of friends. …I started smoking weed with them at probably like [age] 12. So I think that my priorities weren’t right.

Bruce: I supposed the company that I kept was the same as me. …In fourth grade I started hanging out with older kids, so I decided to do the wrong thing. I started smoking cigarettes in fourth grade. …So I really didn’t have time to read and do school activities. …I started skipping school in sixth grade. …I was with my best friend at the time. …I chose to hang out with people that weren’t interested in, you know, going to school. …I was more interested in going out partying with my friends and doing stupid stuff, you know. Illegal activities, getting high. I smoked a lot of weed. I experimented a lot. I started using you know. I was a rebel so I smoked weed and whatever, but I really didn’t start using drugs until my sophomore year.

Eduardo: It was cool in the beginning, hanging out, going to parties and whatnot, but at the end of the day when I wanted to get a job I couldn’t get it because I had no education. …I’m a recovering addict so I could really relate to people using drugs and all that.
Francis: And down there [the south] is where I got introduced to all the drugs and stuff like that, so …I moved back here and I just got with the crowd that did the same things.

Greg: I think I was hanging out with the wrong crew. …You know picking up things like smoking weed, drinking and what I shouldn’t have been at such a young age. …And then I just started skipping [school] a lot and then my grades were going down and eventually after that, screw it, I just wasn’t going at all.

Ken: At [name] High School I got into using drugs and… the pills. I got into the Oxy’s and you know I came from a good family and this wasn’t part of… I never thought I’d end up here [at the correction facility].

The use of illegal substances overshadowed the other risky behaviors that the incarcerated participants had previously engaged in. Skipping school, fighting, and becoming parents had not resulted in their being sentenced to the [name] Correctional Facility.

**Dropout decision.** Each participant cited different reasons for dropping out of high school. Not one blamed their literacy development or skills. Their association with school represented an influential time in each of their lives and served as what Bandura describes as “an agency for cultivating self-efficacy” (p. 174). Each of the ten individuals completing the study stated that he or she was a strong reader and began engaging with literacy during his or her early school years.

Additionally, each participant could pinpoint the exact time, either early or late in his or her secondary school experience, when they knew they were not going to graduate, either through personal choice or expulsion. Andrew blamed his drug use, getting into trouble, being with the wrong crowd, and having too many absences to pass tenth grade. He left when he
turned 16, part way through his sophomore year. For Bruce the decision came in his sophomore year. He said, “I lost my youth from being in juvenile detention, so I was discouraged to keep going back to school and I just didn’t want to do it. I saw all the kids dropping out.” Charles made it to the eleventh grade but knew then he would not graduate because of his expulsion. On his 16th birthday Eduardo signed himself out. Although he did return he was then passed between four different high schools and an alternative program. In the end he was expelled from that program because of his behavior. Francis indicated that his drug and alcohol use was the reason for him to leave school. He said he didn’t really drop out; he just stopped attending school. He made the decision to drop out in eighth grade but had to wait until his sixteenth birthday.

Greg made it to the twelfth grade before becoming incarcerated. He dropped out and never went back. He stated that his use of drugs and alcohol was to blame. According to Harry, he did not graduate because when he got to his senior year he did not have enough credits. He also indicated that he often got himself into trouble. He had always planned on getting a diploma but his lack of credits made him give up. Ingrid’s decision during her senior year was based upon her pregnancy and part-time job. She stated that she wasn’t always feeling well and attending school became too much for her.

Jack’s decision to drop out occurred during tenth grade. He indicated that he was not interested in doing the work any longer. The last participant, Ken, made the decision to drop out between his sophomore and junior years when he transferred from a private high school to a public one where he got involved with drugs and alcohol.

Although some participants went on to attain a diploma later or a G.E.D., all regretted some aspect of the choice they had made. The importance of having an education as well as the
ability to read and write well was perceptible in their responses. They understood the difference in job earnings over their lifetime when compared to those with higher levels of education. Everyone interviewed indicated a plan to continue their education either through community college courses or some hands-on vocational training.

Greg and Harry also associated their future jobs with wages:

Interviewer: You know your future isn’t at McDonalds?

Greg: Yeah, unless I’m gonna be the CEO. And that ain’t happening.

Interviewer: What about for a career? What would interest you?

Harry: I was going to look into [culinary], but it just doesn’t make enough money. …People always have to eat, you know, but I don’t see it making enough money.

I worked in a bunch of different restaurants as a cook and it barely pays the bills.

It was unfortunate, therefore, that none of the participants viewed the majority of their past school experiences as enjoyable or worthwhile. They demonstrated that their self-efficacy was related to either finishing high school or dropping out. Each stated that literacy was not a factor in any of their drop-out decisions. All of the participants indicated that they regretted making the decision to drop out.

**Plan for future education.** Andrew explained his previous success with hands-on work, including construction. He has earned his G.E.D. and plans to continue his schooling in order to obtain a trade license either as a plumber or electrician. Bruce has earned his diploma and indicated that he has completed all but three liberal arts credits toward his freshman year of college. He expects to return to his local community college and possibly pursue certification as a drug counselor. Charles has not completely made up his mind. He has earned his G.E.D. and is now considering earning a commercial driver’s license (CDL) to become a truck driver, or
attending community college in order to become an electrician through a joint program with a local utility.

Eduardo regrets that he was not accepted into the one vocational program offered by his school district. While he awaits the results of his recent G.E.D. testing, he has recently spent time observing in the jail’s kitchen facility. Eduardo is strongly leaning toward attending community college to study culinary arts. Francis stated that he expects follow up with the training opportunities suggested through the correctional facility once he earns his G.E.D. He would like to become a sports trainer or work in the field of athletics. Greg bemoaned the fact that vocational opportunities were not offered in his high school. He is awaiting his G.E.D. results and expects to apply to a local technology institute to study automotive mechanics and become a technician.

Harry is planning to take the test for his G.E.D. Then he hopes to attend his local community college and become an electronics technician. Now that Ingrid has completed her high school’s credit recovery program and received her diploma, she is looking to further her education at the local community college. She plans to continue her current employment and wants to provide a better life for her daughter. Jack came to the jail with a high school diploma. He had only been incarcerated there for two weeks and although he plans to continue his education upon release, he felt it was too soon for him to make a future plan. Having previously earned his diploma, Ken anticipates taking business management courses when he is released.

**Summary**

Through Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series, the study participants illustrated the scope of their educational attainment as related to family, peers, school, and dropping out. Table 4 provides their current educational status.
Table 4:

*Current Educational Status*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Diploma</th>
<th>G.E.D.</th>
<th>Awaiting G.E.D. Results</th>
<th>Anticipating G.E.D.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Eduardo</td>
<td>Francis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>Harry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Through the descriptions of their elementary school experiences, all of the participants demonstrated that they had been happy and more interested in learning, even enjoying learning at that time. For educators, these participants are sending a clear message about literacy and schooling in general. For the most part, the early experiences of these participants were described in positive terms with self-efficacy intact. During this time they were connected either to their families, their schools, or both. All demonstrated their self-efficacy by self-reporting that they have mastered the fundamentals of learning to read and by indicating confidence in their academic abilities. This academic time is often described by reading experts as the “learning to read” period during preschool through grade three.

The educational disconnect for most of these students began either during their late elementary years or during middle school when “reading to learn” imposed new requirements, particularly in the content areas of math, social studies, and science. Textbooks became denser and the participants often viewed the material as less relevant to their lives. Learning ceased to be as enjoyable as it had once been. Doing schoolwork was no longer satisfying and for many skipping school or individual classes alone or with friends became more desirable. Eduardo’s
seventh grade English teacher, however, made him feel proud of his work. He credited this teacher with making him a better reader and writer.

During their middle school transition, most of the participants began withdrawing from learning, either due to a loss of motivation, boredom, lack of interest in the curriculum and materials, the influence of their peers, or a myriad of family issues. Many found extrinsic motivators to make them feel better about their lives. These often included cigarettes, drugs and alcohol, sex sometimes resulting in parenthood, and other risky behaviors. Ingrid was the only participant who did not mention drugs or alcohol.

All withdrew from the school environment, feeling they needed something different. They chose not to complete work in school, out of school, or both. Those with strong family support like Bruce, Ingrid, and Ken fared better in terms of earning a diploma, but that was not enough to keep them from being disappointed in themselves by the time of this study.

As expressed earlier, the purpose of this study was to discover the essences within the lived experiences of the ten participants who completed the study. Although each had led a different life, common themes evolved from their individual experiences. Many additional themes were then coded, reflected upon, and reduced or collapsed to yield their invariant structures. These were then meshed with the personal factors, behaviors, and environmental events that emerged from the participants’ own words as transcribed from the interviews.

Surprisingly, the transcriptions revealed a shared belief on the part of all participants that they could read fluently and did so now on a regular basis. In their view, the availability of reading materials and adult modeling during their early lives had little impact on their current status as literate young adults. During high school they had all made a conscious choice not to read. Spending time with peers and skipping classes or entire school days had greater appeal,
beginning as early as the fourth grade for Bruce. Classes and materials were not motivating to any of the participants; in contrast, spending time earning money at a job such as Ingrid’s, being on the streets as described by Eduardo, or partying with friends, as mentioned by all except Ingrid, was motivating.

At the present time, all of the participants described reading as central to their lives. Francis and Harry were preparing for the upcoming G.E.D. examination. Some were reading to fill the time either while at home or incarcerated and several were proud to share that they had recently completed reading their first book. Sharing novels was common at the [name] Correctional Institution, where a lack of desirable library material was lamented.
Chapter 6: Summary and Discussion

Summary of the Study

In order to examine the experience of students considering the life-altering decision to drop out of high school prior to earning a diploma, former high school students received an invitation either through their high school assistant principal or through a sign up sheet posted in the [name] Correctional Facility requesting participants for a non-criminal justice research project. Purposive and convenience sampling was employed. The participants selected were between the ages of 18 and 23, nine were currently incarcerated, and two had failed to graduate on time from their local, comprehensive high school. Four have since earned their high school diploma and two have completed their G.E.D., with two others awaiting the results of recent G.E.D. testing.

The eleven volunteers’ descriptions of their unique life experiences were collected and analyzed. The perceptions of each participant, as well as the meanings they had gleaned from their experiences, were gathered through one-on-one interviews following Seidman’s (2006) technique. All of the interviews were semi-structured, using the open-ended questions that can be found in Appendix B.

Although there is a plethora of literature on the drop-out situation, the great majority of it is quantitative. Few studies incorporated the actual testimony of students as they described their lived experience. What was gleaned from the drop-out experiences of the ten participants who completed the study is summarized in this final chapter, including the relationships between the personal factors, behavior patterns, and social/environmental events that have continuously influenced their learning. The findings are discussed and conclusions have been drawn with
Bandura’s triadic reciprocity in mind. This chapter closes with limitations of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

**Discussion**

Guided by the work of Wood and Bandura (1989), the cognitive, social, and behavioral competencies were extended to include literacy and the qualifications for a high school diploma. Both of these are accomplished through four means: mastery experiences; modeling; social persuasion; and the enhancement of status by reducing stress and/or eliminating constraints (p. 365). In the literature, enhancement of status has also been referred to as “emotional and physiological states” (Jones, Varberg, Manger, Eikeland, & Asbornsen, 2012). Klassen (2010) adds:

Teachers and parents can help guide adolescents to cognitively process the self-efficacy sources by emphasizing students’ successes (i.e. mastery experiences), by highlighting examples of competent self-regulated practices in peers (i.e. vicarious experiences), by offering encouragement to adopt self-regulatory practices (i.e., social persuasion), and by helping students anticipate and manage physiological and affective reactions to anxiety-producing learning situations. (p. 28)

**Mastery experiences.** Based on the results of this study, the first recommendation for practice would be to increase the opportunity for mastery experiences at the high school level. Mastery experiences, as described by Klassen (2010), then, are previous successful experiences (p. 28). They consist of the analysis of experiences and, “In self-efficacy theory, people evaluate their skills and abilities and convert their beliefs about their capabilities into purposive action” (p. 19). Reading experts describe the early years of schooling as the time when students engage in “learning to read.” This generally encompasses pre-K through grade 3. Once students master
learning to read, they engage in “reading to learn” beyond grade 3. Reading then becomes the tool of education (Biancarosa & Snow, 2005).

At every level, success in school provides students with belief in themselves. This is often not the case for students in danger of dropping out of high school, particularly with respect to adolescent literacy and school performance (Brozo, 2010). For most students there is no reading instruction in high school (McCoss-Yergian & Krepps, 2010), when some experts feel it is needed the most and where the readability of texts often exceeds students’ ability (Gullotta, 2001; Hall, 2006, 2005; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Miller & Veatch, 2010; Rutenberg, 2009; Shanahan & Hynd-Shanahan, 2006; Wilson, 2011; Witte et al., 2010). Additionally, most high school content teachers do not consider themselves responsible for teaching literacy, seeing such instructions as the responsibility of English language arts teachers or those designated specifically as reading teachers, especially at the elementary level (Boling & Evans, 2008; Brozo, 2010; Draper, 2002; Fleishman, 2005; Gewertz, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2009; McCoss-Yergian, & Krepps, 2010; Moore et al., 1999). With the adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) throughout the nation, a shift is expected with the requirement that every teacher become a literacy teacher in their content area. The shift to these standards, however, will require time and money on the part of school districts (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010).

Without mastery experiences, students view themselves as less competent. According to Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, DelBove, Vecchio, Barbaranelli, and Bandura (2008), “Students whose sense of efficacy was raised, set higher aspirations for themselves, showed greater strategic flexibility in the search for solutions, [and] achieved higher intellectual performances” (p. 526). Although the participants interviewed for this study indicated positive experiences in
elementary school, they acknowledged being far less successful in high school. For each of them, high school was a time of high absenteeism, cutting classes, and failing to complete the required work either in or out of school (Bloom, 2010). Similar to those described by Gambrell (2010), McNulty (2003), Kanevsky and Keighley (2003), and Reschly (2010), the participants interviewed for this study reported disliking the assigned curriculum, being bored in class, and having little or no motivation to achieve. Without the desire to succeed, these students had indicators of low self-esteem, lacked confidence in their abilities, and were at a greater risk of dropping out (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Lawrence et al., 2009; Lesley, 2008; Vacca, 2004). In 2010, Hall reported that students with strong self-efficacy were successful students and had increased engagement, learned more, and achieved at higher levels. The implication is that self-efficacy in students can be raised through: monitoring comprehension while reading; rereading for self-correction; asking questions and for help when needed; persevering to understanding; reflecting upon what had been read; and contributing in class (Hall, 2006, 2010). The study participants all reported their current success with and enjoyment of reading. They pointed to now having the time to read and the ability to choose what to read for themselves.

In studying student self-efficacy, Steinmayr and Spinath (2009) found evidence that student motivation played an important role in success. This was supported by Caprara et al. (2010), who linked “high levels of perceived self-efficacy for self-regulated learning… with higher high school grades and with a lower probability of dropping out” (p. 82). All of the participants in this study now indicated a strong motivation to read in addition to their desire to further their education in preparation for entering the work force.

**Modeling.** Modeling is also labeled “vicarious experiences” by Klassen (2010, p. 28). All individuals, according to Bandura (1990), learn from watching others within the three
domains of: environmental events; personal factors, including cognitive, affective, and biological; and behavior patterns. Having appropriate role models, therefore, is a source of learning for all. By asking each participant to recall their earliest experiences with reading and literacy, the goal was to establish whether they had any role models prior to beginning formal schooling and beyond. Six of the participants did express having been read to by parents or grandparents, while the remaining five never had the experience.

The students who had no modeling at home entered school less equipped to succeed; as Downey (2008) found, such students do not face the same future as their better prepared classmates, even at that early age. According to Cappella and Weinstein (2001), only about 15% of students with poor reading skills are able to turn around their reading difficulties enough to graduate. In another study, Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson (2007) found that having a teacher as a role model reduced the possibility of a student dropping out of high school by half (p. 333). Despite being somewhat unsuccessful up through high school, those interviewed for this study all shared that reading was important to them at the present time. Most indicated that they felt their reading would continue into their future endeavors.

Kane, as quoted by Samuels and Samuels (1975), found other role models in students’ lives to be negative influences, including peers and “older generations who freely use sleeping pills tranquilizers, diet pills, coffee, and tobacco. …Consequently, an alarming number [of adolescents] are turning to drugs in an effort to cope with or perhaps simply endure the life around” (p. 422). Drug and alcohol use are discussed further under social persuasion.

**Social persuasion.** Simply stated, social persuasion is the encouragement received from others. As maintained by Klassen (2010), “Students who are persuaded verbally that they are capable… display effort and perseverance, at least temporarily, when faced with challenges and
distractions” (p. 28), which became true for the participants in the study beyond high school. On the other hand, school experiences persuading students that they are less than capable lead to other behaviors. Drug and alcohol use was a behavior that all of the participants incarcerated at the [name] Correctional Facility shared. In a 1975 study reported by Samuels and Samuels:

75.5% of subjects considered low self-concept to be one cause of their turning to drugs and 91.9% felt that boredom and curiosity was another. 67.5% put the blame on peer pressure while 64.8% said they were pleasure seeking. It was concluded that boredom, curiosity and low self-concept were significant causes of drug abuse in many adolescents. (p. 421)

Feeling like a school failure had led several in the study to “anesthetize themselves from the anxiety generated by [the] realization of an ineffective and unworthy self” (Samuels & Samuels, 1975, p. 424). Very few would argue that the prevalence of drug and alcohol use has not increased exponentially since 1975. All but one of the nine incarcerated participants described himself as an addict. That remaining participant, however, did indicate drug and alcohol use beginning at a young age. He felt, however, that he had never been “out of control” despite his use of illegal substances.

During the interviews, Jack expressed the need for high schools to provide more drug education. He vocalized his wish that he had experienced more prevention education while he was enrolled in high school. Two other participants felt they could now be employed as drug counselors because of their first-hand experiences and current desire to keep others from following their path. Both were now excluded from their desired occupations due to their convictions. One had hoped to join the Marines and the other had aspired to a career in criminal justice.
In addition, Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) determined that: Delinquency and drug use were twice as important as poverty in predicting dropout and close to the same level of importance as academic competence in producing school dropout. For schools to succeed, they must use the best teaching technology to improve academic competence, as well as reduce the barriers to learning represented in delinquency and drug use. (p. 260)

Having moved beyond their high school years and their drop-out experience, the participants interviewed expressed a desire to either graduate or earn a G.E.D. Most hoped to further their education in some way. They made it clear that they now had confidence in their ability to do so and their perceived literacy level was not keeping them from doing so. For these participants boredom with school had also represented a barrier to their learning. Larson and Richards (1991) found that boredom as experienced by adolescents, especially in middle school, decreased their attention in class and led to alienation from school. By high school these same students often dropped out (pp. 418-419). Other studies have determined through interviewing dropouts that they felt their high school classes were a waste of time and they found their assigned books and materials boring (Bloom, 2010; Gallagher, 2002; Waters & Harris, 2009). With the time for leisure reading and the ability to self-select what they read, all of the participants now valued reading on their own.

Enhancement of status. According to Wood and Bandura (1989), the fourth way to inspire self-efficacy is through the enhancement of status by reducing stress and eliminating constraints (p. 365), so that students do not become alienated from school. Adolescents often undergo stress as they move from childhood to young adulthood (Gullotta, 2001). At this point in their development many adolescents experience uncertainty. Moving to larger and less
personal secondary schools can be a lonely and stressful experience made more difficult without having had the opportunity to develop quality relationships with family, friends, and school personnel. This is the time when some adolescents are left with the feeling that no one cares about them (Gallagher, 2002, p. 45). After leaving a supportive elementary school environment, this transition becomes more difficult without strong positive student-teacher relationships to rely upon. Farrell, as quoted by Hilty (1998), emphasized:

There must be someone in the student’s life who values her and who values education and whom the student can remember with admiration and respect. Such a teacher can compensate for the student’s lack of academic success. (p. 88)

Davis and Dupper (2004) echoed Farrell’s sentiments. They found that when teachers convey confidence to their students and praise their efforts, the students are motivated to do their best and a strong bond develops between them. On the other hand, when teachers do not have this confidence, the students cannot learn from them (p. 183). Zabloski and Milacci (2012) also found student-teacher relationships to be a “notable factor” (p. 185) for dropouts.

Developmentally, adolescence is when students need to experience success and demonstrate resiliency (Lessard et al., 2009). Unfortunately, high school students are often left to raise themselves due to either having both parents working outside the home or being raised in a single parent home (Gullotta, 2001). Without having established trusting relationships with peers and adults by this point, their freedom can lead to drug and alcohol involvement as well as sexual experimentation and, for some, pregnancy and parenting responsibilities (Rumberger, 2004a; Scheel et al., 2009; Strom & Boster, 2007).

Other constraints experienced by students and placing them at risk for dropping out include: the impact of moving or changing schools; being retained; uninteresting classes; lack of
hands-on, student-centered classes; the current societal demands for accountability via high stakes testing; and incarceration (APA, 2010; Bloom, 2010; Camangian, 2011; Capodilupo & Wheelock, 2000; Griffith et al., 2010; Nathan, 2008; Rebora, 2011; Shriberg & Shriberg, 2006; Stout & Christenson, 2009).

Retention of students in a grade, even as early as the first grade, has been found to predict later dropping out behavior. Many studies have shown retention to be a drop-out factor, including Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey (1997), Christle et al. (2007), Fine (1986), Gallagher (2009), Griffith et al. (2010), Reschly (2010), Stearns, Moller, Blau, and Potochnick (2007), Vitaro, Larocque, Janosz, and Tremblay (2001), and Rumberger (2004a). Two of the participants in this study shared that in addition to being retained, they had repeated the grade at a different school, thus adding the difficulties associated with starting over in a completely new environment. As indicated by Stearns et al. (2007), this severed previous relationships with peers and teachers and added to their stress.

Gewertz (2006) interviewed dropouts and found that they all had concerns with respect to the expectations in their classrooms. She recommended that school districts provide more options for students by offering a wider variety of schools and teaching strategies as opposed to the traditional, teacher-centered classrooms (p. 1) that are often combined with a lack of challenge (Hansen & Johnson Toso, 2007). Cuban, as quoted by Altenbaugh (1998), asserts that the teaching methods employed in high school classrooms have not changed since the late nineteenth century (pp. 60-61). Larson and Richards (1991) determined that student boredom was the greatest when students were expected to sit passively and listen to a teacher or another student; boredom was the least during interactive learning situations such as labs and small group discussions (pp. 430-431). This was voiced by several of the incarcerated dropouts who
described their high school classes as uninteresting and boring. Three in particular applied to other examination-based high schools and were denied acceptance. Three others regretted the lack of hands-on courses available to them in high school and were looking into furthering their education with vocational programs following their release. The need to further their education as well as their current willingness to engage in reading independently on a regular basis indicate that the participants have all moved beyond their unsuccessful school experiences and have a more positive outlook with respect to their futures.

With the passage of NCLB, high stakes testing combined with graduation sanctions and accountability for students, schools, and teachers has been demanded. This has also had a significant impact on students choosing to leave school early. As Camangian (2011) and Rebora (2011) have noted, there is currently too much emphasis on test results and teaching to the test, and this has had a negative impact on student learning (Nathan, 2008). Dorn (1993) has been proven correct because he predicted twenty years ago that imposing the passage of high stakes tests as a graduation requirement would increase the dropout rate. Gallagher (2002) noted:

As American comprehensive high schools continue to impose new standards and add challenging requirements to graduation criteria, such as graduation qualifying exams and senior projects, it may be timely to reconsider the motives for doing so and attend to those for whom such expectations seem like insurmountable obstacles. (p. 53)

Finally, examining the constraints of incarceration, prison inmates have been found to share common traits, including a significant percentage of high school dropouts (Shippen, Houchins, Crites, Derzis, & Patterson, 2010). Whitehouse (2009) found through prosecuting juvenile cases that dropouts can be predicted by their truancy, drug use, and delinquency.

Interestingly, Harlow et al. (2010) determined that prisoners with a G.E.D. have obtained
higher reading scores than those in the general population with an equal amount of education (p. 68). Similar what was found in this study, Harlow et al. (2010) found that prisoners have more free time to read newspapers, books, and magazines and thus have an opportunity to improve their literacy. They watch less television and have incentives to complete jail-based education programs that often provide reading practice (Harlow et al., 2010). All of the participants at the [name] Correctional Facility conveyed their strong interest in reading and some used it as a means to escape the realities of the prison. This bodes well for their future and their determination to continue learning.

Conclusions

From this study, numerous insights have surfaced concerning the self-efficacy of high school dropouts and their literacy. Some or all of these perceptions have the potential to improve the future lives of students struggling to earn a high school diploma. In particular, this study highlights the difficulties faced by students struggling to remain in school so that students believe in their abilities and families and school personnel can better assist them. Several conclusions have been drawn.

1) Acknowledgement that although literacy is only one reason for students electing to drop out of school, it is closely related to the drop-out phenomenon, academic achievement, and the erosion of self-efficacy. Literacy itself was not found to be a factor leading to dropping out for any of the participants. They each indicated a strong belief in their literacy. Transitioning to new school environments or levels, grade retention, lack of structure or difficult situations in the home, delinquency/incarceration, and diagnosed learning difficulties led to poor academic achievement, literacy issues, and a lack of agency over the direction of their lives (Bandura, 1997). Some participants chose not to read as students, while others viewed themselves as
capable readers who now engage in reading daily. Dropping out is, therefore, the result of multiple factors that are produced by an inappropriate education. All stakeholders must work toward providing an appropriate education at every grade level for every student. Literacy remains a required skill for all, but there are additional factors leading students to drop out. All of the participants in this study indicated a strong belief in their ability and an intense interest in reading once they left school and/or were imprisoned. Having some control over their choice of reading material was very important to them, as well as having the time to read about their interests. This argues for parents and educators to provide students with more choices and more control over what they are expected to read as well as to examine the relationship of literacy to transiency, retention, home life, delinquency, and incarceration. Communities must assist schools to provide all citizens with an abundance of materials in order to encourage literacy. Families and schools have limited resources and school funding appropriations are shrinking despite increased demands. The wider community must seek corporate and other donations for the worthy purpose of fostering literacy for all and raising student engagement and high school graduation rates, particularly in those areas with a high dropout rate.

2) Educators and policy makers must take note that while early childhood literacy programs have been shown to increase literacy, it is in high school that literacy support is lacking. Federal dollars have consistently and solely targeted early reading programs. As promulgated in the latest position statement of the IRA (2012), for adolescents to meet the requirements of the 21st century, they must be able to read, talk about, and interact with a variety of texts at a sophisticated level. They need and deserve to be: taught by teachers who provide literacy instruction in all content areas; engaged and motivated by instructional content that includes a great variety of both print and non-print materials and multimodal texts; and taught how to learn
online. Schools must develop a “culture of literacy” with instruction that is differentiated to meet the needs of all students (IRA, 2012). Student self-efficacy and graduation should be increased with the inclusion of these elements in all high school literacy programs. This cannot happen without providing schools with additional resources.

3) Existing high school environments are not meeting the needs of all students. Although “student-centered” has become a buzz word, very few secondary classrooms, particularly at the high school level, have moved away from the teacher-centered classroom where the teacher talks and the students, often sitting in rows, listen. Change has been slow as many teachers continue to teach the way they themselves were taught (Altenbaugh, 1998, p. 62). Though not recommended, schools perpetuate this industrial-age model (Dede, 2012). Several of the incarcerated participants used the term “hands-on” to describe the type of learning that they felt suited them best and expressed an interest in technical education experiences and licensure. Vocational courses were not readily available to them during high school either because they were not offered at the school they attended, or the passing of an exam was a requirement for entrance into such a school. Homework remained an area of contention between the participants, their teachers, and some of the parents; each interviewee mentioned not doing homework as part of their high school experience. For some of those interviewed, homework completion or the lack of it was described as a means of exerting some control over their lives. For various reasons, each of the participants interviewed avoided doing homework, got behind, earned failing grades, skipped classes, and/or stopped attending school. Some then went on to drop out completely. None of the participants reported any contact between their parents and their school around their school performance or drop-out decision, although Bruce’s mother did work with the school so that her son could keep up with the work he missed while he was incarcerated.
This was not the case for any of the other participants. Boredom with classes and school was frequently expressed. In their study, Kanevsky and Keighley (2003) concluded that learning is both the opposite of and the antidote to boredom (p. 20). Those interviewed wanted more interesting and challenging curricula, not just places to do homework, and hands-on materials to keep them engaged. Hands-on opportunities in classrooms should be de rigueur and vocational courses should be made available to more students. The participants’ voices clearly asked for schools to rethink class methods, homework, and materials. Having a choice of materials or being allowed to select reading matter was important to the participants and would have made a difference in the educational path that they followed.

4) Positive adult relationships are crucial. Students thrive when positive and trusting relationships with school personnel are developed. Such relationships are vital to overcoming adversity (Bandura, 1997). Two of the participants described adults at school with whom they connected and who pushed them to achieve during elementary and middle school, but not high school. One mentioned changing schools too often for anyone to get to know him, and that he was never counseled to complete school. For students at risk of dropping out, the attitudes of school personnel have often influenced their decision. One participant reported being counseled to drop out, or was pushed out, by an administrator since he had already failed half-way through the year due to his lack of attendance. Only one of the participants, Ingrid, mentioned having any contact with a guidance counselor. Her counselor encouraged her to come back to school during and after her pregnancy. None of the others reported receiving any counseling for any reason. When they were asked what their schools could have done differently to assist them, all of the participants took ownership of their own difficulties and situation. They found themselves to be at fault, not their family or school environment. Schools must develop ways to mentor
students so that a positive relationship with at least one caring adult is the norm. In order for school to be a successful experience, students need strong mentors to guide them.

5) Having a high school diploma or G.E.D. was not the final credential that these participants hoped to attain; they each saw a distinct need for further education. All of those interviewed voiced the desire to further their education either by earning a certificate, a license in a trade, or some form of college education, although not necessarily a degree. Each sounded sincere, although it remains to be seen whether their plans will come to fruition. Several of the participants shared their previous work history with low paying and unrewarding jobs. They all voiced the desire to do more with their lives by enrolling in vocational or community college courses when able. Four of the participants were already parents with another awaiting the birth of his first child. As parents, they each indicated wanting to provide a better future for their child or children. All of the participants, with the exception of Donald who only participated in the first interview, expressed an understanding of the financial implications of not having an education in order to obtain a well paying job. Before being allowed to sign themselves out of school, students considering dropping out need to be counseled. The financial realities of earning so much less as a dropout over a lifetime as compared with high school and college graduates should be explicitly shared. A few of the participants indicated feeling “less” than others because of their educational experience and drop-out decision. Such feelings reduce self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

6) Drug and alcohol use is prevalent among dropouts. All of the incarcerated participants indicated drug and alcohol use beginning in middle or high school. None of the incarcerated participants indicated any difficulty obtaining marijuana, alcohol, or in Ken’s case, prescription medication. These behaviors all began while they were attending school and contributed to their
behavioral difficulties. Although legal charges have been sustained against most of the participants, the individual reasons for their incarceration were never part of the interviews. Based upon the information that was shared, however, drug and alcohol use had brought further difficulties, including addiction, into their lives both before and after dropping out. In many instances these participants were self-medicating in order to escape some of the difficulties they faced in and out of school. The two participants who were not incarcerated made no references to drugs or alcohol in any of their interviews. As aptly pointed out by Ken, there needed to be more drug education in his high school. He saw this as a universal problem for which there is no easy solution. Parents, schools, and community resource officers must continue to reach out to students and make them aware of the dangers associated with drug and alcohol use/abuse and addiction. Eduardo’s and Bruce’s thoughts of becoming drug counselors might be used as a springboard in developing programs that students would listen to and learn from. Hearing someone’s firsthand experiences and regrets might make a stronger impact on students.

This study has been guided by the phenomenological research method as constructed by Moustakas (1994) and has employed:

Description, reflection, and imagination in arriving at an understanding of what is, in seeing the conditions through which what is comes to be, and in utilizing a process that in its very application opens possibilities for awareness, knowledge and action. (p. 175)

Listening to and learning from the voices of those who have experienced and acted upon the desire to drop out of high school should open minds, increase understanding, and influence future decisions about the students attending secondary schools. Reflecting upon the experiences of these participants should initiate an examination of what schools and communities must provide to keep students engaged through graduation and beyond. Schools should allow students
more flexibility and choices. Teachers must strive to engage all learners and not just teach them the way they themselves were taught. Finally, communities must provide additional resources to assist students in becoming productive members of society with opportunities for meaningful employment and lives.

**Limitations**

Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, the chosen participants were asked to describe the course of literacy acquisition in their lives since the aim of phenomenology is not to explain, but to describe (Ehrich & Simpson, 1995). Although purposive sampling was initiated, the need for more participants resulted in the use of convenience sampling with respect to the interviews of incarcerated adolescents between the ages of 18 and 23.

This qualitative study described the relationship between dropping out and literacy for participants between the ages of 18 and 23 by collecting their experiences and reflecting upon the meaning of those experiences. Seidman’s (2006) three-interview series consisted of semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions relating to literacy acquisition and school experiences, including the decision to leave high school without a diploma. Since this was a qualitative study, all of the data collected was subjective and collected from individuals who volunteered their participation. The first limitation, therefore, is the limited ability to generalize the results.

Secondly, in terms of the ability to generalize from this study, only one of the participants was female. Ingrid kept appointments and participated in all three interviews. The other potential female participants neither kept appointments nor returned telephone calls despite their verbal acceptance of the invitation to participate. Additionally, nine of the participants were Caucasian; one, Eduardo, was Hispanic; and Donald was African American. The group studied,
therefore, was not entirely representative of the general population of students experiencing the phenomenon of dropping out.

Thirdly, the participants all volunteered to participate and were selected solely on the criterion of their drop-out decision. Demographic information was not collected, such as socio-economic status, the education level of their parents, or parental occupations. Any or all of these variables could have made an impact on both literacy and their decision to drop out.

And finally, all of the literacy information was self-reported. Students’ actual reading levels were not assessed for this study, nor were any school records collected or examined. The participants reported that they currently read every day and considered their skills to be from “medium” to “good.” None reported weak literacy skills, indicating that their self-efficacy was intact.

Future Research

As with all phenomenological studies, the purpose is not to explain but to describe. In this case the lived experiences of the participants were described. As a result, the results are particular to these participants and cannot be generalized to other students, adolescents, or groups.

In consideration of the limitations presented, it would be helpful to collect additional participant information in future studies. As mentioned earlier, only one participant was female. A more equal ratio of females to males might be considered for a future study. Expanding the ethnicity of participants might also yield different information. The examination of school records and the actual assessment of reading ability would provide additional information about the relationship between self-efficacy, literacy, and dropping out.
The participants alluded to their relationships with their school personnel and the impact on student self-efficacy in their descriptions. Further study could expand the impact of student-teacher relationships, as well as prompt an investigation into the reasons why, as supported by the literature, so many of the participants referred to loving elementary school, yet the transitions to secondary school were problematic and often the impetus for dropping out.

Based upon the literature cited, future studies should go beyond the aspect of self-efficacy and literacy to examine the effects of providing students with ample resources and more flexibility within their course of study in relation to the drop-out decision. Those interviewed for this study experienced a rigidly prescribed curriculum and assignments, which they chose not to complete. With the pressing need to provide students with 21st-century skills, schools must adapt and develop courses of study that will both engage students and prepare them for their future. As demonstrated by the participants in this study, even for the at-risk population, schools have been successful in assisting students in the development of literacy and self-efficacy. They have failed in keeping students significantly engaged through their high school graduation.
References


DOI: 10.1007/s10802-005-1828-9


Shell, D. F., Murphy, C. C., & Bruning, R. H. (1989). Self-efficacy and outcome expectancy mechanisms in reading and writing achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 81*(1), 91-100. DOI:10.1037/0022-0663.81.1.91


Appendices

Appendix A
Moustakas’ Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon.

2. From the verbatim transcript of your experience complete the following steps:
   a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
   b. Record all relevant statements.
   c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
   d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
   e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
   f. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of your experience.
   g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of your experience.

3. From the verbatim transcript of the experiences of each of the other co-researchers, complete the above steps, a through g.

4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers’ experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122).
Appendix B

Interview Protocol adapted from Seidman (2006, pp. 15-19)

Interview 1: Focused Life History
Please describe your earliest experiences with learning to read, going as far back as you can remember and continuing up until the present time.

Questions: Previous School Experiences

1) What memories do you have of being read to as a young child? (P*)
2) What was your first experience with school like? (E*)
3) When did you begin reading (i.e. prior to school, in school, grade)? Please describe. (B*)
4) Whom do you credit with teaching you to read (e.g. yourself, teacher, parent)? (P)
5) How much reading do you remember doing at home, in elementary school, at middle school, in high school? (P) In what ways do you think reading was valued in your classes? (E) What about among your friends? (B)
6) Can you describe the emphasis placed on reading at home? What types of materials are/were available there? (E)
7) For what purposes (pleasure, work, information gathering, other) have you seen your parents reading? (B)
8) How do you feel about your ability to read? (P)

Interview 2: The Details of Experience
Please reconstruct the details of your experience learning to read. Questions from Interview 1 as well as additional probing and clarifying questions based upon the first interview responses to be asked.

1) Talk about your relationship with reading. (P)
2) Can you share any stories/vignettes about your reading? (P)

Interview 3: Reflection on the Meaning
Please reflect upon your experience with learning to read in conjunction with your decision to drop out of high school and talk about the factors that led you to the decision to drop out of high school.

1) In what ways do you think that reading is an important skill to have? (B) Have you always felt this way?
2) Please describe any reading difficulties that you have experienced. (P)
3) How have your reading ability and your feelings about reading influenced your decision to drop out of high school? (B)
4) At what point in your education did you start thinking about not graduating? (P, B)
5) Can you name your specific reasons for leaving school early? (P, B, E) In what ways was reading involved?
6) Please describe your pleasure reading before you dropped out of high school and at the present time. (P, B)
7) What materials, if any, do you read now? (P, B)
8) How do you feel about reading now? (P, B)

*Using Bandura’s terminology (Bandura, 1997), P indicates personal factors, E indicates environmental events, and B denotes behavioral patterns.
Appendix C
Permission Letter from [name] Correction Facility

December 6, 2011

To Whom It May Concern,

On behalf of Sheriff [______] it is my pleasure to allow Cynthia Kelley access to the [______] Sheriff’s Office for the purpose of interviewing inmates for her doctoral dissertation.

Cynthia has provided me with information regarding the needs of her project and the agency will be able to meet those needs without question. Please see below an outline of our discussion and agreement.

- There will be a total of 8-10 inmates selected to be interviewed by Cynthia on three (3) separate occasions. The period of time between interviews will be determined by Cynthia.

- The manner for selection shall be initiated by a sign up sheet that will be posted in all sentenced housing units for a period not to exceed one week. The sign up sheet would request that any inmate who left high school prior to graduation and would be interested in being interviewed by a non-criminal justice independent person; should sign up on the posting. The sign up sheet will note that the interviews will be conducted as a research project to assist this individual with her doctoral dissertation and all interviews will be tape recorded.
  - Inmates will sign a waiver release in advance to allow the recording of the conversations.

- Based on the individual responses internal criteria for appropriateness shall be determined by the staff at the Sheriff’s Office.
- Length of sentence must be considered to ensure that Cynthia will have access to the inmate for all three (3) interviews.
- Inmate behavior will be considered to ensure cooperation moving forward.

I look forward to working with Cynthia and believe that this project would be a good fit for the [ ] Sheriff's Office.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Mary P.
Assistant Deputy Superintendent
Appendix D
Permission Letter from [name] School District

Public Schools

January 23, 2012

Ms. Andrea B. Goldstein, Coordinator
Human Subject Research Protection
Northeastern University
960 Renaissance Park, 360 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02115-5000

Dear Ms. Goldstein:

I am writing to you at this time to verify that Mrs. Cynthia Kelly, Northeastern University doctoral program candidate, has met with me on several occasions to discuss the nature of her research. I understand that this research will be conducted within our school district and at [ ], Please see the additional letter from [ ], Deputy Superintendent at [ ], concerning the additional participants for this study.

I am fully aware of her proposed research and give my permission for this research to be conducted in conjunction with the [ ] Public Schools. Any decision by the parents or the recruited students, former and current, to participate or not will have no effect on their relationship with the school system, their school standing, or their decision/desire to dropout.

Please feel free to contact me should you have any further questions regarding the involvement of the selected students from [ ] High School in Mrs. Kelly’s study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Superintendent

[The School System does not discriminate on the basis of age, race, color, sexual orientation, religion, national origin or handicap in its educational activities of employment practices]
Appendix E
Informed Consent to Participate

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action
Modification

Date: January 25, 2012
IRB #: 11-05-34

Principal Investigator(s): David Szabla
Cynthia Kelly

Department: College of Professional Studies/Education

Address: 42 BV, Northeastern University

Title of Project: The Dropout Crisis for Students with Low Literacy Skills

Modification: a) addition of subjects who are incarcerated at the

his modification has been
reviewed by the IRB Prisoner Representative and has been deemed
to be no greater than minimal risk

Participating Sites: corrections – approval received

Original Protocol Approved: June 13, 2011

Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form

CFR 46.306 (2)(ii) Study of prisons as institutional structures or of prisoners as incarcerated persons,
provided that the study presents no more than minimal risk and no more than inconvenience to the subjects

Approval Expiration Date: JUNE 12, 2012

Investigator’s Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting
participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be
reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the
expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other
university approvals that may be necessary.

Coleen Pantalone, Ph.D., Vice Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #: 4630
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study:

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study. Mrs. Cynthia Kelly is available to meet with you either at your local high school or at the

The contact person for you at the will be Assistant Deputy Superintendent Mrs. Mary

Through her you will have the opportunity to ask Mrs. Cynthia Kelly any questions that you have.

When you are ready to make a decision, please let Mrs. Cynthia Kelly or Mrs. Mary

know that you agree to participate. You do not have to participate if you do not wish to. If you do decide to participate, Mrs. Cynthia Kelly will ask you to sign this statement and it will be kept on file.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to be interviewed because at some point you dropped out of high school, or expressed an interest in leaving school without a diploma. Ideally, you will meet with Mrs. Cynthia Kelly three times. If this is not possible, all information will be collected in the first interview.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of the research is to examine the reasons for your not obtaining a high school diploma. It would be useful to know whether your literacy acquisition played any role in this circumstance.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, Mrs. Cynthia Kelly is asking you to participate in individual interviews. You will be asked to discuss questions related to your past school experiences and learning to read. Mrs. Kelly will take notes as well as audio record each interview. These audio tapes will then be transcribed. Please let Mrs. Cynthia Kelly know if you wish to review the transcriptions with her at a subsequent meeting. The recordings and transcriptions will be destroyed once the project is finalized. Results of the project can be made available to you if you wish.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

Depending upon your location, the interviews will be conducted either at the high school or in the Programs Area at the

in the late afternoon between 4:30 and 6:30 p.m.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no foreseeable risks from participation in the interviews. All information acquired from the study will be kept confidential. No psychological harm, financial, social, or legal damages as well as physical risks should be incurred during this study.

APPROVED

NIJ IRB: 11-05-33
VALID: 1/27/12
THROUGH: 11/2/12
Will I benefit by being in this research?

Participants will benefit from this study by helping to discover ways to assist future high school age youth with persevering and earning a high school diploma. Participants will learn about the interview process and benefit from insights gained through sharing their life experience.

Who will see the information about me?

Only the participants and the researcher will know who contributed responses. Only the researcher will take written notes and make the transcriptions. This study will be confidential. There is only one researcher, Mrs. Cynthia Kelly, who will see the information gleaned from the interviews. No reports or publications will use information that can identify participants in any way.

The written notes and the audio recordings will remain secure with the researcher. Notes and audio recordings will be destroyed once the project is complete. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University to see this information.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the interview process, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

You can reach Mrs. Cynthia Kelly directly at [Contact Information] or by speaking with Mrs. Mary [Contact Information] should you have any questions or problems.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115 Telephone: 617-373-7570; email: irb@neu.edu. For participants located at [Contact Information], please ask Mrs. [Contact Information] to make the contact for you. You may remain anonymous if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

There will be no payment for participating.

Is there anything else I need to know?

All participants under 18 years of age must have the written permission of parent or guardian in order to participate.
***For participants under 18, please complete the following:

I agree to have ____________________________ take part in this study.

Printed name: ________________________________

Signature of person (parent/guardian) agreeing if subject is under 18 years:

________________________________________ Date:

Printed name of person above:

________________________________________

Signature of the individual who will be participating:

________________________________________ Date:

Signature of Researcher Cynthia Kelly:

________________________________________ Date:

***For participants 18 years or older, please complete the following:

I agree to participate in this study.

Signature of the individual who will be participating:

________________________________________ Date:

Signature of Researcher Cynthia Kelly

________________________________________ Date:
Appendix F
Contact Summary Form

Contact Summary Form - Adapted from Miles and Huberman (2004)

Contact Type: _____ face to face _____ email _____ telephone

Contact Date: _______________   Today’s Date: _______________   Written by: _____

1. Main issues/themes:

2. Summary of information:

3. Salient, interesting, illuminating or important points:

4. New/remaining questions for next contact with participant:
Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Cynthia Kelly successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 11/27/2009

Certification Number: 344387