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THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Instruction

By

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences and perceptions of parents whose children did not receive a high school diploma. This subpopulation has been rarely studied. The central question is, "What are the perceptions and experiences of the parents of public high school dropouts as they pertain to schools, their children, and themselves?"

This phenomenological study examined the lived experience of the parents of high school dropouts. Five women and one man participated in the study by sitting for interviews. The collected interview data was transcribed and analyzed using accepted qualitative methodology including open and axial coding as well as textural-structural description. The results of the study revealed six emergent themes: *Bright Child, Involved Parent(s), Medical Issues, Unfair School, Troubled Home,* and, *Behavior Issues.*

Two of the themes corroborated previous research: *Troubled Home,* and, *Behavior Issues.* However, other themes ran contrary to existing perceptions and highlighted gaps in available research. *Bright Child* challenged the perception and some research suggesting that school achievement is a strong indicator of at-risk status. *Involved Parent(s)* contradicts notions that the parents of at-risk students are uninvolved or uncaring. *Unfair School* is somewhat supported in the literature, but not enough research has been done to validate the implication that at-risk students and their parents are treated less favorably than their peers. *Medical Issues* reveals another gap in dropout research. Though this issue is widely addressed in special education research as it relates to disabilities, the relationship between health and achievement is largely unexplored in dropout literature.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation

to the Graduate Council

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I am honored to acknowledge my committee for their valuable contributions and support: Dr. Janet Penner-Williams, Dr. Christian Goering, Dr. Christopher Lucas, and Dr. Thomas Smith. Your kindness, encouragement, and dedication helped to create a journey that was the "just right" balance of discovery, challenge, and accomplishment that I hoped it would be.

I extend warm thanks to my participants. Your stories touched my heart. It is my hope that they will touch the hearts of others and make a difference for families like ours.

I also am privileged to acknowledge special friends and family members who have continually cheered me on toward achieving this dream: my mother Susan, my father Eugene, Sue, Marie, Al, Janice, Michele, Peter, Jayne, Laura, Rosie, Michelle, Janine, Debbie, Pattie, Cal, James, JJ, Robbie, Martha, Byron, Christine, Sheryl, Pete, Patti, Rick, and many other wonderful colleagues, friends, and extended family.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my mother, Susan, who is the best teacher I know.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

The high school dropout problem continues to make headlines as schools and communities fail to address systemic and social issues that prevent success for students from a variety of subpopulations. These include: minorities, especially Hispanic and African-American; families below-poverty level; children of mothers who didn't finish high school; and teen parents among others (Jerald, 2006). Systemic issues to be addressed include early identification of students at risk, the consistent implementation of research-supported interventions, parent involvement, and the professional development of teachers working with subpopulations (Marchant, et al., 2009; MacIver, 2011; Bass, R. S., 2009; Gersten, et al., 2000; Sleeter, 2001) . Social issues that can cause or exacerbate underachievement in school include parent unemployment or divorce, substance abuse, and gang proliferation (Levine, 2009; Elliot & Richards, 1991; U.S. Department of Health, 2009; Regulus, 1994).

While alleged inadequacies within the K-12 system are the constant targets of research and reform (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Payne, 2008), a steady supply of stakeholder feedback is needed to inform all types of interventions. Numerous studies have examined the perspectives of teachers, students, and the general public, but researchers have shown significantly less interest in what parents have to say (databases Ebsco and Proquest, along with the search engine Google Scholar, had similar results when the terms "teacher + perspective + school," "student + perspective + school," and, "parent + perspective + school" were searched by title, drawing averages of 98, 117, and 29 hits respectively). This study addresses the perspectives of parents, those who had ringside seats as their children dropped out of the public school system. Just as the marketing department of any corporation will tell you the importance of customer feedback when developing products and services, it behooves educators to reach out not just to direct

customers, i.e., the students, but indirect customers as well, i.e., their parents, for insight into dropout phenomena.

Problem Statement

High school students continue to graduate late or drop out at a high rate, some studies reporting as many as twenty-five percent of all high school students (National, 2010), despite school reform efforts and social interventions. Parents of these students have seldom been given voice to share their experiences and express their concerns as participants in the social phenomena of high school dropout. As a data source, parents may provide insight into how schools and communities fail to meet student needs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences and perceptions of parents whose children did not receive a high school diploma. This subpopulation, the parents of students at-risk, has been studied more often in the primary years, rarely during the secondary years or post-high school.

Research Question

The central question is, "What are the perceptions and experiences of the parents of public high school dropouts as they pertain to schools, their students, and themselves?" Extension questions include:

1. How do parents of dropouts describe their children academically and behaviorally?
2. How were these parents involved in their children's education, and what are their perceptions of that involvement?
3. What family issues or challenges do these parents believe affected their children's academic achievement levels?

4. What are these parents' experiences with and perceptions of school-parent communications and programming?
5. What interventions or supports were offered, if any, to help the child be successful, and what are these parents' perceptions of those offerings?
6. What were these parents' experiences with the actual decision or realization that their children would not get a diploma?
7. What emotions did these parents experience in relation to their children's school careers, especially as it became evident that the children would be dropping out?

Rationale

The primary objective of high schools is to prepare students for college and/or adult life as verified by the earning of a diploma. And who will not cross the stage to collect that diploma is no mystery. The capacity to identify which students are at risk of not graduating in the prescribed four years of high school is becoming progressively easier as risk factors have begun to emerge in the literature (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Educators know which students are unlikely to cross the finish line successfully and therefore have a professional and ethical responsibility to provide interventions and support systems that will increase a student's likelihood of success (Strike & Soltis, 1985; Benninga, 2003; Campbell, 2008). The problem is, oftentimes students don't receive these interventions, or the quality of the interventions is poor, or they are too little, too late (Podell & Soodak, 1993). Teachers, however caring, may not be willing or able to give an at-risk student the interventions that he or she needs or make necessary referrals for support services (Soodak & Podell, 1994). Zero tolerance policies may result in limited access to the benefits of mainstream programs (Zweifler & DeBeers, 2002). And

pressure on administrators to meet standardized testing goals often results in minority students being "kept out or pushed out" of equitable school programs (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 246).

Parents are often aware of these oversights and negligences. Proactive parents will step in when they notice something amiss, raise questions, and visit the school to ensure that extra support is being given (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Parents of lower socioeconomic status may be less proactive in advocating for their child (Shumow & Lomax, 2009). Whether or not they become involved in their child's education, many parents have an opinion about whether their child received the help he or she needed to be successful, and whether or not they, as parents, felt supported along the way. Still other parents may be completely satisfied with the efforts of educators, and even satisfied with their own efforts and/or those of their children through the course of their school experience–in other words, they may not perceive lack of a diploma as a problem to be corrected. Regardless of their perspectives, as a whole, these opinions provide an opportunity for longitudinal evaluation of public school services to at-risk students and their families, as well as a better understanding of the sociological factors affecting outcomes.

Additionally, parent involvement has been linked to student success in numerous studies (e.g., Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Keith, 1986; Mapp, 1997), even graduation itself (Lommerin, 1999). Insight into parents' experiences and perspectives may inform ways schools can increase and improve parent involvement. Their perspectives may also inform policy-makers, and community agencies as they support families to effect student success.

Studies of parent perspectives on dropout phenomena, specifically, do surface sporadically in the literature (Bridgeland, et al., 2008). But focused, in-depth explorations of the specific experiences of parents of children who have fallen behind their peers are rare. As school

districts look for clues on how to increase student success rates, the feedback of parents of dropouts is a previously untapped data source. For researchers, this unexplored data mine may produce a new understanding of the phenomena of student failure—why students continue to drop out or graduate late despite an ever-increasing effort to identify them and intervene on their behalf.

Methodology

Phenomenology is a perspective that explores the nature of lived experience through description (Creswell, 2007)). The purpose of phenomenology is to arrive at the "essence" of the thing being observed. That is, what is it that makes a thing distinct from all other things–the thing that, if taken away, would cause a thing to no longer be what it is (van Manen, 1990). There is no prescribed format; however, phenomenologists have, in the decades since its inception in the early twentieth century formed traditions of practice that have been found to be productive (Creswell, 2007). Among these, the personal interview has been found to be an effective means of gathering data (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001). In this study, the essence of the perceived experiences of the parents of dropouts is examined through interviews.

One of the main tenets of phenomenological methodology is that all of the researcher's presuppositions about the topic at hand, in this case the phenomenon of parenting high school dropouts, must be abandoned (Ashworth, 1996). "Bracketing," a concept borrowed from mathematics by the mathematician-philosopher Husserl, is the practice of identifying and putting aside preconceived notions (van Manen, 1990). Moustakas (1991) describes it as, "engag[ing] in disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated" and offers a structured format discussed further in chapter three of this dissertation (p. 22).

For this reason, the literature review found in chapter two of this dissertation will serve as sources to be bracketed by the researcher, not to be carried into the interviewing or interpreting processes, but only referred to again in the discussion and recommendations of the study found in chapter five. The personal experience of the researcher will be bracketed following Moustakas' format as well.

Origin of the Study

One principle of qualitative research, heuristic inquiry, has to do with the process of personal discovery inherent in the process. The research question originates from the researcher's autobiographical experience, which drives him or her toward understandings of universal human experience (Moustakas, 1990). This study originates with the autobiographical experience of watching two of my own children struggle in, and eventually drop out of, high school. During those years, my emotional focus was almost entirely on their needs. But as the years passed, I reflected on the enormity of the ordeal I had experienced. I came to understand that the tremendous toll it had taken on our family was multi-faceted: emotional, spiritual, financial, and even physical in that aspects of our health were affected. For me, the years-long crisis of watching my children fail had become a core aspect of my life experience.

As a doctoral student and public school teacher, I began to reflect on my experience more and more, realizing that, as the parent of two high school dropouts, I possessed a wealth of first-hand knowledge about two ways a child in our public school system can end up leaving school prematurely. The kinship I felt with the parents of students at risk, and the belief that their experiences as well as my own might lead to greater understandings of dropout phenomena and how it might be curtailed, evolved into the research question at the center of this study.

Definitions

The following key terms and phrases are relevant to this study:

At-risk Student

"At-risk students are students who are not experiencing success in school and are potential dropouts," (Donnely, M., 1987).

Bracketing

"Bracketing" means the researcher sets aside "all prior assumptions about the nature of the thing to be studied," (Ashworth, 1996, p. 1). This includes scientific theories, research, and personal experience.

Dropout

A "dropout" is defined as a person who withdraws from school with no intention of returning to earn a diploma at any time within the next twelve months.

Dropout Rate

The "dropout rate" refers to the student/percentage of students who leave(s) school without completing an alternate diploma or certification program and do(es) not return to school the following year (NCES, 2010).

Essence

"Essence" is described as the irreducible definition of what a phenomena is and means as evidenced by the compared observations of several persons who have experienced it (Van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology

"Phenomenology" is generally understood to be the study and interpretation of the life experience of human beings.

Intervention

An “intervention” is an action performed to direct or influence behavior.

Graduation Rate

The “graduation rate” uses aggregate student enrollment data to estimate the size of an incoming freshman class and counts the number of diplomas awarded four years later (National Center, 2010).

GED

The “Tests of General Educational Development” (GED Tests) are designed to measure the skills and knowledge equivalent to a high school course of study. The five subject area tests which comprise the GED test battery are Mathematics; Language Arts, Reading; Language Arts, Writing (including essay); Science; and Social Studies. (American Council, 2011).

Parent

For the purposes of this study, “parent” is defined as an adult who is either a parent (biological or adoptive) or guardian who cared for the child during the most recent years in school leading up to dropping out.

Parental Involvement

For the purpose of this study, Epstein's 1995 framework for building parental partnerships is adopted to include six steps: parenting; communicating; volunteering; learning at home; decision-making; and, collaborating with the community at large (Epstein, 1995).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review consists of four major sections: (1) an overview of the low graduation rate problem in the U.S., including an exploration of the factors that often lead to late graduation or dropout; (2) a look at the interventions that have been found to increase chances of success for students at risk; (3) a consideration of parents' perceptions of what schools are doing (and/or not doing) to help their struggling children; (4) a summary of research on the meaning of and need for parental involvement; and (5) an overview of the philosophy and methodology of phenomenology. The goal of this review is to build a case for studying the experiences of the parents of students who are at risk of not graduating on time or dropping out.

Overview of the Graduation Rate Problem

The U. S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) narrowly defines the dropout rate as the percentage of students who were in school one year and not in school the next and without a diploma or GED (NCES, 2010). They determine the graduation rate, on the other hand, to be the number of students who were in a school for their freshman year and accepted a diploma on time with their cohort four years later, plus or minus students who transferred in and out from other schools. The dropout rate can be and is manipulated by administrators at the state and local level to keep the percentage of "failures" to a minimum, by a variety of methods such as counting dropouts as transfer students and GED completers as graduates (Hauser and Koenig, 2011; Michie, 2007). However, the graduation rate is more difficult to massage. Either said student accepted a diploma in four years or he/she did not. In light of these manipulations, dropout statistics have become more difficult for policymakers and community members to discern, and the definition of dropout keeps changing from state to state, making the graduation rate more attractive as a clear indicator of school

success or failure. It is much more difficult to manipulate, and it tells a more dramatic story, since it does not include students who complete alternative diplomas such as the GED, nor does it include those who graduate as soon as a day after their peers walk across the stage.

In 2008 the U.S. Department of Education issued a new rule requiring schools to follow a uniform formula in reporting their graduation rates (U. S. Department, 2008). Because exact dropout rates can be difficult to establish (students may re-enroll and drop out multiple times, or drop out from one school and enroll in another only to drop out again), policymakers concluded that the best way to compare schools would be to simply observe how many new freshmen collect a diploma four years later.

The National Center of Education Statistics explains the formula for establishing "Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate" (AFGR) as follows:

> The AFGR provides an estimate of the percentage of high school students who graduate on time. The rate uses aggregate student enrollment data to estimate the size of an incoming freshman class and counts of the number of diplomas awarded four years later. The incoming freshman class size is estimated by summing the enrollment in 8th grade in one year, 9th grade for the next year, and 10th grade for the year after, and then dividing by three. The averaging is intended to account for prior year retentions in the 9th grade. (Stillwell, 2009).

The most recent data available from the NCES (2010) shows that in the 2007/8 school year, only 74.9% of those enrolled as freshmen four years earlier (presented as the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate [AFGR]) walked across the stage to receive a diploma that spring. Over twenty-five percent of students either take longer than four years to graduate, transfer to a

completion certificate or general equivalency diploma (GED) program, or drop out of education altogether.

In years past, the graduation rate was seldom taken into account. Circumstances beyond educator control such as transitory families, divorce, poverty, illness, substance abuse, learning/physical/emotional disabilities, and a myriad of other barriers often make four-year matriculation nigh unto impossible for many students. For these, a fifth year of regular high school, or a detour to a GED program, seem like reasonable outcomes. Yet policymakers and the public remain understandably concerned about the alarmingly low rate of on-time completers. The fact is, most of those students who are off-track to receive a diploma in four years will never receive one at all (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

The Dropout Rate

The dropout rate is an entirely different statistic from the graduation rate, defined as the percentage of students who leave school without completing an alternate diploma or certification program and do not return to school the following year, averaged at 4.1 percent nationally in the 2007/8 school year (NCES, 2010). Many have found this limited definition produces a low figure that doesn't tell the whole story about the high rate of student failure, and in fact masks the seriousness of the problem.

One way the dropout rate is kept low is that alternate diplomas, including the GED and attendance certificates, are in many states counted against the dropout rate, effectively increasing the number of "completers" and lessening the sting of the four-year graduation rate (late and GED graduates are often removed from the graduation rate). These practices are a matter of continuing controversy, especially as the value of the GED as evidence of student preparedness for the workforce or postgraduate studies has been called into question (Heckman & LaFontaine,

2007; Hauser & Koenig, 2011). In a 1997 study, Murnane, et al., found that as many as two-thirds of GED candidates claimed they planned to attend a postgraduate program later. By age 26, however, less than twenty percent actually fulfilled that claim, and less than five percent actually completed any kind of degree. These rates equal those of dropouts who were not pursuing postgraduate studies at the time.

With the true dropout rate an unknown percentage, and the graduation rate disturbingly low, it becomes clear that a significant number of students embark on their adult years at an economic and social disadvantage. Regardless of what districts and states do to disguise the truth, the fact remains that every year thousands of young adults enter the work world unprepared and subject to a lifetime of struggles.

Consequences of Dropping Out

In 2010, the median weekly earnings of adults without a high school diploma was $444; the average American earned $782, about fifty-seven percent more (U.S. Department, 2011). All told, dropouts earn $260,000 less than their peers with diplomas over the course of a lifetime, and are less likely to benefit from employer-provided health insurance or insurance plans (Rouse, 2007). Studies also find that dropouts suffer more health problems than graduates, including a six- to nine-year shorter lifespan (Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2009; Wong et al., 2002; Dorn, 1986).

Dropouts are nearly twice as likely as the average American to be unemployed as well, with a 15 percent unemployment rate in 2010 (U.S. Department of, 2011). In the aged 16-24 range, dropouts have an even lower jobless rate of 40 percent (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009). A lack of gainful employment often leads to crime in this age group also, with nearly one in ten dropouts becoming institutionalized (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009).

At-Risk Students

The most prominent social indicators that students in K-12 are at-risk for dropping out of high school have been enumerated as: "(a) single-parent family, (b) low annual family income, (c) being held back at least one grade, (d) parents without high school diplomas, (e) having a sibling who dropped out, (f) low achievement, (g) limited English proficiency, (h) working while enrolled at school, and (i) misbehavior" (Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999, p. 720). However, in recent years, researchers have tended to focus more on indicators that occur at school–factors that schools have some control over.

Studies aimed at discovering the earliest age at which dropping out can be predicted reach back as early as first grade, with one study showing that first grade indicators include: stressful family changes (moving, divorce), parental attitudes and socialization, children's attitudes and behavior, and academic measures such as grades and test scores (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997).

Longitudinal studies of in-school indicators began to reveal that one of the most vulnerable stages for students is the middle school years, especially grade six, with four key indicators affecting sixth-graders' chances of graduating: failing mathematics, failing English, less than 80 percent attendance, and/or receiving a poor behavior grade in a course (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). It was found that a student with even one of the four indicators in sixth grade had only a one in four chance of graduating, and that failed middle school courses were a more reliable predictor of dropping out than failed high school classes (Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008).

Many educators might assume that low achievement scores would be a strong indicator as well, but, surprisingly, this is not the case. In fact, grades predict graduation much more

reliably (up to eight times more often) than grade eight achievement test scores (Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

At the high school level, the strongest indicators for dropout are found in freshman level grades, GPA, and attendance (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). By the end of the first semester of freshman year, up to 80 percent of dropouts can be predicted using these three indicators. Nield and Balfanz (2004) found that students who are overage at the time of entering high school (nearly always because of retention in a grade due to low achievement) were not promoted to sophomore level at a rate of 47 percent of the time compared to 29 percent for the average student. Not being promoted in high school from one year to the next is evidence that several classes were failed. Hence, being overage for grade level is another telltale sign that a student is at risk of dropping out.

Attendance data can be reliably used to identify at-risk students. Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that Chicago freshmen who missed twenty days or more in a single semester reduced their probability of graduating to less than ten percent. Students who missed only one week in a semester their freshman year reduced their chances to sixty-three percent.

Allensworth and Easton's Chicago study (2007) also revealed that, in their district, grades are the most reliable predictor of dropout. Specifically, a GPA of 2.5 (C+) offers an eighty-six percent chance of graduating with one's cohort. A 2.0 (C) drops one down to a seventy-five percent chance, and only twenty-five percent of those with a 1.0 average (D) will collect a diploma in four years.

History of Dropout Prevention

Hunt and Clawson (1975) noted that "dropouts have been a constant occurrence ever since American schooling, accompanied by compulsory attendance legislation, was initiated on a

'mass' scale in the nineteenth century" (p. 237). Compulsory attendance legislation was initiated by Massachusetts in 1852, and by 1918 all states had enacted similar laws. Attendance was required until age fourteen, rising to sixteen by the 1950s.

In 1900, 7-12 percent of enrolled students actually finished a high school degree (Fant, 1990; Hunt & Clawson, 1975). By 1920, 20 percent received diplomas. In 1940, slightly more than half of Americans aged 25-29 had finished, and by 1960, the dropout rate was still at 40 percent (Hunt & Clawson, 1975). The available statistics must not be confused with present day graduation rates, as the largest percentage of students at the turn of the century actually dropped out during elementary school, not after starting high school.

A variety of reasons are offered for the low success rates of early public education programs, with the most compelling reason for quitting being the abundance of low-skill labor jobs available, including agricultural work in rural areas and factory work in urban (Havighurst, 1964; Fant, 1990). Ironically, child labor exploitation is cited as one of the reasons that compulsory education laws were enacted in the first place. But other reasons for dropping out prevail as well. Hunt and Clawson found that racism towards African American children is documented both in the South, where segregation continued long past Brown v. Board of Education was decided in 1954, and the North, where children of color were considered inferior in ability and pushed en masse into vocational programs via culturally-biased intelligence tests (1975). Discrimination against immigrants from southern and eastern European countries was prevalent in the North as well, with IQ scores and poor grades used to justify intolerant attitudes by educators toward immigrant children.

Another factor aggravating the high dropout rate was the high cost of so-called "free" public education. In the nineteen-thirties and early forties, researchers found that a typical

expense list for a high school education averaged $125, this during the Great Depression when 26 percent of Americans earned less than $750 per year. School expenses included books, uniforms, supplies, and fees. Social expenses were costly as well, including clothing, yearbooks, dances, dates, and graduation expenses (Hand, 1958, Sexton, 1969). Low income students did not have the financial means to participate in school life.

Sherman Dorn's history of the American dropout phenomena reveals that during World War II, high school attendance levels, and subsequently graduation rates, dropped as adolescents filled the labor shortage left by young adult men serving in the military (1996). After the war ended, he found, compulsory attendance laws were enacted for students up to age eighteen in an effort to keep young people out of the labor market, allowing veterans the opportunity to work. It was at this time that high school attendance became expected and normalized for all American adolescents.

By the sixties, growing awareness of dropout rates among minorities became a dominant issue among social researchers. Even the U.S. president at the time, Lyndon Johnson, remarked that the high dropout rate, especially among minority youth, was "the dark side of public education" (Fant, 1990). As research continued, it was learned that skin color was not the primary culprit causing poor achievement among minority students, but poor economic conditions and lack of opportunity were (Fant, 1990).

Trends in Dropout Prevention

In recent decades, dropout prevention efforts have come full circle. While fifty years ago vocational programs were part of the menu of offerings for every large school district, efforts to bring equity with emphasis on success for all students in core subject areas led to a diminishment of these programs. While the college dream still reigns supreme across the country and

standardized testing drives curriculum planning as administrators clamor to boost scores, the voices of growing dropout rates and employer demand for skilled workers have become ever louder and districts are beginning to respond (Plank, et al., 2008).

Credit retrieval programs. Low academic skill is another marker for becoming at-risk in high school. In addressing this area, several curriculum companies have sprouted up, marketing their wares to districts in need of shoring up test score data, increasing graduation rates, and decreasing dropout rates. Credit retrieval programs such as Novanet, E2020, and PLATO allow students to review course material they have failed at a self-paced rate while showing proficiency to earn necessary credit (Umpstead, 2009). Literacy-building programs such as READ 180, Achieve 3000 and Accelerated Reader promise to raise reading levels when willing students sit in front of their software (Deschler, et al., 2007).

After-school tutoring. In response to research revealing the vulnerability of ninth-graders, many schools have begun offering before- and after-school tutoring for core subject areas, especially at the freshman level. Such tutoring has been funded by states in an effort to comply with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates. NCLB also makes provision for students in failing schools, requiring that students be offered the opportunity to go to tutoring and/or transfer to another school in the district (NCLB, 2003).

Employment as an incentive. Government and privately-funded programs such as Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) and Job Corps offer opportunities for at-risk students to stay in school using employment as an incentive. While JAG promotes diploma completion through earned credit for after-school jobs, the Job Corps is a last ditch approach for low-income students at risk which provides technical career training in addition to a diploma or GED. This federal program has established centers throughout the U.S., requiring students to live on-site for up to

two years as well as providing transition services for up to twenty-one months following graduation (Job Corps, 2011).

Community support. Many schools employ social workers and counselors equipped to help at-risk students maneuver the challenges life has foisted upon them such as divorce, single-parent homes, teen pregnancy, poverty, substance abuse, and homelessness. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has established standards that include "facilitat[ing] student access to mental and community health services providers," and, "empower[ing] students to gain access to and effectively use formal and informal community resources" (NASW, 2002).

Support for minority youth. As minority students are deemed at even greater risk for dropping out, programs specifically aimed at supporting minority youth are offered in some districts. Rolstad, Manoney, and Glass (2005) found that programs for English as a Second Language (ESL) or English Language Learners (ELL) were effective, with bilingual programs edging out sheltered-immersion programs in a meta-analysis. Some studies, however, show that courses intended to support second language learners can actually lead to greater marginalization of minority students (O'Shea, 2000).

Alternative schools. Alternative schools are another standard offering in school districts across the country. Foley and Pang (2006) found that at-risk students are placed in smaller classes that offer non-traditional curriculums such as individually-paced coursework, project-based and/or hands-on learning, behavior-modification, counseling, and mentoring. Alternative programs can be schools-within-schools, stand-alone schools in a district, or charter schools operating under district contract, among other configurations. The purpose of these schools is to keep students in school by providing a supportive environment with a relevant curriculum and ready access or referrals to social services according to individual needs (Foley & Pang, 2006).

Graduation coaches. Graduation coaches are a fairly recent approach to dropout prevention. Funded in many states by Gates Foundation grants, coaches are trained to work with students individually and in small groups to help students overcome barriers to graduation. Several studies indicate a statistically significant impact on graduation rates among high schools utilizing coaches (Eppes, 2009, Hunter, 2011, McKeever, 2010). However, a study of 46 at-risk middle school students in Georgia showed that the aid of a graduation coach did not significantly improve attendance, math, or reading scores at that age level (Travillian, 2010).

Mentoring. Mentoring programs allow community members the opportunity to get involved in saving failing students. Having a friendship with a stable and caring adult can make a difference in student success. Dappen and Isernhagen (2005) found that school-based mentoring programs can provide a variety of benefits, including: improved grades, better relationships, reduction in drug and alcohol use, less likelihood of dropout, reduced pregnancy, and reduced gang involvement. They also learned that mentored students were more trusting of teachers, had a more positive attitude toward school, had better attendance, performed better academically, and were more confident and expressive of feelings.

Thus, schools have adopted a number of means of intervening in the lives of students at-risk for dropping out or graduating late. But are these interventions being used as often as they are needed, and are the interventions assigned to students with sensitivity to individual needs? Objective answers to these questions are difficult to come by in the school system, where quality control is measured by only two yardsticks: graduation and standardized test scores. Clearly, evaluation of this sort cannot be objective if it comes from the educators themselves who have a strong conflict of interest. The students are less than ideal evaluators as well, with limited perspective on what brought them to the point of failure. The parents, however, may have a

more advantageous viewpoint. They are the adults who have most closely watched the child stumble, wander, or get pushed off the track to success. They have a longitudinal perspective which, though emotionally subjective, allows them to evaluate the services offered by the school system from a vantage point that educators are not privy to.

Parents of Students At-risk

Parents of at-risk students are frequently marginalized; they are often not respected by educators and are blamed for the problems of their children (Thompson, 2004). Therefore, studies of this group have mostly involved implementing strategies to involve parents in helping their at-risk elementary children succeed in school. Strategies include parent education workshops and institutes, home visits, communication strategies, parent nights, and parent conferences. Though the literature supports these strategies as beneficial to at-risk students (Ingram, Wolfe, and Lieberman, 2007), parents have been given little opportunity to evaluate their effectiveness. Nor have researchers given much consideration to whether parents have felt well-served either in quantity or quality of outreach efforts. Parents of students at-risk are often considered by educators to be difficult to reach, uncommunicative, or uncooperative (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Despite these perceptions, it behooves educators to make a concerted effort to understand parents' perspectives about why their children are not being successful in school, and what they suggest should be done about it. Though a paucity of these types of studies exists, it is useful to consider the more general studies of parental perceptions currently in existence.

With an absence or rarity of similar studies of secondary parents, it is helpful to consider studies of the parents of younger children. Epstein (1986) surveyed parents of elementary students to find that they actually welcomed teacher guidance and instruction on how they can help their children to learn at home. She has also found that parents thought more highly of

teachers who involved them in their child's learning. Though Epstein did not attempt to generalize her findings to include the parents of secondary students, she did note that parents of older elementary students felt less confident in their ability to help their children and welcomed opportunities to learn how they could be more effective as their children's tutors.

The quality of teacher and administrator communications as perceived by parents shows that parents of struggling students suffer inequities in treatment. Some parents report feeling marginalized or criticized (McDermott& Rothenberg, 2000, Fine, 1993). Nierstheimer (2000) reports that as a literacy professor and parent of two students of widely differing ability levels, she has experienced conflicting attitudes from teachers and administrators toward her parenting abilities when interacting with them, and that when they are critical or judgmental, it hurts. She notes,

> I remind them that . . . making assumptions about their parents is a dangerous thing. I tell them that just once we would have like to have received a note or phone call from a teacher that communicated good new, or progress, or recognition. I remind them to be very careful and gentle in their letters (p. 37).

Nierstheimer concludes that, in her experience, teachers and administrators are not supportive of struggling learners or their parents. She felt that her parenting skills were being judged negatively when communicating about her struggling son, and letters home tended to be too harsh. In contrast, when speaking with educators about her academically successful daughter, she only heard positive comments about her parenting skills.

Bridgeland, et al. (2008), surveyed one thousand parents across the country to find that in general, parents want to be involved in helping their children succeed, but felt that schools should be doing more to reach out to them when their children reached secondary level. In focus

groups, parents cited the need for better communication, more opportunities to visit the school, more mentoring and education on parenting, and more information about expectations and graduation requirements before high school.

Parents from higher-achieving schools also reported having different experiences than parents from low-achieving schools, with the former reaching out to parents more frequently than the latter. Interestingly, parents at low-achieving schools in Bridgeland's study are not unwilling to take responsibility for their lack of involvement, with only 58 percent reporting that they are as involved as they think they should be. However, in focus groups they had numerous suggestions about what schools could do to support their involvement. One notable suggestion was to inform parents quickly if a child is having academic or behavioral problems. Though 53 percent of parents at high-achieving schools felt this was happening, only 25 percent of parents from low-achieving schools felt they were being informed (p. 6).

Parent Involvement

History of Parent Involvement

Parent involvement with their children's education can be traced from ancient cultures to the present (Hepworth Berger, 2005). Organized efforts to improve parenting and child education in this country started in the late nineteenth century with the American Association of University Women (AAUW) in 1892, the Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA) 1897, and the National Association of Colored Women (1897). These organizations began to promote child labor laws, kindergarten, and research into the needs of children. The National Council of Parent Education was formed in 1925, furthering the cause of increased parental involvement in child-rearing (Hepworth Berger, 2005).

During World War II and continuing through the 50s, parent involvement was still a matter of parent education, not reciprocal in any way. But starting with Head Start in 1965, parents were invited to serve on local, state, and national boards to better inform decision-makers of their needs and concerns in regards to the care and education of their children (Hepworth Berger, 2005).

The 1980s brought a flood of parent-school collaboration models, bringing parent involvement into vogue. The U.S. Department of Education as well as several professional educators' associations began to promote parent involvement via parent education programs, reading support literature, and even home visits (Williams & Mueller-Lewis, 1987, Hirshman, 1996, Newman & Baum, 1989).

With her 1995 model, Epstein (2005) redefined parental involvement as a "partnership" with a model of six types including three groups: schools, parents, and community. The six types are as follows:

Type 1. Parenting: Helping all families establish supportive environments for children.

Type 2. Communicating: Establishing two-way exchanges about school programs and children's progress.

Type 3. Volunteering: Recruiting and organizing parent help at school, home, or other location.

Type 4. Learning at home: Providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related materials.

Type 5. Decision-making: Having parents from all backgrounds serve as representatives and leaders on school committees.

Type 6. Collaborating with the community: Identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen school programs (Sheldon & Epstein, 2005, p. 197).

Epstein's typology has provided schools and researchers a framework for identifying areas of need and measuring success for involving parents and communities in school life.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), designed to close the achievement gap between ethnic populations and raise reading and math achievement in general, included community and parent test score reporting requirements which made accountability to parents an issue at the same time that researchers were delving deeper into the parent involvement/student achievement connection. Section 1118 of NCLB mandated parental involvement for schools (No Child Left Behind, 2003) giving parent involvement research an even brighter spotlight. Through NCLB, parents were given the "right" to choose a better school if their local school was not making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Parents were also awarded a high level of regard by the portion of the text that ensures them a yearly report comparing their child's school with that of other schools in the district and state, and a variety of rules in the section forced schools to offer a menu of supports designed to increase all forms of involvement.

Parents of students in schools that don't reach AYP are also informed of their right to expect free tutoring, after school programs, and summer school for their children (U. S. Department of Education, 2007). However, studies performed in the years following the launch of NCLB have reported that, although middle class families have benefitted from the reforms, lower socio-economic families, including illiterate minority members, have difficulty understanding school communications which are usually replete with confusing data and government mandates (Rogers, 2006). The policy that was meant to close the gap between class

levels, may have actually caused it to widen, i.e., middle and upper class parents are more savvy than ever about school systems, while lower class families have gained little.

Emerging Research in Parental Involvement

Benefits of Parental Involvement

The documented benefits of parent involvement are numerous. Steinberg, et al (1996), in a study of 20,000 adolescents at nine high schools, documented achievement gains when parents with an authoritative parenting style became involved at school. Trusty and Lampe (1997) expanded on Steinberg's findings, reporting an increased sense of locus of control among high school seniors when parents used an authoritative parenting style and were involved with school. Sheldon and Epstein (2002) noted a positive relationship as well, finding that parent involvement improves attendance, and attendance is directly correlated to achievement. Keith (1986) observed a correlation with homework completion. Mapp (1997) uncovered a relationship between parent involvement and self-esteem, and Trusty (1996) revealed an improvement in student attitudes toward school. Fan and Chen (2001) found a positive correlation with good behavior, and Epstein (2005) discovered parent involvement improves emotional well-being. Researchers have also discovered parent behavior can have significant effects on life goals and graduation (Lommerin, 1999).

Though numerous studies hail the benefits of parent involvement, gaps in research leave no shortage of unanswered questions. Anderson and Minke (2007) found that definitions of "involvement," differed between parents and educators, negating the effects of many parent and teacher surveys. In addition, several researchers have noted that parental expectations, which are an indirect form of involvement at best, trump on-site activities on achievement measures. This is even true with ethnicity studies, where it was found that African-American families, who show

high involvement in campus activities, have lower achievement than Asian-American students, whose families are less likely to attend an open house but are more likely to communicate high expectations and aspirations to their children (Liu, 2006). The most significant gains come not from physical involvement in school activities, i.e., homework, conferences, etc., but from expectations and aspirations for their children, both spoken and unspoken (Trivette & Anderson, 2005; Blondal & Adalbjarnardottir, 2009; Center for Research, 1998). Families that expect and plan for their children to finish high school and attend college are more likely to get those results, regardless of how many parent-teacher conferences they attend.

Another unsettling finding suggests that associations between parent involvement and student achievement are negative (Domina, 2005), i.e., parents involve themselves according to the needs of their child. Parents of students with behavior or academic problems are more likely to get involved, subsequently skewing the observed benefits of the involvement in a negative direction. Domina (2005) did concede that parent involvement appears to have a positive effect, however, on student behavior, which may in turn affect achievement outcomes, noting, "Parents prevent children's behavioral problems when they volunteer at school, help their children with their homework, and check their children's homework" (p. 245).

Socioeconomic status has been shown to influence parental involvement and management of their children's education as well. Baker and Stevenson (1986) found that parents from both high and low status backgrounds agree on strategies for improving their child's academic performance, parents of higher status and higher education were better able to manage the many factors that play in to following through on those strategies. The authors conclude, "Better educated mothers seem to be better managers of school careers; they are more likely to monitor their child's progress and to choose a high school curriculum that leads their

child toward college admission," and, "it may be that higher-status parents again undertake this with more skill and knowledge of an effective strategy than lower-status parents" (p. 165). This study supports the notion that there are parental skill sets involved in raising academic achievement in children. The authors also recommend that future research explore "the actions of schools and teachers that may encourage or hinder parental involvement" (p. 165).

Despite the rather intuitive notion that involved parents are informed parents, Bridegeland, et al. (2006) also discovered, in a large study of the perspectives of student dropouts, that 68% of them reported that their parents were not aware or only somewhat aware that they were having trouble in school until right before they dropped out and 71% recommended an improvement in school communication with parents (pp. iv-v).

Parent-Teacher Relationships

Quality of relationship between parents and educators has been linked to student achievement as well (e.g., Boethel, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Vickers and Mincke (1995) describe this relationship as an affective quality including trust, mutuality, affiliation, support, shared values, and shared expectations.

Boethel (2003) found in a meta-analysis that several studies show quality of relationship disturbed by "instances of exclusion and discrimination" that she finds may be related to a "power differential" between school staff and parents (pp. 43-44). She specifically references Gutman and McLeod (2000) who found parents reporting "previous negative interactions" with school staff were more "wary" of school staff (Boethel, 2003, p. 44).

Vickers and Mincke (1995) end their study by suggesting future studies investigate parent-teacher relationships in cultural subpopulations of successful and unsuccessful students.

This study does not focus on a particular ethnic group, but will investigate these relationships in a subpopulation of the parents of unsuccessful students as recommended by the research.

Research Methodology

Qualitative Research

Epistemology refers to the study of knowledge, e.g., how do we know what is real? Positivism declares reality to be outside of self, something that can be studied under a microscope, or measured through observation. Postpositivism embraces the subjectivity of knowledge, i.e., reality cannot be known apart from the shading of the lens of our personal experience. Constructivism philosophizes that reality is constructed . Qualitative research tends toward post-positivist and constructivist paradigms, but is not inherently so (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative researchers may utilize positivist scientific methods including hypotheses, controls, and quantitative measurement to arrive at conclusions.

Though most qualitative researchers would argue that their brand of research is no less relevant than that of quantitative researchers, qualitative research findings often are used to inform quantitative hypotheses (Bryman, 1984). Various types of data collected through qualitative inquiry offer descriptive and exploratory knowledge that can later be validated or corroborated through quantitative measurement.

Phenomenology

Van Manen (2011) describes phenomenological inquiry as possessing two "methodological impulses," i.e., the "reductio (the reduction)" and the "vocatio (the vocative dimension" (van Manen, 2011). The "reductio" speaks to the bracketing of a concept, the abandoning of attitudes and conceptions about an experience in life in pursuit of experiential essence. The "vocatio" speaks of the translation of that experience into language, or, eidetic

reduction of the invariant aspects of the phenomenon into an essential description. My role as researcher, then, is to systematically and reflectively set aside my own preconceptions about the phenomenon of parenting a high school dropout, for the purpose of exploring the experiences of others through the reflective activity of writing.

Foundations of Phenomenology

Many of the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology originate with the German mathematician philosopher of the late nineteenth century, Edmund Husserl. Van Manen referenced Husserl when he said, "[It] asks for the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some- 'thing' what it is–and without which it could not be what it is" (1990, p. 10). Phenomenology then, in Husserlian terms, is the study of lived experience–the science or epistemology of understanding the realities of lived experience. Although Husserl propounded that reality could be understood through experience, that understanding is contingent on conscious awareness, therefore the subject-object dichotomy most often under-laying positivist thinking is rejected in this model (Creswell, 2007).

Husserl's contemporary, Heidegger, proposed a more ontological approach to phenomenology, resulting in an even more radical, constructivist view of reality. He did not see the philosophy as an approach to discovering knowledge so much as an approach to understanding what it means to be human (Laverty, 2003). Therefore, methodology of the Heidegerrian type has a somewhat different focus and approach.

Phenomenological Methodology

Two types of methodology dominate phenomenological research: hermeneutic phenomenology, and phenomenology (sometimes labeled empiric, transcendental or psychological phenomenology) (Creswell, 2007, Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutical

phenomenology, in keeping with Heideggerian ontological roots, focuses on the subject and the constructed meaning developed in relationship with the researcher. Greater emphasis is placed on the role and reflections of the researcher (Laverty, 2003). The approach can be used under postpositivist or constructivist paradigms.

Phenomenology, be it empirical, transcendental, or psychological, holds to an epistemological Husserlian worldview in that the emphasis is on the experience itself as understood by the subject. Researcher experience is thoroughly bracketed and put aside at the beginning of the research process (Laverty, 2003). This approach fits under a postpositivist paradigm, and may include positivist methodology as well.

Several social sciences have developed a strong contingent of qualitative research literature based in phenomenological philosophy, including nursing, psychology, education, and information systems. Phenomenological education research is dominated by the methods of two men, van Manen and Moustakas (Creswell, 2007). van Manen advocates a more hermeneutic methodology, focusing on a blend of subject experience and the researcher's reflections in an exploratory fashion. Moustakas uses a more empirical approach, not excluding the experience of the researcher, but bracketing it at the beginning of the study, seeking a more objective, descriptive research product (Creswell, 2007).

Summary

This literature review focused on aspects affecting the perspectives of parents whose children are not on track for graduation with their peers. The literature shows that although some efforts have been made to involve parents in helping their at-risk children be successful, a paucity of studies specifically exploring the perspectives of this sub-group of parents exists. Studies available tend to focus on the parents of preschool and elementary-aged children.

Though the value of these studies is not in question, the need to continue to communicate with and garner feedback from parents throughout the middle and high school years is evident. Numerous studies from all corners support the importance of parent involvement in raising student achievement, but not enough has been done to involve the parents themselves in developing this key component.

Studies also show that, by and large, schools are reaching the parents of high-achieving and upper income level students. But the literature also indicates that parents of low-achievers and lower income level students are not being reached with information and support that could make a difference in reversing the trend toward ever-higher numbers of high school dropouts. This study attempts to give those parents of students at-risk a voice as educators and policymakers consider how best to address low graduation rates

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the methodology and methods adopted for this study. I will begin by explicating the philosophical paradigm that is foundational to the study, introduce the roles and setting of the study, then describe the procedures for data collection and analysis that were used to complete the study.

To uncover the experiences of parents of at-risk secondary students, a phenomenological case-study method was used. Creswell (2007) defines a phenomenological study as one that "describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences (his italics) of a concept or phenomena" (p. 57). This study attempts to discover the meaning of the experiences of parents' experiences with their at-risk children by capturing their stories about and interpretations of those experiences throughout the children's school years.

Conceptual Framework

Phenomenological methodology is built on a philosophical paradigm that differs markedly from conventional, quantitative methods of research, and even most forms of qualitative research (van Manen, 1990). Rather than forcing data into a theoretical structure, the researcher attempts to extract the "essence" of a particular experience. "Essence" is defined by van Manen (1990) as "a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon." So "essence" in phenomenology is an attempt to describe in words the purest form of something–life experience without reflection or analysis.

Stewart and Mickunas (1990) offer four philosophical perspectives inherent to phenomenology:

1. "A return to the traditional tasks of philosophy," referring to the "Greek conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom" (p. 58).

2. "A philosophy without presuppositions," referring to the researcher's obligation to "suspend all judgments about what is real . . . until they are founded on a more certain basis" (p. 58).
3. "The intentionality of consciousness," referring to the idea that "reality of an object . . . is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it" (p. 59).
4. "The refusal of the subject-object dichotomy," suggesting that "the reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (p. 59).

Phenomenology, therefore, is rooted in the idea that the subject (the person having an experience) is the final arbiter of the object (the experience). This framework makes the method attractive to sociological researchers of all kinds who want to give a voice to the poor, the forgotten, the downtrodden of society. Those whose voices are typically ignored in the dominant paradigm are treated with dignity and respect by phenomenologists–their "take" on life has value.

In this study, the subjects are parents who rarely receive accolades or recognition of any kind for their efforts–the parents of dropouts. The study will illuminate the lived experiences of these parents by allowing the researcher to walk in their shoes, as it were, to understand the complex circumstances and injustices that brought them and their children to a point of uncertainty about their futures.

The Role of the Researcher

Moustakas (1994) assigns a foundational role to the phenomenological researcher, asserting, "the topic and question [are] rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well

as involving social meanings and significance" (p. 103). It is the personal experience of the researcher that both inspires and drives the study.

However, as with all qualitative methods, phenomenology assumes that the researcher has a subjective position in relation to the topic at hand, and this position is not to remain hidden, but clearly exposed as meaning is constructed. Husserl developed the concept of "bracketing," as one way to accomplish this transparency, wherein the researcher exposes his or her own subjective experience with the topic at hand, then "brackets" it within the study in order to assume as honest and objective a position as possible (Creswell, 2007). In keeping with Husserl's concept, I offer a brief history of my arrival at the topic of this study.

As a high school teacher and lifetime learner, the quality high school education of my own children was an assumed goal I adopted when becoming a parent. As the prospect of a high school diploma vaporized for each of my oldest two children, I experienced deep regret and concern, especially as school failure was precipitated by the wild ride of at-risk behaviors of the kind that keep parents up at night for months and even years on end.

During one of the lowest points of my dark journey, I vowed that one day I would help parents like myself. I felt that I had suffered more than I should have for lack of support from the schools and community. Many years later, after my children's lives had stabilized and I continued to pursue higher education, I discovered that my passion for the plight of parents was revived and I found myself drawn to research parental perspectives, at-risk students, and dropout phenomena. I had no idea that my vow, uttered during a dark night of the soul, would one day lead to doing a study like this.

Site Selection

Walford showed that, although case studies cannot achieve true generalizability, they may allow readers to compare and apply findings to their own situations through the use of thick description (2001). In this study, although it was hoped that purposeful sampling would provide data representing various ethnicities, income levels, and educational attainments from the region, a fairly homogeneous sample of participants came forward.

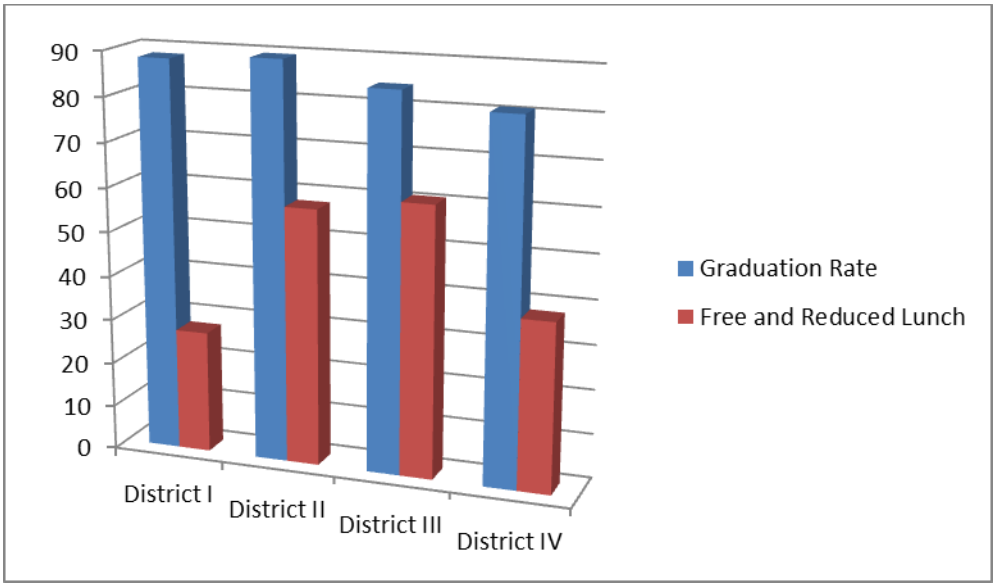
This region of the South Central U.S. is home to approximately 463,204 residents (Census 2010). The region is served by several institutions of higher learning including two community colleges. The Adult Education programs of these two colleges, specifically the GED programs, were invited to participate in this study. In Community College I, the Adult Education program is housed in a building with other college and certificate programs on a busy highway in the middle of town, albeit with a separate entrance for these non-credit classes. Community College II, on the edge of town, houses its Adult Education program on the same campus with its regular college and certificated courses as well, but in a separate, smaller building.

Community College I serves a metropolitan area of the South Central U.S., with 93% of its more than 17,000 students coming from two adjacent counties (NCES). In 2010, 3,315 of those students were enrolled in Adult Education programs, and 430 General Equivalency Diplomas (GEDs) were awarded. The ethnic breakdown of the school population is 77% Caucasian, 11% Hispanic, and 12% mixed ethnicity including African American, Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander. Community College II is adjacent to Community College I, serving 346 students, with 93% Caucasian and 7% Hispanic, African American, or Asian descent (NCES).

Four school districts from two counties are the primary feeders of the two community colleges under study. According to the National Office for Research on Measurement and Evaluation Systems (NORMES), District I has a graduation rate of 88.2 percent, and a free and reduced lunch population of 27.5 percent. District II has a graduation rate of 89.4 percent and a free and reduced lunch population of 57.7 percent. District III has a graduation rate of 84.4 percent and a free and reduced lunch population of 60.8 percent. And District IV has a graduation rate of 80.9 percent and a free and reduced lunch population of 38.1 percent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Graduation Rates and Free and Reduced Lunch Populations in Primary Districts.



The number of high school graduates in County I is 83.2 percent with 24.7 percent earning a bachelor's degree or higher, and the number of graduates in County II is 82.4 percent with 28.5% earning a bachelor's or higher. Jimerson, et al., however, noted that a higher percentage of the parents of dropouts will be less educated and of less means than the average county resident (2000), therefore the study sample represents a spread from the applicant pool.

The Participants

This study solicited the participation of the parents of high school dropouts. Six members of the larger community agreed to participate in the study, together representing fairly homogeneous ethnicities, income, and education levels. By way of convenience, two community college GED programs were approached with letters and fliers explaining the purpose of the study–to interview the parents of dropouts–and offering small incentives for participation. GED students who provided contact information to reach their parents received gift certificates for beverages at local fast food restaurants and coffee shops. The contact form (Appendix B) included information about the parameters of the study as well as requests for limited demographic and contact information. Interested parents were invited to participate in a screening interview. Parents who passed through screening and indicated a willingness to continue the process agreed to two subsequent interviews. All interviewed participants received twenty dollars per hour of interviewing.

It was hoped that a diverse group of parents representative of the diversity of the community would "illustrate subgroups and facilitate comparisons" (Creswell, 2007, p. 127). Because twenty-five percent of the general population in the two counties represented are minorities, a sample that mirrored that diversity would have represented the area more accurately. However, only two GED students with ethnic surnames completed the contact information forms. Of those, one was a former student of the researcher and was therefore screened out. The second contact form did not lead to contact with the parent, as the phone number provided was disconnected or no longer in use. One male parent agreed to interview, and the others were female. The group was also disproportionately low income, with all but one indicating their child had received Free and Reduced Lunch benefits.

All interested parents were invited to an initial interview of no more than thirty minutes length. The applicants were screened for the following criteria: relationship to dropout, i.e., the parent must have been involved as a caregiver for the last several years of the child's public school career; availability, i.e., they had to be available to commit time to two subsequent interviews within a period of 1-4 weeks; and their child had to be a high school dropout.

New paradigms in qualitative research promote the concept of participants as stakeholders in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Thus, as conventional researchers observe "human subjects," a phrase that connotes scientific objectivity but in some ways marginalizes the role of informants, many qualitative paradigms prefer the term "participants" which assigns value to the role of informants, allowing them to participate as co-researchers. Each of the participants expressed a willingness to be helpful by contributing to the study.

Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were informed that their privacy would be protected. They were informed that original tapes and transcripts would be kept in locked storage until the researcher had completed the project and any related projects. Names of participants and their children were changed to pseudonyms for additional privacy, and the names of educators, towns, and schools were left blank. The University of Arkansas Institution Review Board (IRB) policies were adhered to, and participants received a signed copy of IRB approval and related forms.

Data Collection

Initial screening interviews were recorded through traditional pen and paper means. The second, hour-long, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. A laptop computer microphone and recording software provided high quality audio recordings. The third, short follow-up interviews consisted of traditional note-taking. Once the data for the

second interviews was transcribed, it was saved on two USB flash drives, a laptop hard drive, and also on a back-up cloud. Transcriptions were printed as hard copy to facilitate analysis.

Interview Protocol

Johnson suggests that interviewers with lived experience with the phenomena under investigation may bring a knowledge base that allows them to observe "nuances and layered meanings" that a novice in the area of study may miss (2001, p. 108). Johnson also notes that researchers who choose to reveal their identity as "insiders" in relation to the phenomena may gain greater trust from participants. Johnson (2001) iterates that the danger of stigmatization, of being considered "unprofessional" or worse, no longer poses a threat for researchers, as studying areas of one's personal expertise is even encouraged among qualitative research experts.

An important goal of each contact with a participant was to begin to form a personal relationship. Doing so allows the participant to feel valued as a "co-member of a communicative partnership" (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Interview questions were open-ended, and the interview style was conversational to allow for a broad array of responses in an informal and relaxed format. Interview sites were chosen by the participants for their convenience. Interview sites included library study rooms, restaurants, and participants' homes.

The "informal conversational interview" and the "general interview guide" are but two of the three practical methods of data collection in heuristic research (Patton, 1980, p. 197-198). In the former, Moustakas (1990) notes that questions and dialogue are spontaneous and natural, allowing the participant to have a role in choosing areas of focus for the data. Moustakas describes the interview guide as an instrument that allows the interviewer to "explore . . . a set of issues" with participants as the interview progresses, thus "focusing on common information" (p. 47). This study includes both informal dialogue and a general set of open-ended questions to

achieve both natural dialogue and common information (see Appendix C). This researcher conducted two practice interviews to practice this casual-yet-guided interview format.

Data Analysis

A simplified, step-by-step method of data analysis is used in this study. Moustakas offers a modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis, which is to be conducted from a verbatim transcript (2007). His method and my annotations are found in Table 2.

In this method, the researcher begins by "interviewing herself" as part of the "systematic process" Moustakas refers to as preparatory to phenomenological research (1991, p. 22). The data is analyzed using the same format to be used in analyzing the data from all participants. This allows the researcher to examine, then step away from, her own experience, i.e., to "bracket" it.

Steps one and two involve recording, reading, then re-reading interview transcripts. Steps three through five of Moustakas' process involve creating "meaning units." Each transcript was examined repeatedly and methodically, with "meaning units," i.e., "chunks" or phrases indicating thoughts, feelings, descriptions, intuitions, reactions, motivators, and all manner of meaning the participant has made of his or her experience highlighted on hard copy, then recorded on a spreadsheet. Each meaning unit a participant used was put in a cell of its own.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe a coding (categorizing) process that was used as an explication of step five in this study. The process they describe for coding is cyclical, with the researcher producing and refining new codes each time the data is returned to. As meaning units began to be identified and recorded, the "open coding" process begins. Open coding was

annotated with "memo-ing," the researcher's reflections and discoveries about the particular code.

The next stage, "axial coding," involves organizing open codes into more definitive categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The axial stage was memo-ed as well, as the researcher processed relationships between open codes. Axial code categories were titled with themes which were then used to write the composite "textural and structural (what and how) descriptions" of the participants' collective experience (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).

Steps six through nine of Moustakas' process delineate the process of using the core categories and subcategories to develop descriptions of the essence of the individual experiences of the participants. "Textural description" was used to illustrate the "what" of the experience (Creswell, 2007). "Structural description" refers to the "how" of the experience (Creswell, 2007). Actual examples were used to color and detail the descriptions.

Finally, step ten synthesizes individual descriptions to create a composite description of the collective experience of the group (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Data analysis process (Moustakas, 2007)

Moustakas	Annotation
1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomenon.	I wrote out my experience using the guiding questions found in Appendix C.
2. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.	I read the transcript several times in search of significant, descriptive statements.
3. Record all relevant statements.	Relevant statements were highlighted on printed transcripts, a form of "open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Moustakas	Annotation
4. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the "meaning units."	Meaning units were assigned codes using the "comments" tool in the word processing software.
5. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.	"Axial coding" is the categorization of meaning units into themes or "codes" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes were clustered to form major themes through listing and sorting on a spreadsheet.
6. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a *description of the textures of the experience* (author italics). Include verbatim examples.	"Textural description" refers to *what* the participants experienced (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). Unlike "selective coding," a process of "integrating and refining categories" that become the building blocks of theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 143), the descriptive nature of phenomenological research precludes development of theory at this stage of coding.
7. Reflect on your own textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a *description of the structures you experienced* (author italics).	"Structural description" refers to the *how* of what the participants experienced (Creswell, 2007, p. 61).
8. Construct a *textural-structural description* of the meanings and essences of your experience.	This is a final draft documentation of the essences of my experience.
9. From the verbatim transcript of the experience of *each* of the other *co-researchers,* complete the above steps.	Each interview transcript was processed documenting the essential experiences of the participants using the above process.

Moustakas	Annotation
10. From the ten individual textural-structural descriptions of all co-researchers' experiences, construct a *composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience* (author's italics), integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole.	The composite represents the essential phenomena of the group's collective experience as the parents of high school dropouts.

Trustworthiness

Since so many variables influence qualitative data, conventional methods for establishing reliability as used in quantitative methodology may be impossible to use (Golafshani, 2003). Instead, Golafshani proffers the term "trustworthiness" as a qualitative alternative to quantitative concepts of reliability and validity both.

Nutt-Williams and Morrow (2009) found three aspects of trustworthiness to be addressed in qualitative methods: "integrity of the data, balance between reflexivity and subjectivity, and clear communication of findings" (p.577). Integrity of data, they found, can be achieved by multiple means including a clear and repeatable study design, "sufficiency of data" (p. 578) which is not necessarily a measure of quantity but "richness" as demonstrated by demographic diversity and variety of viewpoints, and also "checks" such as colleague feedback and/or triangulation with other data methods. The authors note that data quantity supports integrity as well, which many qualitative researchers define as "redundancy," i.e., the point at which no new themes can be found.

Redundancy is built into this study first by seeking a number of participants sufficient to evoke an adequate amount of data. Redundancy was achieved as saturation of data (no new categories or themes of codes) was reached with the original participants.

Nutt-Williams and Morrow (2009) asserted that a balance between subjectivity (participants' voices) and reflexivity (researcher's interpretation) is another aspect of building trustworthiness. In this regard, Johnson (1997) calls for "interpretive validity," i.e., the accurate representation of participants' "viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, intentions, and purposes" (p. 285). Lincoln and Guba (1985) proffered "member checks" as a way to involve participants in verifying that the researcher has represented their perspectives accurately, i.e., reviewing the data with the participant after it has been analyzed and summarized and incorporating their feedback. Member checks were built into this study design through multiple interviews with each participant, effectually producing validity of data interpretation.

Bracketing, or "epoche," increased trustworthiness of the data by compartmentalizing researcher experience throughout the data collection and interpretation process.

Clarity of communication of findings is the third aspect of trustworthiness explored by Nutt-Williams and Morrow (2009). They find that clarity is dependent on "acknowledging the uses and purposes of the research," providing context (thick description) of the research, and "tying the results to the existing literature" (p. 580). As a dissertation, this study followed a traditional format of establishing purpose and significance, as well as linking findings to the current body of research. Context is established both in the site and participant descriptions as well as descriptive notations of the interview contexts.

Summary

This study employed a phenomenological, qualitative methodology. The singular data

source was participant interviews of the parents of high school dropouts. Participant contact leads were drawn from GED students at two community colleges. Interview transcripts were analyzed using Moustakas' (2007) guidelines. Coded data were sorted to form themes and were further reported in descriptive format. Descriptions were reviewed by participants in the form of member checks. Individual themes and descriptions were synthesized to identify common themes and produce a descriptive group profile.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to capture the essence of the lived experiences of the parents of high school dropouts who are enrolled in two local GED programs. A phenomenological research methodology led to qualitative interviews to create a rich data set for investigation by qualitative analysis. A small sample of participants allowed for in-depth, case-study interviews to illuminate themes useful in building textural descriptions for synthesis as a group profile.

Interview Sites

Participants were encouraged to choose interview settings that would be convenient and comfortable for them. Two participants chose to be interviewed in their homes, two met with me in restaurants, and two chose to meet in public library study rooms.

The Participants

GED students provided contact information about their parents in exchange for a coffee shop gift card. Ten forms and gift cards were left at each Adult Education Center. Of the twenty forms and cards distributed, eleven forms were completed and turned in. Out of the eleven, two families were not considered eligible for participation because they were former students of the researcher. Of the remaining nine forms, three families could not be reached using the contact information provided. All six of the remaining families agreed to participate in the study. At the initial screening interview, each was told that their confidentiality would be protected and signed an informed consent form. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant as well and their child to protect their identity.

Table 2 shows demographic information collected from the participants.

Table 2.

Demographic information.

Participant	Ethnicity	Education	Free/Reduced Lunch Benefits?
Jessica	Caucasian/Pacific Islander	GED	yes
Stephanie	Caucasian	Some college	yes
Brenda	Caucasian	High school diploma	no
Cindy	Caucasian	Some college	yes
Paul	Caucasian	Some college	yes
Jennifer	Caucasian	Some college	yes

Each participant participated in an initial screening interview, followed by an in-depth interview, and finally a member check meeting (after transcripts and descriptions had been written). Participants were remunerated at a rate of $20 per hour averaging two hours, $40, per participant. All participants expressed positive attitudes toward the study, were glad for the opportunity to help others by sharing their stories, and were grateful to earn some extra money.

General Description of Participants

Jessica. I met with Jessica in the backyard of her duplex on a cool summer morning. Toys and play equipment, a barbeque grill, broken chairs and old tires filled the small, fenced yard. We sat at a round patio table with her fiancé and their baby, lying in a baby carrier, present. Jessica was heavyset and spoke with a loud, rough voice and an easy laugh. She smoked and conversed with me while her young-looking, quiet fiancé kept the baby occupied. Jessica's teenaged daughter from the GED program, Haley, lives with her and was inside the house with her own baby and Jessica's kindergarten-aged son during the interview.

Jessica's screening interview revealed she is part Pacific Islander and part Caucasian ethnicity. Her child had participated in the free and reduced lunch program, and her highest level of education was a GED. Jessica has been a single mom for many years, and has a long history of drug abuse and psychiatric issues. Her interview revealed that she had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder in recent years, but she let me know that since finding stability on prescribed medication, substance abuse was no longer an issue for her.

Jessica has two older daughters who have not finished high school, but the one who had provided the contact information to me, the one we would be talking about, was the second child, Haley. Jessica's first daughter had been an excellent student, but her senior year she had decided to quit school, making Haley the third dropout in the family after her mother and sister.

Paul. I met with Paul in his sparsely-furnished and dimly-lit duplex apartment on a hot summer afternoon. He was alone in the apartment the first time I met with him, except for a tiny dog who "protected" him from my invasion into his space by barking at me until I sat down on the sofa. There were no pictures on the walls and no dining table, just a sofa and a recliner with a small end table beside it on which sat Paul's laptop, papers, coffee cup, and miscellaneous items. Paul, a single, heavyset, middle-aged Caucasian, is the non-custodial father of four mentally disabled children. He has a debilitating medical condition of his own and currently lives on disability payments.

Paul's highest level of education is "some college," and he informed me that he is currently enrolled at a local community college and is pursuing an associate's degree in computer science. Because of his disability, he cannot drive and is dependent on public transportation to get to his classes. His children have been the recipients of free and reduced lunch.

Paul's four children by three different mothers, three boys and a girl, each has some form of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and accompanying mental illnesses. At our second interview meeting, his daughter had moved in with him, and came in and out of the room during my visit. I observed that her manner of speaking and topics of interest resembled those of a much younger child, one of perhaps ten or eleven years of age. Paul had to ask her to leave the room due to her excessive interruptions of our conversation. He later confided in me that the girl frequently hallucinated, but refused to take antipsychotic medications. With few resources to draw from, Paul clearly faced an extremely challenging situation.

Kyle, the GED student who had completed the contact form for me, had been living with Paul at our first meeting, but had moved back with his mother at our second meeting. Like his half-sister, Kyle also had problems complying with treatment plans or suggestions for continuing his education or training, which caused frustration for Paul who wanted to help his children be successful.

Jennifer. Jennifer, a slender, clean-cut, athletic-looking young woman, is the Caucasian mother of three. She lives with her fiancée and two daughters. Jennifer has some college education and assistant manages a local fast food restaurant. Her children have received free and reduced lunch benefits. She recently moved into an apartment following several months staying in a pay-by-the-week motel room. We met in a small study room in a public library.

Jennifer's path took her from a small-town environment with a supportive employer and children who were happily involved in school activities, through a relationship that led to a move to a more urban area where financial challenges and lifestyle changes led to difficulties for her and her children. When I met her she was optimistic about her future, being recently engaged and settled into a more stable living situation.

Brenda. Brenda and I met in a restaurant after she got off work one evening. Heavyset and graying, but a friendly fixture in the town (more than one woman approached us in the restaurant to say hello and catch up with her), Brenda is the Caucasian mother of two grown boys. The older son is now a pastor. The younger son is twenty, unemployed, and still pursuing his GED while living at home. Brenda has a high school diploma, and has worked in department and grocery stores for most of her adult life. Her husband, a disabled veteran, is an alcoholic who has experienced recovery in recent years, but who drank for many of the years that their boys were growing up. Brenda said her son did not receive free and reduced lunch benefits, although she did indicate that financial difficulties contributed to the challenges she and her husband faced.

In addition to the challenge of raising children in partnership with a drinking husband, Brenda's first son suffered from a debilitating physical condition that not only dominated much of her time and attention, but took her on trips to a distant children's hospital for treatments. As the primary parent, Brenda at times found herself torn between the needs of her two sons, the older with his medical problems, and the younger who struggled in school. As the primary breadwinner in the family, often holding two jobs or more, Brenda had carried a heavy load of responsibility for many years.

Cindy. Cindy and her husband met me in the study room of a public library on a Saturday morning. Cindy, a heavyset but athletic-looking Caucasian woman, has worked in public schools as an administrative assistant for many years, and has been an active volunteer in the community and school system, including coaching athletics and serving on numerous committees. She has some college education, and her children have received free and reduced lunch benefits. Her husband, a middle-aged business owner with a construction background, sat

in on and sometimes participated in the interview as well, often finishing Cindy's sentences or filling in missing memories.

Cindy explained that one reason she was drawn to working in her children's schools was to be near to and available for her mentally disabled son. Over the years, Cindy learned that in order to get her son the modifications and support he needed to help him be successful in school, she had to be proactive and involved. Working in his schools gave Cindy direct and frequent access to teachers and administrators, allowing her to monitor her son's school experience.

Cindy's daughter Courtney, her youngest, filled out the contact form for me. Although Courtney was an identified gifted and talented student who excelled academically and enjoyed athletics for many years, during high school she developed a painful medical condition that kept her home for several days at a time. Cindy, who had always been extremely involved in her children's activities and her son's care, took on the additional job of helping her sick daughter through school.

Stephanie. I met Stephanie in a restaurant while her car was being serviced. Stephanie, a young and slender Caucasian mother of three, including the mentally disabled daughter who completed the contact form, lives with her fiancée and is enrolled in a program of study through an online business college. Her disabled daughter is currently serving jail time. Her children received free and reduced lunches while in school.

Stephanie spent many years battling hardcore drug addiction, including jail and prison terms. During ten years of extreme substance abuse, Stephanie left her children in the care of her mother and had no contact with them for ten years. Following a prison term, Stephanie moved back home with her mother and children and began fulfilling probation and drug court

requirements assigned by the court. Only then did she begin a real relationship with her children and try to give them the care they needed.

Stephanie shared that she battled guilt feelings over abandoning her children for so long. She also felt sad that when she did come back into their lives, she had demanding probationary requirements that left her very little time for family life. Despite these extreme challenges, however, Stephanie became a devoted advocate for her daughter, helping her navigate the juvenile court and behavioral rehabilitation systems for several years.

Interview Process

Interviews began with a screening questionnaire to establish parent-child relationships, collect demographic information, and review the Informed Consent agreement for protection of privacy. At the end of this screening interview, participants were given the option to schedule a second, separate interview, or to continue with the second interview segment. All participants chose to stay and commence with the second interview.

At the beginning of the second interview, a laptop computer microphone and recording software were used to capture verbatim audio interview data. A sheet of guiding questions was on hand to keep the interview time focused, however, clarifying questions were asked and encouragement was provided throughout the session to keep participants involved. Minimum interview length was one hour, and a few went far beyond the scheduled time. Participants seemed relaxed and eager to share their experience, with the exception of one participant who seemed to focus only on positive aspects of her child's school life until toward the end of the interview, when it was revealed that problems had been more numerous than initially revealed.

Data Analysis

Recording and Transcribing

After experimenting with both a hand-held recorder and a laptop built-in microphone, I determined that the quality of the sound files was much higher with the latter. Recorded interviews were played back and transcribed one phrase at a time in single-spaced scripted form, averaging 26 pages each. Time spent transcribing averaged eight hours per interview. The transcriptions were saved to a hard drive, on a USB flash drive, and also with a web-based cloud storage service.

Open and Axial Coding

Transcriptions were read several times, with "meaning units" highlighted and commented on in the margins, a form of "open coding." Open coded meaning units were then compiled and categorized to form "axial coding," resulting in approximately seven to ten rough themes per interview. Themes that represented meaning units that were infrequently mentioned and not corroborated through additional references, either within or between interviews, were eliminated (see Eliminated Themes, Appendix G). Themes that could be combined to form a larger theme were combined and renamed. Ultimately, each participant's story was reduced to approximately five themes.

An example of a theme with axial-coded meaning units follows in Table 3. In this example, meaning units for the code were easy to identify initially, as each participant was asked to describe their school involvement, so I was able to use units that directly followed that question each time it came up. Typical answers referred to parent-teacher conferences, open house events, and volunteering in the classroom. But as the interviews progressed, I noticed that parents began describing more non-traditional forms of involvement. They were supporting their

children, providing time and resources to help them be successful, in numerous ways that either directly or indirectly affected their educational goals. In this example, as I sorted meaning units, I included every effort that Jessica made on behalf of her child, both in school and out, drawing on more than one of Epstein's six types of parental involvement (2005).

Table 3.

Axial coding example.

Jessica's Parental Involvement
conferences and awards ceremonies
involvement a priority
field trip volunteer
8th grade graduation
mom proactive about grades, talking to teachers
mom leaves work to check on Haley
mom attempts to get her into half day program
called the cops on her own daughter
mom confronts the older man
mom takes control: runaway posters
searching for runaway: phone calls, visits to friends and school
homeschool: GED book
homeschool: study schedule
mom sends her to a facility, dad rescues her

Descriptions

Moustakas' (2007) phenomenological analysis process calls for a "synthesis" of themes and meaning units to produce a "textural-structural description" of the participant's experience. Derived themes guided rich description of individual experiences, including verbatim quotations.

Textural description. The first step in creating a textural-structural composite involved writing a textural description for each of the participants. Creswell describes this as the "what" of the experience (2007, p. 61). The textural descriptions were thematically-organized summaries of what happened in the participant's life.

Structural description. Creswell defines structural description as the "how," in terms of context and setting, the experience unfolded for the participant. At this stage, I considered participant emotions, pet theories, and reflections to summarize their sense of how their experiences came to pass.

Textural-structural description

The final description combined the "what" and the "how" of the participants' experiences. Each textural-structural description was unique in that different participants emphasized different themes, although many of the themes, those chosen for the composite description, were held in common. The following is an example of an individual textural-structural description.

Jessica and Haley: Textural-structural description.

My child is smart enough. Jessica's daughter Haley was a shy, well-behaved child who struggled somewhat with her schoolwork, but was an otherwise successful elementary student. Her academic trouble seemed easily remedied by an incentive program, a carrot held out by the school, receiving cash for grades, which raised her achievement noticeably.

> She had a little bit of trouble in school with her grades and everything, but for the most part she did pretty good . . .

Haley was never held back in elementary school, so Jessica wasn't concerned about severe academic problems.

Even as Haley entered middle school, academics were not the problem. In Jessica's view, the problem was a poor choice of friends that led to the skipping behavior that was at the forefront of Haley's downhill slide.

I did my best to be involved. Jessica believed that her children had a better chance of success if she was involved at school. She volunteered to chaperone a field trip. She attended parent conferences and awards events at the school. School success for her children was a priority for Jessica.

> Yes, I went to conferences. And when she would get, there were award ceremonies, I went to award ceremonies, but um, I'll be honest with you . . . I was off and on drugs a lot when she was going to school. . . So, sometimes I would play a real important role when I was clean. But I would always, you know, I knew the importance of school. I knew it was better if I got involved and she would get better if she knew how important it was to me. So when I was clean, I was in there, I did my best, went on school field trips and stuff . . .

Jessica also worked with Haley to communicate with teachers about improving her grades.

> If her grades weren't good, we talked about it and said, "Okay, you're going to go to each one of your teachers and ask them, 'Is there anything else I can do for extra credit that will bring my grades up?'" And that's what she would do, she would go to each one of her teachers and do some extra credit stuff to bring her grades from a C to a B or possibly from a D to a C . . .

As Haley got older and problems began, Jessica looked to school officials for support and even intervention. She approached a campus police officer for help with what she believed was

an illegal act, a 26-year old harboring her daughter during the school day. Shortly after that, when Haley ran away from home, Jessica reached out to teachers and administrators in hopes they could help her discover her daughter's whereabouts.

Jessica was also proactive in reaching out to the community for help at times, including making and posting "missing child" posters, and calling the police to come and arrest her daughter when her behavior was out of hand.

Jessica showed care for her daughter by advocating for her in these ways. Though she frequently felt rebuffed or ignored by those she reached out to, turning to the school and the community for help was a big part of her parenting experience.

My daughter made poor choices. Jessica never showed anger or resentment toward her daughter during the interview process. But she did imply that at times her daughter made choices that led to the problems she was having at school.

> Middle school is when she started, out there is when she started hanging out with, kinda I' lots of friends and hangin' out with the wrong ones, so . . .

At times Haley's behavior was more than Jessica could handle on her own. She hoped that natural consequences would take effect, that someone from the school or community would step in so Haley could learn a lesson. But such interventions were few and far between.

> Yeah. And so, I wanted to believe her, but this went on so long, so I called the school and said, "I think my daughter's ditchin'." You know, I wanted them to get her in trouble. They never did . . .

At one point Haley's behavior was so out-of-control that Jessica called the cops to come and deal with her.

> I was for anything wanting to help that girl. And I ended up calling the cops on her and that's whenever they came and picked her up and took her to [facility]. . . .

Haley had a character trait that made her behavior especially frustrating to deal with at times: she tended to withdraw. Even her grandfather on her father's side of the family noticed it.

> I remember talking to her grandpa often and him saying, "I don't know what's wrong with her grades cuz she won't talk to me," and I'm like, "Well, join the crowd cuz she won't talk to anybody." She's a closed book, that one. . . .

I had my problems. Although Jessica never suggested that her personal issues may have contributed to Haley's poor choices after starting middle school, she easily admitted that she was not the perfect parent. She was quick to let me know that she had fought a drug problem for many years. She also had what she referred to as "meltdowns" from time to time, which was her term for the crashes that are typical of untreated bipolar disorder. Only in recent years did Jessica receive treatment for her condition, and since then she has been successful staying clean and sober.

During the interview process, Jessica would at times complain that she didn't remember, or was missing key bits of information about Haley's education because she wasn't around, or someone else was taking care of Haley, or her mental condition affected her memory. In that sense, her own problems were not a part of her experience parenting Haley. They were a separate experience, a separate life from her life as a parent. By acknowledging her memory problem, she admits that she was at times either missing in person or in spirit as her daughter was growing up.

Over the years, however, Jessica frequently reminded herself that her children needed her, and this became a motivator for her to "clean up." In that sense, her problems and her parenting were linked. Her children motivated her to keep trying to be a good mom.

Problems at home during the elementary years included Jessica's mental illness and substance abuse issues. Jessica described her behavior this way:

> When I messed up, I messed up and I withdrew from people and everything and stayed to myself and did that. But I always cleaned up. For a long time I would clean up, mess up, clean up mess up, so . . .

Other problems included a stay in a homeless shelter, moving a few times, and the challenges of just being a single parent.

Schools offer inconsistent support. In the elementary years, Jessica was appreciative of the support offered. The "cash for grades" program helped motivate Haley to higher achievement. The after-school tutoring program Haley attended in her early middle school year helped her avoid attending summer school or being held back. But as Haley got older, school system supports that could help her with serious behavior problems were not evident.

Jessica was especially disappointed by the seeming lack of concern shown for Haley when her attendance was poor, when she was known to be skipping. Jessica thought there should have been phone calls, letters, even threats of legal action, but nothing happened. As a single parent, it was hard for her to convince her daughter of the importance of school attendance when the schools themselves seemed unconcerned.

Jessica felt hurt by the lack of compassion shown by school officials when Haley engaged in more dangerous behaviors such as skipping school to be with an adult male, or running away from home. She looked to their wisdom and expertise to help her get her family

back on track, but the staff seemed to shrug their shoulders and remind her that she was the parent and it was her responsibility to figure it out on her own. Her hurt turned into resentment over time as she realized that teachers were "just there for a paycheck."

Jessica remembers a phone call from the school that led to an upsetting discovery:

> Yeah. I had gotten a call from them when I was at work one day and they said, "We believe Haley's just called in [to excuse] herself." So, they called and said we want to let you be aware . . . so they let me know. So I left work and went up to the school and found out she'd ditched school that day and I thought they'd have a little more involvement because I found out she'd ditched with a 26 year old man. . . After that, I asked them, you know, if she is not in school, please let me know. I gotta know every time. That way I can be on top of it.
>
> But she later told me she used to ditch all the time and I wouldn't know about it, the school wouldn't call me when she wasn't there. . . .

Jessica felt devastated by this experience and began to harbor resentment toward the school staff. As she describes it:

> There's a few teachers out there that are concerned, but for the most part they're just there. . . Cuz I talked to an officer there when I found out she was ditching, you know. I went in there crying. I'm crying because my daughter ditched with a 26 year old man. 'Please help me, what can I do?' . . . My heart was broken. . . .
>
> It was like maybe I was a nuisance, you know. . . Just pretty much saying, you know, it's up to me, you know, they really couldn't do anything and you know, stuff like that. And I don't like to feel like a nuisance, so, I wouldn't go back to them anymore. Tried to handle it myself. I don't like to resent either, so . . .

Skipping school was a constant problem, but the school did not seem to take notice. Jessica rarely received phone calls from the school and she only recalls Haley getting in trouble for her truancy one time. She did receive some automated phone calls about missed classes, but she found it hard to trust these:

> Sometimes I would get a call from the automated system saying she missed this period, and I would call her on it and she'd be like, "I swear I was there, Mom." You know, stuff like that. . . .

Family members and agencies were involved. Haley's father was not happy about his daughter being put in a shelter after the running away episode, so he took her to live with him after she had been there just one day. She lived with him for six months. Toward the end of the six months, her father found out she was pregnant. Dad was intolerant of the pregnancy, telling her she would have to get an abortion or move out, so she went to live with her older sister.

During her ninth-grade year while living with her older sister, Haley's attendance and grades worsened, so she was sent back to live with her mom.

> My daughter . . . and my son-in-law actually took a big role in making sure they took her to school and then picked her up from school instead of letting her ride the bus cuz you didn't know if she was coming from school, or . . . They would take her to and from. I believe they went in and talked to some of her teachers. . .

Jessica was tired of pushing Haley to go to school at this point, and focused more on Haley's pregnancy. She wanted her daughter to be comfortable, and did not force the attendance issue any longer. Jessica did not send Haley to school for eight months straight. Finally, DHS workers came to her house to check on the family because someone reported that Jessica looked

impaired when she was picking up her younger son from school, but she showed them that she had prescription medication to treat her mental illness and did not get in trouble for that.

DHS had Jessica enroll Haley in homeschool, at which point Jessica went out and bought a GED book and put Haley on a study schedule. Haley was not very motivated to study at home, so she eventually enrolled in a local adult education program where she received her GED at 16 years of age.

Member Checks

After completing the textural-structural descriptions for each interview, a follow-up interview was conducted with each participant to validate inferences made by the researcher. The description was read aloud by the researcher, and participants were invited to stop the reading or make margin notes indicating errors or misinterpretations of the data before the descriptions were finalized. Participants were also informed of the data analysis process, and were asked to consider whether the researcher's themes were under- or over-emphasized, or if an important theme had been omitted.

Synthesizing Themes

Once individual participant experience descriptions were completed, common themes and meaning units were compared and contrasted to develop a group profile. The meaning units from each of the common themes were listed to elicit detailed pictures. An example of a common, synthesized theme with axial-coded meaning units follows in Table 4.

Table 4.

Common theme with axial coding.

Bright Child
Advanced to first grade while in kindergarten.
Junior year AP classes.
Active in Spanish club.
Gifted and talented program.
Dependable and responsible child.
A brilliant test taker.
Kindergarten great. Perfect attendance.
Third grade loved to read, tested for gifted and talented.
Reading and English were his good subjects.
Happy, charming little boy.
Academically fine in kindergarten.
Very bright child, high vocabulary.
Creative, enjoys making educational how to's for youtube.
Bright child.
Above average grades.
Musically talented.
Not challenged by curriculum in facility schools.
Basically a good student.
Very well-behaved.
Likes school.

Themes

The process of phenomenological inquiry involves eliciting participant engagement through a series of questions related to the research question. In this study, the primary research question was, "What are the perceptions and experiences of the parents of public high school dropouts as they pertain to school systems, their child, and themselves?" Seven sub-questions served as a guide to ensure that researcher and participant stayed focused on parenting as it related to their child's school achievement.

1. How do parents of dropouts describe their children academically and behaviorally?
2. How were these parents involved in their child's education, and what are their perceptions of that involvement?
3. What family issues or challenges do these parents believe affected their children's academic achievement levels?
4. What are these parents' experiences with and perceptions of school-parent communications and programming?
5. What interventions or supports were offered, if any, to help the child be successful, and what are these parents' perceptions of those offerings?
6. What were these parents' experiences with the actual decision or realization that their children would not get a diploma?
7. What emotions did these parents experience in relation to their children's school careers, especially as it became evident that the children would be dropping out?

In response to the interview questions and subsequent conversations with participants, six themes emerged from the transcript data:

1. Bright Child.
2. Involved Parent(s).
3. Medical Issues.
4. Unfair School.
5. Troubled Home.
6. Behavior Issues.

Table 5 shows how participant responses supported the emergent themes.

Table 5.

Participants and themes.

	My Child is Bright	Involved with Child's Education	Family Medical Issues	Unfairly Treated by School Staff	Problems at Home	Behavior Became an Issue
Jessica		X	X	X	X	X
Stephanie	X	X	X		X	X
Brenda	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cindy	X	X	X	X		X
Paul	X		X	X	X	X
Jennifer	X	X			X	X

Theme One: Bright Child

Every parent interviewed believed that his or her child is intelligent, or at least competent, with several boasting about their children's early achievements.

Brenda. Brenda described how her son Michael loved to read, so much so that he was referred for Gifted and Talented testing in third grade.

But they did test him to see if he could be in Gifted and Talented. And he tested out not gifted and talented and we thought maybe it was because he made it through kindergarten and into first grade and loved to read. . . .

Jennifer. Jennifer shared that her daughter was so smart, her kindergarten teacher advanced her to a first grade classroom when she was five.

She went to kindergarten in [town]. She did really well. She was actually advanced to the first grade, but she wasn't ready. So she, by my choice, she went back to kindergarten because that's where she felt comfortable. . . .

Paul. Paul observed that his son was a sharp learner, and worked with him to develop an advanced vocabulary while still a toddler.

He [Kyle] was very bright. He knew answers to everything 'cause I used to drill him all the time. You know, I'd say just a hypothetical word like 'antidisestablishmentarianism.' He would tell me the word and repeat it verbatim. No messing it up or slurring or anything like that. He'd also tell me the definition. . . I made sure he was intelligent. I didn't want him to fall into the same stigma that I did when I was in school. I wanted him to be in the upper ten percent. . . .

Cindy. Cindy's daughter Courtney actually started kindergarten when she was only four, was identified as Gifted and Talented, and was characterized as "dependable and responsible" in elementary school.

She started early because her birthday is in the end of August. So she was four when she started kindergarten. And she's been an exceptional student all the way through. As and Bs mostly. And she was in the Gifted and Talented program. . . .

No behavior problems. Everybody loved her. She was our third child, so, you know how you are, you learn from the first ones. But she got along with everybody and all the teachers loved her because she was so smart. She was dependable. She was real responsible. . . .

Stephanie. Stephanie knew that her daughter was smart. Grades were not Shannon's problem in school.

But once she made it through the day, she made good grades. We knew that she was smart. She just really didn't want to be there. . . . I mean, that was pretty much the whole thing for Shannon. I mean, she was capable, and she was smart. . . .

Jessica. Jessica was the only parent in the group that didn't describe her child's intelligence in glowing terms. But neither did she describe her as less than capable.

She had a little bit of trouble in school with her grades and everything, but for the most part she did pretty good. . . .

Theme Two: Involved Parent(s)

Every parent in the group described some kind of involvement with their child's education. A few described traditional involvement on campus, while the others were more involved at home, attending to medical or behavioral issues.

Brenda. Brenda worked hard to provide for her family, usually working two or three jobs at a time. She remembers attending a Halloween Carnival that her husband volunteered at when Michael was in elementary school. But more serious involvement was evident as she

described several incidences where she advocated for her son by meeting with administrators to address problems.

> Like I said, I went to the superintendent . . . I did everything I could do to get it narrowed down to where he could get back into his little spot. . . . .

Stephanie. Although Stephanie admittedly abandoned her daughter for many years, when she did come back into her life, she spent numerous hours researching and seeking treatment facilities to help her with her behaviorally disordered daughter. When she did find placements for her daughter, she stayed involved in keeping her there.

> And by this time I could see the pattern with Shannon and I said, "She's gonna come in here [alternative school] probably every other morning and she's gonna try to tell you that she's freakin' out. She's gonna try to tell you that she's sick. She's gonna try to tell you a bunch of stuff. And they would call me and they would say, "Shannon is saying that this is going on and we're just letting you know and she's wanting us to call you." And I would tell them, "She needs to stay at school. . . ."

Jessica. Jessica's involvement was sporadic through the years due to her substance abuse and mental illness issues. Yet she understood the importance of parental involvement and made an effort to participate when she was doing well.

> Yes, I went to conferences. And when she would get, there were award ceremonies, I went to award ceremonies, but um, I'll be honest with you . . . I was off and on drugs a lot when she was going to school. . . So, sometimes I would play a real important role when I was clean. But I would always, you know, I knew the importance of school. I knew it was better if I got involved and she

would get better if she knew how important it was to me. So when I was clean, I was in there, I did my best, went on school field trips and stuff. . . .

Jessica also learned the importance of teaching her daughter to communicate with her teachers.

If her grades weren't good, we talked about it and said, "Okay, you're going to go to each one of your teachers and ask them, 'Is there anything else I can do for extra credit that will bring my grades up?'" And that's what she would do, she would go to each one of her teachers and do some extra credit stuff to bring her grades from a C to a B or possibly from a D to a C. . . .

Jennifer. Like Jessica, Jennifer was a single mom, making parent involvement more challenging. But thanks to a supportive employer, Jennifer felt good about her involvement when her daughter was in elementary school.

I went to every single parent teacher conference, every single practice, every single game. I didn't miss anything. I never missed anything with all my kids. And it was easy, because it was all right there. I never missed a party. Would go to one kid, say, "Okay, I'm going to go see your sister," go to another kid. And then when my youngest got in school I'd say, "Okay I love you," and then go see another kid. When they were in kindergarten and had snack days or whatever, I always brought snacks. . . .

In addition to attending school events, Jennifer encouraged her children to excel by helping them with homework, studying spelling words, and reading with them.

We had a routine. They had, like, so many books. They had like a scholastic thing. I always wanted my kids to get awards. That school was really good.

Every child got an award for something. But I wanted mine to get more awards. They would read to me or their siblings or whatever. . . . It just made me feel good, and I know it made them feel good. She always got the citizenship award. I mean, she always had more awards than just about anybody. And we did things like study for spelling words. I'd call the word out . . .

Cindy. Cindy, Courtney's mom, was so involved with the elementary school that she started working there as a part-time employee. In large part she was motivated by the needs of Courtney's older brother who suffered from autism. But Cindy enjoyed being close to Courtney's classes as well. She always knew exactly what was going on in their classes and was able to attend every special event that was hosted at the school.

Oh yeah. I was the home room mom, I worked at the school part of the time. She has a brother that was autistic. And he was in the school too. So I stayed there and worked so I could be with both of them. . . . I knew what was going on. . . . [every conference] . . . [Every awards ceremony] . . . Every ribbon, every time . .

As Courtney grew older and started having trouble making it to school and getting her work done, Cindy became involved in another way. She became her homework cheerleader and her tutor.

Not her junior year. They let her make it up. She spent all her time doing makeup work. And I came down on her to get it done, cuz I knew if she didn't get it done it was gonna be bad. And it was a fight, all the time, it was constant, "Go get your homework, I'll help you with it. Get it done. . . ."

Paul. Because Paul was not the custodial parent, he felt he had less opportunity to be involved in Kyle's education. Fortunately, however, Kyle's mother was able to stay connected to the school.

> She was more involved in the parent conferences than I was because I was working nights. So that kind of messed up . . . I was always at work. Unless it was like . . . if I knew about it like three, four, five weeks in advance I could schedule it. . . . They were really stringent about it . . .

In fact, Kyle's mother was proactive in ensuring that her son received the attention and accommodations he needed.

> She was rallying for [the school] to acknowledge these problems. And it ended up affecting other kids like Kyle also, all the rallying she did. . . She gets on a soapbox, she ain't gonna get off it. That's the kind of person she is . . .

Theme Three: Medical Issues

Paul. With a dual diagnosis of ADHD and Asperger's, most if not all of Kyle's school behavior issues were connected to his medical issues, as far as Paul was concerned. From the early elementary years, psychiatric symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations kept Paul from fully participating in his academics, even though he was clearly bright.

> When he was three he had an ephemeral seizure. And that was one of the major turning points of his life . . .

One of the symptoms of Kyle's Asperger's was extreme difficulty accepting change. He became upset when he had to change schools.

> He has all the classic symptoms of someone with ADHD and Asperger's. . . . Not finishing his work, mind drifting off. If you know anything about kids with Asperger's,

they like a set routine. It has to be chiseled in concrete. That's the way they expect it to be. If you turn around and change one little thing it messes up their entire world . . .

The psychiatric issues Kyle suffered from included living in a fantasy world, which made normal communication difficult.

He was fantasizing that he was a character in video games and stuff like that. . . .

[Even in kindergarten] He was having some psychological issues. With minor delusions and seeing things and stuff. . . He ended up on some psychotropic medications . . .

Stephanie. Stephanie's daughter Shannon had mental health issues as well; so much so, that Shannon spent as much time in institutional care as she did in her mother's home during the high school years.

. . . during the four years that I've had her she's been gone probably two years of the four years to behavioral places, institutions . . .

What began as anxiety issues for Shannon, developed into dramatic fits of anger and tears that led to serious consequences, even an expulsion, in high school.

She was having really bad behavior. Throwing books . . . Threatening people. Violence. Just fits of violence. They weren't really anything, but she tends to make them think that it's something . . .

Jessica. At Jessica and Haley's house, it was the mom, Jessica, who had the mental health issues in the home.

I was just diagnosed with bipolar disorder two years ago. So I'm doing much better now than I was . . .

Brenda. Brenda's son Michael's older brother had a serious kidney disease that kept her running when she wasn't at work.

> My older son, ten years older than [Michael], had a kidney disease. And we dwelled a lot on his kidney disease. And we made trips to [the city] and he'd be hospitalized . . . and Dad would be staying with Michael. We did that until the older one was almost twenty-one . . .

Cindy. Cindy's daughter Courtney also has a disabled older brother. Jeremiah has a serious cognitive disability that demanded Cindy's attention.

> She has a brother with autism. He was in the school, too. So I stayed there and worked so I could be there with both of them . . .

Her brother's disease was not the only medical issue that affected the family. Courtney herself developed a chronic illness as a junior in high school.

> It was her stomach and headaches. And they actually diagnosed her with abdominal migraines which I'd never heard of. . . It's a migraine that starts in the abdomen. It starts with stomach pain and then the regular migraine. She'd throw up. . . And then her junior year she started using that to stay home . . .

Jennifer. Of the six participants, only Jennifer did not mention having a child or other family member with a serious illness to deal with.

Theme Four: Unfair School

Five of the six parents also talked about problems with the way they and their children were treated by school officials.

Cindy. Cindy expressed a sense of betrayal by school staff, since she was not just a parent, but an employee in the school district that mishandled her child's records and high school

credits on more than one occasion. One of those incidents involved an attendance committee that promised one thing, and a principal that delivered another.

> I went to the superintendent because I've known him for years and I was like, "Dave, what's the deal?" I called him and he went through her records and was like, "She's missed too many days and we just can't give her credit for it." And I said, "But they told me this, this, and this." And he said, "I know. But they shouldn't have told you that . . ."

Brenda. Brenda expressed anger toward school officials as well. She had inadvertently moved her family into a house that was in a different school district, even though they remained in the same city limits. She was granted a district transfer, but when she took Michael back to his alternative high school to re-enroll him, she was told that his spot had been given to a new student. The counselor recommended that, since he was eighteen, he should pursue a GED.

> Like I said, I went to the superintendent . . . I did everything I could do to get it narrowed down to where he could get back into his little spot . . . . And that's what happened. She looks up and says, "Sorry, his place has already been taken. . . . He said, "I can't believe it." I said, "All this money. I spent $250 to the courts so you could go to school. I said all the humiliation that you went through. The counseling that you went through. The DHS coming in and checking on us like they did." And I said, "We survived everything. And then they turn around and now you can no longer attend school, just when you was getting to enjoy being there." Would it have hurt for him to have been 20 years old and graduate from _____ High? . . . He was willing to do that. There was kids already in there that was the same age as him. . . .

Jessica. Jessica conveyed a sense of hurt over the treatment she received when she asked school officials to help her with her delinquent junior high daughter.

> There's a few teachers out there that are concerned, but for the most part they're just there. . . 'Cause I talked to an officer there when I found out she was ditching, you know. I went in there crying. I'm crying because my daughter ditched with a 26 year old man. 'Please help me, what can I do?' . . . My heart was broken. . . . It was like maybe I was a nuisance, you know. . . Just pretty much saying, you know, it's up to me, you know, they really couldn't do anything and you know, stuff like that. And I don't like to feel like a nuisance, so, I wouldn't go back to them anymore. Tried to handle it myself. I don't like to resent either, so .

Paul. Paul did not feel that school staff showed personal care for him or his disabled son. This was evidenced by what seemed to be overly harsh discipline and higher than necessary expectations.

> Every little tiny thing he did wrong, they called him on the carpet. Everything. It could be chewing his pencil. Breaking off the eraser. Burping, just something stupid, and they called him on it all the time. . . . They were alienating him. . . .

Paul also felt that teachers often did not follow the modification requirements on his Individual Education Plan (IEP).

> Even after he was given the IEP, the teacher expected him to do the full thing, with no leniency on anything at all. So no matter how hard he tried, it wasn't good enough. . . .

Ultimately, Paul felt that his child had been rejected by the school system. Because Kyle's was a difficult case, Paul believed school staff were intolerant of him as a person.

> They were singling him out. "You don't fit the criteria; you don't fit in our mold. You're the weak link." . . . Ostracizing him. . . Personally I just believe the school system just passed him on, just to get rid of him. . . maybe a teacher's aide every once in awhile . . . tried to steer him in the right direction. . .

Jennifer and Stephanie. Jennifer and Stephanie were not openly critical of school staff during their interviews.

Theme Five: Troubled Home

Jennifer did not express any regrets about the difficulties her family had encountered over the years, but the facts she shared spoke of real trials for her daughter. For instance, Jennifer's children did not have their fathers in their lives. Hannah tried to help her sister who was dealing with that emotional rejection.

> Her (little sister's) dad said he didn't want her because she wanted to live with me. . . . Hannah dealt with that. Her dad didn't want her until she was fourteen, you know. So she's trying to help her little sister. And my oldest son, his dad's not in the picture.

Housing was another challenge for Jennifer's family. They ended up in a hotel for nine months, most of Hannah's junior year, after one of Jennifer's break-ups.

> We lived in a hotel for a little while. Actually about nine months we stayed in a hotel. . . We were living in a hotel for awhile while they were in school, most of her junior year . . . . We had two rooms. But there was me and my brother-in-law and my fiancée and my two girls and my son. So there was six of us in two

rooms. . . . We didn't have any food because we didn't qualify because I made too much money. . . and my son's working. . . .

Brenda. Brenda's problems, aside from an older son with kidney disease, included an alcoholic husband and low-paying jobs. At one point, authorities became involved.

So then they have him on probation again and this time they called in the Department of Human Services and they had a lady come out and talk to us. I guess they'd been worried maybe about Dad drinking. I don't know. But they had her come out. Had her talking to him. Got Michael set up with a counselor. . . . He'd go there once every week, once every two weeks. I'd drive him down there and he'd get out of the car. I think it helped him. He got to tell her his stories. And the little girl at Human Services went out and bought him a whole bunch of clothes, you know. She just thought the world of him. . . .

Stephanie. Stephanie's problems at home mostly stemmed from her own drug addiction issues. She left her children in the care of her mother and didn't see them for ten years. During that ten years she was in and out of prison on drug charges. When she finally made a re-appearance in her children's lives, it was under difficult conditions.

When I got out I actually went to live with my mother. And so the kids were there and we were starting to do things and trying to mend things but you know I never could stay clean. . . . Two or three months out of prison I would do really really good, and the parole officer wasn't on my back and I would just kinda fall back into that stuff. It's just hard. . . .

Dealing with drug addiction was not the only problem Stephanie and her family encountered. The reality of her ex-husband's abusiveness complicated matters even more.

> But [Shannon] had a lot of trauma when they were [living at their father's house]. He would lock them in their room for hours and hours at a time with no telephone. He would lock the door from the outside. . . . She told me about some times when he would pin her up against the wall by her throat. . . .

Jessica. Jessica also suffered from substance abuse issues, complicated by her undiagnosed bipolar disorder. The result was inconsistent involvement with her children.

> When I messed up, I messed up and I withdrew from people and everything and stayed to myself and did that. But I always cleaned up. For a long time I would clean up, mess up, clean up mess up, so. . . .

Paul. Paul was not the custodial parent of his son, but he maintained involvement in Kyle's life throughout his childhood. Problems at home included divorce, girlfriends that Kyle did not warm up to, and medical issues. But one season of their lives in particular led to a host of problems for the family–when Kyle's older brother was accused of molesting him.

> At one point in time his older brother had a hard time keeping control of him while his mother was at work. And the only way to watch him was to make him do everything that you did, right? So, he had brought him into the shower with him, right? Just to keep an eye on him. Which turned into a big fiasco. And that really affected Kyle. His brother got charged with child molestation. . . [DHS became involved]. And then he ended up at [facility] . . . He was down there for I would say probably a couple of months . . . He was majorly messed up in the head over the whole thing . . . I don't think [the abuse really occurred]. And they had twisted my words around. They'd ask a question, I'd answer it, and they turned it around and twisted it on me. . . .

Jessica and Cindy. Jessica and Cindy did not bring up any additional problems at home other than the medical issues discussed previously.

Theme Six: Behavior Issues

Jessica. Jessica's daughter Haley did not manifest behavior problems until middle school. Even then, she was not one to act out in class; rather, her problem was not showing up to class at all.

> Yeah. I had gotten a call from them when I was at work one day and they said, "We believe Haley's just called in [to excuse] herself." So, they called and said we want to let you be aware . . . so they let me know. But she later told me she used to ditch all the time and I wouldn't know about it, the school wouldn't call me when she wasn't there. . . .

Stephanie. Stephanie's daughter Shannon frequently looked for excuses to go home. But she also was one to speak and act impulsively.

> Like, the days that she did stay at school, she just misbehaved the whole time. She was getting constantly in ISS. She spent a lot of days in ISS for talking in class. Just absolute disregard for rules. Just, I'm Shannon, and I'm bad, and I have to be here and that's why I'm here but I'm gonna do whatever I want when I'm here. . . .

Cindy. Cindy's daughter Courtney was not a big troublemaker like Shannon, but she was known to talk in class more than she should.

> She was more of a cut up. [The principal] would say something to her. But no problems as far as getting into trouble. . . That was the biggest thing all the way through, she talks too much. . . .

Paul. Paul's son Kyle, on the other hand, had a variety of problem behaviors through the years, many of which he was disciplined for.

> Seventh grade he was in trouble all the time. Then eighth grade, I would say every other week something was happening where either I would have to go get him or his mother would have to go get him. . . . Something. Just some altercation. . . .

Brenda. Brenda's son Michael was also known as a troublemaker. She learned that Michael had earned a reputation with the principal when he got in trouble on the first day of school one year as she was picking him up at the end of the school day.

> So I come up there and I could see him but he's walking with the other kids so I was following the crowd. Finally I go over and park and he comes over to get in the car. The principal's right behind him. He opens the car door and he says, "Well, he's back at it again." He said he can't follow directions. That he's supposed to get in the car like the other kids did. He said, "We practiced this, didn't we Josh?" He got real stern with him. . . . And to me he did his best to try and not get in trouble, but the more he tried, the more trouble he'd get into. . . .

Jennifer. Jennifer's daughter Hannah had a different type of behavior problem. She was not one to get in trouble at school at all. She did, however, suffer from a sense of insecurity, even feeling bullied at times, which affected her attitude toward school.

> There was a couple of times her sophomore year where she didn't want to school and she locked her closet and I said, "Get your ass out of the closet! You're going to school, you're not missing school!" Finally she opened the door and she was crying and she said they were making fun of her. So I think that she just didn't

want to deal with that anymore. . . She found herself, then reinventing herself, and having to deal with that. . . . She's not a social butterfly, poor little girl. . . .

Eliminated Themes

Themes that emerged infrequently were considered uncorroborated and not descriptive of the common experience of the parents of dropouts. Eliminated themes are included in Appendix G.

Summary

Six participants were interviewed in a variety of settings to gather stories about their experiences as the parents of high school dropouts. Data analysis, including transcription, open coding, axial coding, and textural-structural descriptions, uncovered common themes. Six themes included: 1) Bright Child, 2) Involved Parent(s), 3) Medical Issues, 4) Unfair Schools 5) Troubled Home, and, 6) Behavior Issues.

The common themes experienced by the participants converge to create a characteristic profile for this group of participants. In general, they described themselves as involved parents of bright children who encountered personal challenges, especially family medical problems, but also poverty, abuse, and addictions. Invariably, their children developed behavior problems resulting in school struggles. As they attempted to work with school staff to garner support and solutions for their children's problems, these parents often felt they were not treated fairly. All six children eventually dropped out of public high school and sought a GED in lieu of a diploma.

Chapter Five: Discussion

In an eloquent essay about the rights of the disabled, Blatt wrote, "Those who would tell stories about others have the obligation to . . . Listen to the stories of those about whom they tell stories" (1981, p. 190). Many stories have been written and told about the parents of at-risk students, many based in fact, no doubt, but oftentimes perhaps with egregious omissions. As Paul Harvey iterated daily on his popular radio show, "the *rest* of the story" may offer a perspective that sheds greater light on phenomena that has been dismissed by the experts as intractable.

In this study I have attempted to do just that, to allow the modern-day scapegoats of the high school dropout story, the parents, to tell their side. I have attempted to report their experiences without bias, setting aside my (sometimes conflicting) personal viewpoints as an educator and the parent of two dropouts to listen, transcribe, and relay my findings in a straightforward manner.

Summary of Findings

I chose the methodology of phenomenology as a framework for the study because it addresses researcher bias while inviting participants to share personal, detailed memories about a challenging and sometimes painful course on their life's journey. Phenomenological research methodologists put aside personal hypotheses and, because they work with small sample sizes with too few data for generalization, do not theorize based on their findings. The research product is rather a descriptive reduction of the experiences of a handful of participants. This descriptive reduction may generate further study resulting in development of theory.

The study began with one simple question: "What are the perceptions and experiences of the parents of public high school dropouts as they pertain to school systems, their students, and

themselves?" This question was broken into several extension questions designed to guide the interview process, including:

1. How do parents of dropouts describe their children academically and behaviorally?
2. How were these parents involved in their children's school careers, and what are their perceptions of that involvement?
3. What family issues or challenges do these parents believe affected their children's academic achievement levels?
4. What are these parents' experiences with and perceptions of school-parent communications and programming?
5. What interventions or supports were offered, if any, to help the child be successful, and what are these parents' perceptions of those offerings?
6. What were these parents' experiences with the actual decision or realization that their children would not get a diploma?
7. What emotions did these parents experience in relation to their children's school careers, especially as it became evident that the children would be dropping out?

I gathered a convenience sample of six participants by soliciting GED students from regional adult education programs located within local community college campuses. In exchange for a Starbucks gift card, students turned in their parents' contact information. Although I had hoped that a representatively diverse group of individuals would volunteer, a fairly homogeneous subsection responded to my efforts, comprised mainly of Caucasian, low-income females. Participants received payment for time spent with me.

Interviews were conducted at various locations chosen by participants, including restaurants, homes, and local libraries. Interview times varied, but the three part interviews

totaled an average of two hours per participant. The interviews were informal, conversational, and, I believe, enjoyable for both researcher and participant. All participants chose to combine the first and second interviews into one sitting.

A member check was conducted during the third interview, allowing participants the opportunity to correct any mistakes or misinterpretations of the transcripts. They were given a copy of axial coding to review, followed by an oral reading of the textural-structural description by the interview. They were asked to stop me if something needed correcting. They read along from their own copy during the oral reading, and were also told they could mark their copy if they saw a problem with the description. Minimal errors were detected and corrected.

Analysis of the data began with open coding whereby meaning units, i.e., details of each subtopic under discussion, were highlighted. During axial coding, meaning units were listed on a spreadsheet. The units were then grouped by subtopics. Themes emerged from the groupings, and some units were moved from one column to another according to fit. Subtopics or themes that lacked sufficient support were removed.

When axial coding was complete, textural and structural descriptions were written using direct quotations, and then combined, to produce a cohesive description of each participant's experience. Finally, common themes were identified within the group to create a group profile, a textural-structural composite of the group's collective experience.

The composite description revealed six common themes:

Bright Child. It is natural for parents to see their children as above average in comparison to other children. However, five of the participants were able to give concrete examples supporting their belief that their child was bright in some way. Only one parent noted academic difficulties for her child.

Involved Parent(s). All but one parent cited examples of involvement in their child's education. Involvement included traditional forms such as conferences and school events, as well as types of involvement specific to at-risk students such as communicating with school officials when problems arose.

Medical Issues. Five of the six parents indicated a serious medical issue in the immediate family. In three cases the student suffered from a mental or physical illness. In three cases a sibling suffered, and in two cases a parent was ill.

Unfair Schools. Four of the six parents cited multiple examples of mistreatment by school staff including unfair discipline, issues of mis-handled situations, and lack of compassion or attention.

Troubled Home. Five of the six parents referred frequently to serious problems in the home including substance abuse, divorce, financial difficulties, abuse, and medical problems as discussed above.

Behavior Issues. In only one case did the parent describe behavior problems starting at an early age. However, as the students moved into higher grades, behavior became an issue in five out of six cases including: truancy, fighting, and acting out.

Research Questions

It should be noted that specific answers to the research questions did not necessarily correspond with the common themes that emerged through phenomenological analysis. However, the answers to the questions reveal another dimension of the study that might have otherwise been missed by strict adherence to the adopted methodology.

1. How do parents of dropouts describe their children academically and behaviorally?

Participants in this study described their children as intellectually capable of mastering the

academic goals that were set for them. They were proud of their children's intelligence and regretted that schools either did not challenge them or pushed them out of the system. Behaviorally, parents described children who were pleasant and well-behaved, even shy, though perhaps overly-imaginative or mischievous at times. As the children grew older, behavior tended to regress, negatively affecting academic achievement.

2. How were these parents involved in their children's school careers, and what are their perceptions of that involvement?

Parents described various levels of involvement through the children's school careers, with the understanding that two of the parents worked long hours, one was a non-custodial father, and two suffered from chemical dependency. However, each described both traditional and non-traditional forms of involvement either by themselves or by another caregiver in the child's life.

Parents offered varying forms of self-reflection on their involvement. Three communicated enjoyment of elementary and junior high school events including awards ceremonies, parties, eighth-grade graduation, and athletic recognition. Four of the six reflected negatively about involvement with school officials relative to their children's troubles at school. They felt they were treated with disregard, disrespect, and/or unfairness.

3. What family issues or challenges do these parents believe affected their children's academic achievement levels?

A wide variety of family issues were related including marital problems, chemical dependency, medical issues, financial challenges, trouble with the law, moves and homelessness. A common theme, however, was a serious medical issue found in one or more family members.

Medical issues resulted in extended absences from school and subsequent problems with reintegrating into the school community and making up missed schoolwork.

4. What are these parents' experiences with and perceptions of school-parent communications and programming?

Parents expressed frustration and anger with perceived unfairness in the way communications and interventions were handled. Promises were not kept, agreements were broken, and bureaucratic mismanagement led to missed opportunities.

5. What interventions or supports were offered, if any, to help the child be successful, and what are these parents' perceptions of those offerings?

Interventions were often perceived favorably by parents, but were perhaps too little, too late. Pay-for-grades, after-school tutoring, alternative learning environments, and counseling seemed to have positive effects. However, these interventions seemed to emerge infrequently, doing little to address the larger challenges families were facing at home and the strained relationships they had with school staff.

6. What were these parents' experiences with the actual decision or realization that their children would not get a diploma?

The decision to withdraw their child from, or allow their child to quit public school, came differently in every case. A variety of persons were involved in the process, including spouses or ex-spouses, school counselors, administrators, registrars, and district officials. In two cases a parent made the decision, in two cases the child made the decision, in one case the parent and child felt forced out of the school system, and in the sixth case, an extended absence resulted in a social worker advising the parent to withdraw the child.

7. What emotions did these parents experience in relation to their children's school careers, especially as it became evident that the children would be dropping out?

Four of the parents expressed dismay and upset that their children would not receive diplomas. Two of the parents made the decision for their children, feeling that school had been such an unhappy and unproductive experience that it would be better for the child if he or she was withdrawn. All six expressed some form of negative feelings about the experience.

Comparison with Literature Review Findings

Goldschmidt and Wang's findings (1999) were supported by this research, i.e., the dropouts were predominately from single-parent, low income families with behavior problems and at least one other of Goldschmidt's indicators (e.g., parent without a high school diploma, a sibling who dropped out, or low-achieving). Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey's assertions (1997) about first grade indicators of dropout were less well-substantiated, however. Stressful family changes were referenced in two of the homes, parent and child attitudes were mostly positive in the early school years, and academic problems were evident in only one home. Limitations of this observation are the subjectivity of parents reporting in retrospect and the small sample size.

The findings also paralleled those of Allensworth and Easton's study of Chicago freshmen (2007). They found that attendance problems were one of the biggest precursors to dropout. Four of the participants in this study reported attendance problems for months and/or years prior to dropout. Another parent reported attendance being an issue in the last weeks before her daughter dropped out.

Epstein and Dauber (1991) found that often teachers of disadvantaged students believed their parents to be difficult to reach, uncommunicative, and uncooperative. In this study, such stereotypes were unfounded. Every participant referenced multiple communications with

schools over the years, whether their own or through an ex-spouse or grandparent. Several also referenced attempts to cooperate with the suggestions and interventions of the schools, including alternative placement, summer school, or helping with homework and makeup work completion. Whether general behavior could be characterized as "cooperative and communicative" cannot be discerned through naturally subjective interviews. However, in the minds of the parents, they clearly made efforts to cooperate with schools for the welfare of their children.

Allensworth and Easton (2007) found that grades predict graduation more reliably than achievement test scores. The data from this study show five out of six dropouts were bright children as evidenced by a variety of factors offered up by their parents. And in fact, only two of the six students in this study had problems with grades before dropping out. According to their parents, a look at the elementary test scores and grades of these children would not have raised any cause for alarm.

Evidence of unfair treatment toward the families of at-risk students supported the findings of similar research (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000; Fine, 1993; Nierstheimer, 2000). This study not only gave testimonies of unfair treatment toward these families, but, perhaps just as importantly, revealed lingering resentments. This supports the work of Boethel (2003, p. 44) and also Gutman and McLeod (2000) who agreed that "previous negative interactions (p. ???)" may hamper future friendly relations as younger siblings and grandchildren move through the school system.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

One strength of this study is the choice of methodology. Phenomenological inquiry addresses a primary area of concern in qualitative research, that of researcher bias. Through

bracketing, researcher experience and knowledge about the topic has been set aside, increasing trustworthiness of the data collection process by reducing subjectivity. Phenomenology has further addressed researcher subjectivity through the use of broad, general research questions that encourage researcher and participants to consider any and every aspect that might be relative to their experience as parents of dropouts.

Another strength of the study, increasing both data reliability and trustworthiness, has been the process of member checking. Each participant was given the opportunity to review the findings specific to their own case before the final analysis was completed.

Finally, peer review of the coding and analysis ensured proper handling of the data. Three professional researchers reviewed coding materials during the research process.

Limitations

This study does not claim to be generalizable due to the small sample size. However, a central purpose of qualitative inquiry is not generalizability, but, ". . . applicability of findings from one setting to another depend[ing] on the likeness between the bodies of knowledge, or contexts, as judged by those wishing to apply the findings" (Fossey, et al., 2002, p. 5; Poppay, et al., 1998). Practitioners, policymakers, and researchers may reasonably glean understandings to inform application in like contexts.

Participant memories, another limitation in this study, are not to be considered an objective reflection of actual experience, but do offer a richer understanding of participant perceptions. Polkinghorne (2005) notes, "People do not have complete access to their experiences. The capacity to be aware of or to recollect one's experiences is intrinsically limited. People do not have a clear window into their inner life" (p. 139). Although they offer a

rich understanding of participant perspective, qualitative studies are, without apology, inherently subjective.

Researcher bias certainly has impacted the validity of this study. One could feasibly call my findings into question since they support, in many respects, my personal perceptions and experience. I have tried to address this limitation throughout the course of the study through reflexivity, defined by Johnson (1997) as a researcher's "active engage[ment] in critical self reflection about his or her potential biases and predispositions" (p. 284). I have also disclosed my personal experience that the reader may consider it as they make their own distinctions about the validity of the findings.

Another notable limitation is the absence of participant diversity. A possible reason why minority students chose not to complete the contact information sheet, except for one whose number had been disconnected when I called, is a constrained political environment that may consider unnecessary contact with an authority figure too risky or invasive. It is also possible that, although a translator was on standby if needed as mentioned in the student contact flier, language barriers may have influenced students' decisions about participation. Finally, it is possible that the coffee shop gift card did not serve as an enticing incentive for minority student participation.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice and Policy

With the limitations of the study fully considered, practitioners and policymakers may consider several implications relating to educator-parent relations, health care support, at-risk student identification, and discipline policy.

Because every family expressed some level of frustration with staff decisions and communications, and because those findings supported previous research, schools may consider

staff training on handling negative student and/or parent situations in a fair, consistent, and diplomatic fashion to improve parent relationships. This is not to say that school staff are to blame in every situation, but that the poor handling of problems has a ripple effect, potentially affecting school culture, community perceptions, and students' futures.

The continual emergence of health care issues in the data came as a surprise to the researcher. Mental, physical, and substance abuse issues emerged in five out of six cases. The participants did not reference difficulties in accessing health care for their children, rather, health issues affected attendance and school behavior. Medical absences, whether due to the child's or a family member's illness, were frequently a barrier to positive relationships with school staff, whether because of lost medical notes, a teacher not believing a child was ill, or problems receiving and/or completing makeup assignments. Again, increasing staff training to improve handling of health-related situations may be beneficial. Early identification of health care needs could prove to be a deterrent to poor attendance and even dropping out of school. Also, alternative approaches to supporting family health care such as school-based clinics have proven effective in some studies (Geierstanger, et al., 2004).

Recommendations for Further Research

One purpose of this study was to establish a baseline of knowledge about the experiences of parents of high school dropouts. The methodological design of the study precludes definitive generalizations. Rather, phenomenological research seeks to define a phenomenon more robustly, ultimately setting the stage for various future studies. For example, the findings relevant to problematic relations with school staff invite a quantitative study of dropouts' parents' experience with staff, perhaps in the form of an exit survey for parents and/or students as they officially withdraw from school. On the other side of this issue, a qualitative or mixed

methods study of school staff members' experiences could further examine how negative situations are handled.

The preponderance of family medical issues amongst the participants in this study suggests a need to examine the relationship between attendance and health, not just student health, but family health issues. School nurse records as well as student surveys may be valuable data sources for comparison to grades, attendance, and dropout rates.

Problems at home including substance abuse, child abuse, homelessness, divorce, and parent abandonment issues and the prevalence of these issues, at least in the limited data presented here, suggest a need for further study of possible solutions to larger social problems affecting dropout. Quantitative and qualitative examinations of the effectiveness of social workers in secondary schools are possibilities (Jozefowics-Simbeni, 2008). A study of the effects of educating students and parents about social issues and available community resources is another.

Though longitudinal studies identifying elementary students at-risk are available, findings from this study indicate that academic achievement was not a strong indicator. Further exploration of the *Bright Child* theme may inform understandings of early identification.

Though uncorroborated themes were eliminated methodologically, certain ones provoked more questions worth future investigation. Specifically, *Mishandled Credits,* and *Unchallenging Curriculum* raise questions about school policies and practices deserving deeper examination.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of the parents (n=6) of high school dropouts through interviews. The collected interview data was transcribed and analyzed

using accepted qualitative methodology including open and axial coding as well as textural-structural description. The results of the study revealed six emergent themes: *Bright Child, Involved Parents, Medical Issues, Unfair School, Troubled Home, and, Behavior Issues.*

Two of the themes corroborated previous research: *Troubled Home,* and, *Behavior Issues*. However, other themes ran contrary to existing perceptions and highlighted gaps in available research. *Bright Child* challenged the perception and some research suggesting that school achievement is a strong indicator of at-risk status. *Involved Parent* contradicts notions that the parents of at-risk students are uninvolved or uncaring. *Unfair School* is somewhat supported in the literature, but not enough research has been done to validate the implication that at-risk students and their parents are treated less favorably than their peers. And *Medical Issues* reveals another gap in dropout research. Though this issue is widely addressed in special education research as it relates to disabilities, the relationship between health and achievement is largely unexplored in the dropout literature.

The results of this descriptive study have shed light on a previously under-examined aspect of dropout phenomena, that of the perceptions and experiences of the parents of dropouts. The voices of a few representatives from a heretofore marginalized subpopulation have been heard. Further studies are needed to gather more detailed and substantial information from this valuable source.

Essence & Inspiration

The essence of the study for me personally was a glimpse into the hearts of parents like myself. Like nearly all parents, we had high expectations for our children and excitement about their potential and talents. But our expectations and excitement dissipated over time, slowly replaced by experiences of dismay and frustration, anger and

hurt over situations that seemed beyond our control. Upset feelings focused somewhat on our children, close relatives, agencies, and ourselves, but more frequently on school officials whom we felt had mismanaged important decisions or established untenable policies.

Personally, I feel satisfied that the question of my heart has been validated. I no longer feel alone in my journey. Others have trod the same path with similar feelings of confusion, abandonment, and even devastation. I feel heartened that the findings of this study may lead to further inquiry and ultimately result in profound solutions to social and systemic problems that cause or exacerbate the phenomenon of high school dropout.

Professionally, I feel I have found in these results inspiration for future research and practice. The dropout problem is too complex and overwhelming for one person to solve, but I believe my efforts may illuminate new avenues of study leading to progress toward greater understanding and improved practice.

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Appendix A: Initial Contact Scripts

GED Student Contact Script

(To be read to GED students by the researcher or a GED teacher or administrator).

Hi there. My name is Christine Silano. I am a Ph.D. student at the University of Arkansas. One of my assignments before I can graduate is to write a dissertation. That means I need to do an important scientific study and publish my findings. I have chosen to study the experiences of parents whose children didn't finish high school.

I am looking for contact information for the parents of ten GED students at this site. Any information you give me will be kept completely confidential. Real names will not be used in the final publication. If you think your parent or guardian might be interested in participating in the study for two hours at twenty dollars per hour, please fill out this short contact form. I have free beverage coupons for the first ten students who fill out the form.

Parent Phone Pre-interview

Hi there. My name is Christine Silano. Your son/daughter gave me your phone number. They said you might be interested in participating in a research study. Because your time is valuable you will be paid $40 for two hours of interviewing. I am studying the experiences of the parents and guardians of high school dropouts. Your story could help other families and schools in the future. All information I receive from you will be kept completely confidential. Real names will not be used in the final publication. Is this something you would be interested in participating in? If so, is there a time you and I could get together for thirty minutes for a screening interview? You will be paid $10 for this first interview.

Appendix B: Participant Contact Form

Research Participant Contact Information

~The first ten students to complete this form will receive a Starbucks gift certificate.~

The purpose of this study is to investigate the experiences of the parents of high school dropouts. Parent participants will be interviewed for up to three hours at a rate of $20 per hour. The results of this study will be used to inform educators and researchers about the experiences of these parents. This information may help other parents and students to have more positive school experiences in the future.

Privacy policy: Real names of participants, teachers, administrators, counselors, high schools, and community colleges will not be used in the final publication. Names and phone numbers will be used by the researcher for contact purposes only.

*This form may be completed by the student, but interviews are with parents/guardians only. Only parents will be paid for interviews.

**Please list the name and contact information of a person who raised you during the last five years you were in school.

Parent/guardian name:_____

Parent/guardian phone #1:_____ #2_____

Parent/guardian email:_____

Student name:_____

Student phone:_____

Student email:_____

Appendix C: Live Interview Scripts

Interview One: The Screening

Thanks so much for participating in the study. The purpose of this study is to find out what it means to be the parent of a student who did not finish high school. I myself am the parent of two dropouts, so I can identify with parents of dropouts and I think our voices need to be heard.

The first thing you need to know is that everything you tell me is confidential. I have a form for you to sign which shows you your rights as a participant and explains how I will keep your information private.

The interviews will be a lot like conversations. I have a few questions to get us started on each interview, but basically I want to hear you tell me in your own words about your child's education leading up to the decision to drop out of school. Today's interview is just for you and I to meet so you can decide if you want to continue to participate and for me to find out if you are a match for the study.

Because your time is valuable, you will be paid at the end of each interview at the rate of $20 per hour. Are you ready to answer a few questions?

Screening Questions

1. Were you the (primary) parent/guardian of your child during his/her last years of school?

   a. Yes

   b. No

2. How would you describe your ethnicity?

   a. African-American

   b. Asian

   c. Pacific Islander or Native American

   d. Caucasian

e. Hispanic

f. Other:_____

3. Which of the following would best describe your education level?

a. No formal education

b. Elementary school

c. Some high school

d. GED

e. High school diploma

f. Some college

g. Associate's degree

h. Vocational certification or trade license

i. Bachelor's degree or higher

j. Other: Please specify_____

4. Did your child receive free or reduced lunch while in school?

a. Yes

b. No

5. Would you be available to meet for two more interviews after this one, with the next one being 60 minutes long and the last one being 30 minutes?

a. Yes

b. No

6. What is the best time for you to meet for interviews?

    a. Weekday evenings.(Weekday mornings? Weekday afternoons?

    b. Weekend mornings.

    c. Weekend afternoons.

    d. Weekend evenings.

7. What would be the best location for your interviews?

    a. Your home:_____

    b. A coffee shop or other public place:_____

    c. At the community college (NWACC) or (NTI)

    d. At your place of employment:_____

    e. Other_____

8. Are you willing to sign papers about privacy?

Conclusion: I will call you in about (time frame) and let you know if you are a match for the study. If you are, I will have two or three times and dates determined based on your responses and you can choose what works best for you. Do you have any questions?

Thanks and I'll talk to you soon.

Interview Two: What Happened

Intro: I'm going to ask you some questions about your child's school career, starting from their early years and continuing until when they left public school. Please describe what happened and how you felt along the way. I may ask you to explain or give more details about your answers as you go.

(Allow the participant to begin telling the story in their own way. The questions below may be used as prompts if the answers are not covered by the participant spontaneously).

1. How would you describe your child as a student,(grades? and behavior-wise?)?
2. Tell me about when your child first started school. What were those first years like for both your child and yourself? What were your mornings like? After school?
3. What do you remember about the middle school years?
4. What can you tell me about your child's high school experience?
5. How were you involved in your child's education? (examples: volunteering, conferences, phone calls, homework help).
6. Tell me about communication with the school during that time. Do you remember any particular conversations with school staff, phone calls, letters, or parent programs that stand out?
7. Do you remember the schools doing anything special to help your child be successful? (examples: after-school programs, summer school, tutoring, mentors, reading or math programs, etc.)
8. Can you tell me about any family issues or challenges at home that might have affected your child's success at school?
9. Do you remember when it hit you or when you were told that your child wouldn't graduate? What happened? What were you feeling?

Interview Three: Check the Facts

Researcher begins by giving the participant a copy of meaning units (including categories and sub-categories) and textural/structural descriptions from the first two interviews, which they read over together.

Do you agree that the key points and summaries accurately represent what you told me in the interviews?

Is there anything you would like to change, delete, or add before the final draft of this study is written up?

Researcher marks any changes, deletions, or additions in red pen on the hard copy, then lets participant know he/she will be sent a copy of the final draft upon acceptance by the doctoral committee.

Appendix D: Letter to School Administrator

February 28, 2012

Dear GED Program Administrator,
My name is Christine Silano and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Arkansas, as well as a teacher at Bentonville High School. I am hoping you might be able to help me with my research project.

My dissertation topic is the experiences of parents of high school dropouts and/or early school leavers. I have adopted a qualitative method of research, which means I will be doing lengthy interviews to acquire data. I need access to several high school dropouts which is where you come in.

As you will see from the enclosed flier, I am soliciting GED students for contact information on their parents. Students who provide contact information will receive a gift certificate for a coffee beverage at Starbucks. Selected parent participants will receive remuneration in the amount of $20 per hour for up to two hours of taped interview time.

It is my hope that this study will inform research and practice as school districts seek ways to better serve struggling students and their families.

I will call you soon to follow up on this letter and find out if I have administrative permission to solicit participants for my study.

Thank-you for your time and I will talk to you soon.

Christine Silano, M.Ed.

Appendix E: Informed Consent

The Lived Experiences of the Parents of High School Dropouts

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Christine A. Silano, M.Ed.

Faculty Advisor: Janet Penner-Williams, Ph.D.

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study of the lived experiences of the parents of high school dropouts. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are the parent of a dropout.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Christine A. Silano, Bentonville High School, 1801 S.E. J St., Bentonville, AR, 72712. Phone: 479-696-3573. Email: csilano@bentonvillek12.org

Who is the Faculty Advisor?

Dr. Janet Penner-Williams, University of Arkansas, Rm. 335 Graduate Education Bldg., Fayetteville, AR 72701. Email: jpenner@uark.edu. Phone: 479-575-2897

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of this study is to better understand the perspectives and experiences of the parents of high school dropouts.

Who will participate in this study?

5-11 parents (including 1 pilot study) of high school dropouts.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require the following: You will be asked to answer, at length, questions about your experiences as a parent.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks to participants.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

There are no known benefits to participants.

How long will the study last?

Three interviews of 30-60 minutes each will be conducted over a one-month period.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

You will receive $20 per hour for participation.

Will I have to pay for anything?

No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.

Additional steps include the use of pseudonyms for both names and places in both transcripts and publications. Also, original interview data will be kept in locked storage for five years.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study you will have the right to request feedback about the results from either the principal research or faculty advisor as listed below. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Christine A. Silano

Dr. Janet Penner-Williams, University of Arkansas, Rm. 335 Graduate Education Bldg., Fayetteville, AR 72701. Email: jpenner@uark.edu. Phone: 479-575-2897.

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
120 Ozark Hall
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Participant name:_____

Date:_____

APPENDIX F: THEMES & MEANING UNITS

THEMES	MEANING UNITS
Bright Child	• Advanced to first grade while in kindergarten. • Junior year AP classes. • Active in Spanish club. • Gifted and talented program. • Dependable and responsible child. • A brilliant test taker. • Kindergarten great. Perfect attendance. • Third grade loved to read, tested for gifted and talented. • Reading and English were his good subjects. • Happy, charming little boy • Academically fine in kindergarten • Very bright child, high vocabulary • Creative, enjoys making educational how to's for youtube • Bright child • Above average grades • Musically talented • Not challenged by curriculum in facility schools • Basically a good student • Very well-behaved • Likes school
Involved Parent(s)	• Participated/involved as much as possible--went on a field trip. • My husband coached Little League 2 years • Grandma stayed involved best she could • Mom gets Shannon a transfer to other h.s. in district • Mom has positive relationship with administrators • Mom decides GED is best choice • Home room mom • Worked in school • Mom and Dad both coached her teams • Mom very involved in making sure Courtney passes classes

- High expectations from dad, “I made sure he was intelligent”
- Got him in scouting
- Helped with homework
- Tried the chore charts, structure, money incentives, tried everything to motivate him
- Got him involved in scouts
- Conferences and awards ceremonies
- Involvement a priority
- Field trip volunteer
- Attended 8th grade graduation
- Proactive about grades, talking to teachers
- Left work to check on Haley
- Attempted to get her into half day program
- Never missed an occasion where parents were invited
- Always wanted my kids to get awards
- Helped with homework

Medical Issues

- I admit I had a drug problem
- Diagnosed with bipolar disorder
- Poor memory due to mental condition
- Psychosis at an early age, delusions, hallucinations
- Seizure at age three, changed his life forever
- Started psychotropic medication in kindergarten
- Bad asthma
- In first grade, he’s diagnosed with ADHD and Asperger’s
- IEP
- Sent to a facility for two months in second grade
- Fantasized that he was a video game character
- Brothers have same Asperger’s diagnosis
- Dad has a brain tumor
- Develops stomach pain and headaches.
- Abdominal migraines
- Autistic brother
- Stress-induced illness vanishes after she drops out of school
- Couldn’t stay clean at Grandma’s
- Sobriety comes before kids’ welfare
- Abandonment issues
- ADHD
- Two years in mental health facilities
- Severe anxiety issues

- Older brother's kidney disease
- Lots of trips to children's hospital
- Sober till Michael was 7, then started drinking again
- Call came for a kidney transplant the night before summer school.

Unfair School

- School doesn't take his hurt head seriously, he has fractured skull
- First day of middle school he is scolded in front of me
- Teacher scolds, then slams car door
- Summer school teacher said she would email lessons, they never came
- Made to repeat 8th grade for missing three days of summer school
- Sent to alternative school after repeating 8th, starts high school at 16
- Doing great in alternative school, but forced to leave when parents unknowingly move to adjoining district
- District approval received to stay in [same school], but loses his spot in the ALE, told to get a GED
- After all we went through, the humiliation, the fines, the UAs (urinary analyses), the district paperwork, and they turn around and do this just when you was getting to enjoy being there
- Unjust consequence for going out wrong door creates hardship for mom
- Extreme consequences lead to humiliation--handcuffing for wrestling
- Saturday school for calling a kid a rhyming name
- School makes mountains out of molehills and molehills out of mountains
- Committee misleads the family.
- Office staff loses medical notes.
- Teacher pushed her to earn points for reading when she already enjoyed reading at a high level.
- Weak biology teacher leads to failing a class.
- Teacher accuses family of lying about daughter's illness.
- Some teachers were supportive, some not.
- The school is out to get us back for shaming them.
- Staff is perturbed that the girl could be so smart.

- Daughter wasn't challenged in middle school. GT program was lacking. She started to get lazy.
- School seems happy to be rid of us.
- Dad is at end of his rope dealing with school officials.
- Dad loses it, yells.
- Daughter frustrated by favoritism on basketball team.
- Every tiny thing he did wrong, they called him on carpet
- Even with IEP, teachers did not modify work
- Father and mother felt administrators not supportive
- Kyle didn't fit the mold, weak link
- Kyle ostracized
- They passed him on to get rid of him
- Poor communication from school about attendance
- School doesn't seem to notice long absences. No calls
- It's up to [Mom] to handle it, [truancy] not [school's] problem
- Asked SRO for help, told there is nothing the school can do
- Daughter moves to CA with dad and no one notices she is gone
- School staff doesn't care, just there for paycheck
- Teachers are "just there"
- Resentment towards schools
- Counselor shouldn't have told daughter about GED

Behavior Issues

- Urinated on classroom [pet]
- Not finishing work
- Daydreaming in school
- Lots of time outs
- 7th grade in trouble most of time
- 8th grade had to be picked up by mom or dad for some conflict almost weekly
- Did his work but didn't turn it in, piled it up
- Improvement over last two years as far as maturity
- Poor choice of friends, bad grades both start in junior high
- Middle school: poor choice of friends
- Unscrupulous adult: 26 year old boyfriend

- Skipping continues at sister's house
- Takes off 8 mos. from school during pregnancy
- Running away
- Daughter started hiding the letters from the school
- Hiding in the closet sophomore year
- Going to the lake during school day
- Couldn't sit still in second grade
- Manipulative--hall pass incident
- Frequent phone calls to come get him from school
- Learning problems show up in 5th grade
- He starts skipping school, authorities step in
- Does as she pleases at school and at home
- Kicked out of band
- Middle school, stealing
- Skipping classes in junior high
- Runs off with boy during and after school
- First run in with law at dad's, curfew and marijuana
- Dad kicks her out of house for trouble with stepmom
- Overdramatizes her anxiety
- Threatens shelter staff
- Locks herself in school bathroom
- Teachers can't deal with daughter's behavior
- Kicked out of high school for threatening language, violent fits

Troubled Home

- I worked nights
- Unsupervised after school at Grandma's house
- Mom gone for 10 years
- Grandpa had drug problem
- Custody battle with Dad
- Girls not supervised by Dad
- Dad is abusive
- Dad and kids visited mom in rehab
- Mom has custody last four years
- Courts, p.o. for truancy
- DHS
- Counseling
- Older brother's kidney disease
- Lots of trips to children's hospital
- Dad started drinking again
- Autistic brother.

- She defended her disabled brother.
- Brother had big problems with behavior at home.
- A difficult grandma to deal with.
- DHS charges older brother with molestation. Dad doesn't believe it.
- Dad's statements twisted by DHS
- Dad disabled with brain tumor
- Mom had a drug problem
- Inconsistent mothering due to drugs and mental illness
- Mom has bipolar disorder
- Homelessness and moving around
- Single mom
- Mom has poor memory due to mental condition
- DHS suspicious of mom, but finds out she has legit reason for impaired behavior
- DHS steps in to address 16 year old pregnant by 21 year old
- DHS pushes for enrollment in homeschool
- Dad takes her in, then kicks her out when she gets pregnant
- Sister tries to help, but isn't any more successful than mom or dad
- Stepdad in elementary school was an alcoholic
- My husband and I would fight sometimes
- Dad was out of her life for many years
- Divorce brought economic hardship to our family
- Older brother had trouble with the law right after the big move
- Divorce summer before high school
- Lived in a motel her junior year
- Three uninvolved fathers
- Maybe she wanted out because she wanted stability

APPENDIX G: UNCORROBORATED THEMES

School Interventions

- Individual and family counseling a successful intervention
- Alternative school helps
- Tutoring offered but never happened
- Alternative school great, but taken away
- Summer school required, but he wasn't given makeup work to successfully finish

Unchallenging Curriculum

- GT program was lacking in middle school
- Teacher pushed for reading points when she already enjoyed reading at a high level
- She couldn't stay engaged in high school
- Weak biology teacher
- Busy work

Mishandled Credits

- Office staff loses medical notes
- Re-take classes or alternative school
- Attendance committee misled us

Shame and Disappointment

- Ashamed to have a child drop out
- Disappointed that neither daughter finished high school
- Wanted to make him a shadowbox with his tassel and photos

Attendance Problems

- She took extra days off
- Missing a few days spiraled into several
- 51 days absent that semester
- She gave up on school
- They never returned our calls
- She started hiding letters from school
- Going to the lake

Athletic Child

- Started early with soccer
- Frustrated by favoritism on basketball team
- She never missed a practice
- Started volleyball sophomore year

Socially Inferior

- We lived in a trailer
- Her religion made her feel like she didn't fit in
- She's not a social butterfly

Change Hurts

- Re-zoning forced change in first grade
- He took the divorce really hard
- Grades went down with the school change
- Didn't like dad's new girlfriend

Stubborn Child

- He doesn't want to be labeled "special ed"
- Doesn't want Dad's help going to college

APPENDIX H: TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS

Jessica and Haley

My Child is Smart Enough

Jessica's daughter Haley was a shy, well-behaved child who struggled somewhat with her schoolwork, but was an otherwise successful elementary student. Her academic trouble seemed easily remedied by an incentive program, a carrot held out by the school, receiving cash for grades, which raised her achievement noticeably.

She had a little bit of trouble in school with her grades and everything, but for the most part she did pretty good.

Haley was never held back in elementary school, so Jessica wasn't concerned about severe academic problems.

Even as Haley entered middle school, academics was not the problem. In Jessica's view, the problem was a poor choice of friends that led to the skipping behavior that was at the forefront of Haley's downhill slide.

I Did My Best to Be Involved

Jessica believed that her children had a better chance of success if she was involved at school. She volunteered to chaperone a field trip. She attended parent conferences and awards events at the school. School success for her children was a priority for Jessica.

Yes, I went to conferences. And when she would get, there were award ceremonies, I went to award ceremonies, but um, I'll be honest with you . . . I was off and on drugs a lot when she was going to school. . . So, sometimes I would play a real important role when I was clean. But I would always, you know, I knew the importance of school. I knew it was better if I got involved and she

would get better if she knew how important it was to me. So when I was clean, I was in there, I did my best, went on school field trips and stuff.

Jessica also worked with Haley to communicate with teachers about improving her grades.

If her grades weren't good, we talked about it and said, "Okay, you're going to go to each one of your teachers and ask them, 'Is there anything else I can do for extra credit that will bring my grades up?'" And that's what she would do, she would go to each one of her teachers and do some extra credit stuff to bring her grades from a C to a B or possibly from a D to a C.

As Haley got older and problems began, Jessica looked to school officials for support and even intervention. She approached a campus police officer for help with what she believed was an illegal act, a 26-year old harboring her daughter during the school day. Shortly after that, when Haley ran away from home, Jessica reached out to teachers and administrators in hopes they could help her discover her daughter's whereabouts.

Jessica was also proactive in reaching out to the community for help at times, including making and posting "missing child" posters, and calling the police to come and arrest her daughter when her behavior was out of hand.

Jessica showed care for her daughter by advocating for her in these ways. Though she frequently felt rebuffed or ignored by those she reached out to, turning to the school and the community for help was a big part of her parenting experience.

My Daughter Made Poor Choices

Jessica never showed anger or resentment toward her daughter. But she did imply that at times her daughter made choices that led to the problems she was having at school.

Middle school is when she started, out there is when she started hanging out with, kinda gettin' lots of friends and hangin' out with the wrong ones, so . . .

At times Haley's behavior was more than Jessica could handle on her own. She hoped that natural consequences would take effect, that someone from the school or community would step in so Haley could learn a lesson. But such interventions were few and far between.

Yeah. And so, I wanted to believe her, but this went on so long, so I called the school and said, "I think my daughter's ditchin'." You know, I wanted them to get her in trouble. They never did.

At one point Haley's behavior was so out-of-control that Jessica called the cops to come and deal with her.

I was for anything wanting to help that girl. And I ended up calling the cops on her and that's whenever they came and picked her up and took her to [facility].

Haley had a character trait that made her behavior especially frustrating to deal with at times: she tended to withdraw. Even her grandfather on her father's side of the family noticed it.

I remember talking to her grandpa often and him saying, "I don't know what's wrong with her grades cuz she won't talk to me," and I'm like, "Well, join the crowd cuz she won't talk to anybody." She's a closed book, that one.

I Had My Problems

Although Jessica never suggested that her personal issues may have contributed to Haley's poor choices after starting middle school, she easily admitted that she was not the perfect parent. She was quick to let me know that she had fought a drug problem for many years. She also had what she referred to as "meltdowns" from time to time, which was her term for the

crashes that are typical of untreated bipolar disorder. Only in recent years did Jessica receive treatment for her condition, and since then she has been successful staying clean and sober.

During the interview process, Jessica would at times complain that she didn't remember, or was missing key bits of information about Haley's education because she wasn't around, or someone else was taking care of Haley, or her mental condition affected her memory. In that sense, her own problems were not a part of her experience parenting Haley. They were a separate experience, a separate life from her life as a parent. By acknowledging her memory problem, she admits that she was at times either missing in person or in spirit as her daughter was growing up.

Over the years, however, Jessica frequently reminded herself that her children needed her, and this became a motivator for her to "clean up." In that sense, her problems and her parenting were linked. Her children motivated her to keep trying to be a good mom.

Problems at home during the elementary years included Jessica's mental illness and substance abuse issues. Jessica described her behavior this way:

> *When I messed up, I messed up and I withdrew from people and everything and stayed to myself and did that. But I always cleaned up. For a long time I would clean up, mess up, clean up mess up, so . . .*

Other problems included a stay in a homeless shelter, moving a few times, and the challenges of just being a single parent.

Schools Offer Inconsistent Support

In the elementary years, Jessica was appreciative of the support offered. The "cash for grades" program helped motivate Haley to higher achievement. The after-school tutoring program Haley attended in her early middle school year helped her avoid attending summer

school or being held back. But as Haley got older, the school system did not offer supports that could help her with serious behavior problems as they developed.

Jessica was especially disappointed by the seeming lack of concern shown for Haley when her attendance was poor, when she was known to be skipping. Jessica thought there should have been phone calls, letters, even threats of legal action, but next to nothing happened. As a single parent, it was hard for her to convince her daughter of the importance of school attendance when the schools themselves seemed unconcerned.

Jessica felt hurt by the lack of compassion shown by school officials when Haley engaged in more dangerous behaviors such as skipping school to be with an adult male, or running away from home. She looked to their wisdom and expertise to help her get her family back on track, but the staff seemed to shrug their shoulders and remind her that she was the parent and it was her responsibility to figure it out on her own. Her hurt turned into resentment over time as she realized that teachers were "just there for a paycheck."

Jessica remembers a phone call from the school that led to an upsetting discovery:

Yeah. I had gotten a call from them when I was at work one day and they said, "We believe Cheyenne's just called in [to excuse] herself." So, they called and said we want to let you be aware . . . so they let me know. So I left work and went up to the school and found out she'd ditched school that day and I thought they'd have a little more involvement because I found out she'd ditched with a 26 year old man. . . After that, I asked them, you know, if she is not in school, please let me know. I gotta know every time. That way I can be on top of it.

But she later told me she used to ditch all the time and I wouldn't know about it, the school wouldn't call me when she wasn't there.

Jessica felt devastated by this experience and began to harbor resentment toward the school staff. As she describes it:

> *There's a few teachers out there that are concerned, but for the most part they're just there. . . Cuz I talked to an officer there when I found out she was ditching, you know. I went in there crying. I'm crying because my daughter ditched with a 26 year old man. 'Please help me, what can I do?' . . . My heart was broken. . . . It was like maybe I was a nuisance, you know. . . Just pretty much saying, you know, it's up to me, you know, they really couldn't do anything and you know, stuff like that. And I don't like to feel like a nuisance, so, I wouldn't go back to them anymore. Tried to handle it myself. I don't like to resent either, so . . .*

Skipping school was a constant problem, but the school did not seem to take notice. Jessica rarely received phone calls from the school and she only recalls Haley getting in trouble for her truancy one time. She did receive some automated phone calls about missed classes, but she found it hard to trust these:

> *Sometimes I would get a call from the automated system saying she missed this period, and I would call her on it and she'd be like, "I swear I was there, Mom." You know, stuff like that.*

Family Members and Agencies Were Involved

Haley's dad was not happy about his daughter being put in a shelter after the running away episode, so he took her to live with him after she had been there just one day. She lived with him for six months. Toward the end of the six months, her father found out she was pregnant. Dad was intolerant of the pregnancy, telling her she would have to get an abortion or move out, so she went to live with her older sister.

During her ninth-grade year while living with her older sister, Haley's attendance and grades worsened, so she was sent back to live with her mom.

> *My daughter . . . and my son-in-law actually took a big role in making sure they took her to school and then picked her up from school instead of letting her ride the bus cuz you didn't know if she was coming from school, or . . . They would take her to and from. I believe they went in and talked to some of her teachers.*

Jessica was tired of pushing Haley to go to school at this point, and focused more on Haley's pregnancy. She wanted her daughter to be comfortable, and did not force the attendance issue any longer. Jessica did not send Haley to school for eight months straight. Finally, DHS workers came to her house to check on the family because someone reported that Jessica looked impaired when she was picking up her younger son from school, but she showed them that she had prescription medication to treat her mental illness and did not get in trouble for that.

DHS had Jessica enroll Haley in homeschool, at which point Jessica went out and bought a GED book and put Haley on a study schedule. Haley was not very motivated to study at home, so she eventually enrolled in a local adult education program where she received her GED at 16 years of age.

Brenda & Michael

My Child is Bright

Michael was a bright and charming little boy with an active imagination. Brenda was very proud that he won an award for perfect attendance his kindergarten year, and she did not know of any problems with him academically. In fact, by third grade he was such an excellent reader that his teacher recommended him for Gifted and Talented testing.

> *But they did test him to see if he could be in Gifted and Talented. And he tested out not gifted and talented and we thought maybe it was because he made it through kindergarten and into first grade and loved to read.*

Reading and English were always Michael's best subjects. He also excelled at computers and could type 70 wpm by junior high. In high school, he enjoyed his media broadcasting class.

In fifth grade, however, Michael was not working at his potential and his grades were going down. He was actually tested for learning disabilities, but no learning problems were identified.

I Was Involved as I Could Be

For many years Brenda worked two and even three jobs at a time, so involvement in organized school events was limited.

> *I made it to most of the homeroom gatherings that they had to show art. . . . Got to go to the Halloween Carnival. My husband one year participated in the Halloween Carnival. Had to dress up like a ghoul and be in a coffin and raise up and scare all the kids. . . . We did some of the participation and I'm sure there was others. I just didn't have time to volunteer to do anything else. . . . And I did get to go with him on a trip to Lake _____ that we made. That was a*

memorable one. I still remember the other children that went and how they were. I even learned the poison oak, poison ivy, "Three leaves, let it be."

Although Brenda was not able to participate as much as she might have liked, she advocated for her son by speaking with school staff, including district level administrators, whenever there was a problem.

We Were Mistreated

Brenda sensed her son was being treated unfairly at several junctures during his school career. From her point of view, his feelings and interests were not taken seriously. The first incident involved a concussion incurred on the playground that the teacher and school nurse dismissed as a bump, not calling the parents while Michael nearly died or went into a coma.

Fourth grade he had the same teacher third grade and fourth grade. That teacher I think knew him by fourth grade. And she considered him a 'wolf crier' you know. Anything was wrong with him, it wasn't really wrong with him. . . . And he actually had fell off the slide at school and had cracked his skull. . . So they took him in and had him lay down in the school office. And the nurse was there and she was checking his knee, his leg, cuz they thought that was wrong with him when he told them his head. . . . . It happened to be at the last recess. So they didn't call and tell us he'd been injured. And Dad went to pick him up, and he was told to go around and pick him up inside the school. He goes in to get him and they said he'd had a slight accident on the playground. Had to carry him out because his head injury and the right leg don't work. . . . So we tried to check his and he wouldn't move his hand. His hand was stuck to his head. . . . He wasn't crying. . . . [but] He wouldn't let me touch his head. We asked him if he was

thirsty. And we let him have root beer. Gave him a cup of root beer. I mean it was just a cup. He took just one sip of it and threw it up. . . . So we grabbed him and took off. We went to Washington Regional and it was in the old building. . . . We went straight there. . . . But then when they x-rayed him they immediately told me he had a cracked skull. He had blood flowing between the skull and the brain. . . . And that doctor told us if it'd been an hour later, he'd have been in a coma or dead. . . . I was angry with the school. . . . I was angry cuz they didn't call us. I was angry cuz she treated it like he cried wolf. Cuz she said to my husband, "Oh, he's laying there in the office" and said, "He's had a slight injury. But you know Michael, he'll play on it for awhile."

The next injustice Brenda talked about involved a summer school mishap that led to Michael repeating an entire year of school.

By the time he got to junior high, in the eighth grade, the principal, we just knew he'd passed . . . he was going through summer school that year. It was the year his brother got his transplant. And it was all I could do to get him to school and make it to work. Then we got the phone call saying he was going to get a transplant. And you only go to summer school one month. And he was down to the last week of school. On Monday night we got the call, and he had to be there on Tuesday. Well I took off to go to _____ to the _____ Medical Center to be there for his transplant and Michael missed school . . . dad wasn't capable of getting him to school those three days. . . . So Michael didn't get to go to school on Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday. And I came back on Thursday and took him up there on Friday and that was the last day of school, the last day of summer

school. He went in and talked to the teacher and she told him, "I'll get the lessons on the computer and I'll email you, tell you where they're at and everything so you can finish up because that's a legitimate reason for missing." Brother had a kidney transplant. She never sent them. I never got them. And he never called; I didn't call. So when he went to school the next year he was going to ninth grade. Gets up there and the principal calls him up to her office and said because he missed three days of summer school he was going to do the eighth grade over again.

Yet another incident caused Brenda to feel that school officials lacked sensitivity toward her family. Michael was unfairly assigned in-school-suspension because of an action related to a shoulder injury.

The ultimate injustice for Brenda came when Michael was a high school senior. His junior year, after months of struggle with attendance and grades, Michael had been placed in an alternative program. At last his grades came up and attendance improved. He was enjoying school for the first time in a long time. But then the family moved to the edge of town. Still in the city limits, they were surprised to learn that they had moved to a different school district. Because Michael was finally doing well in school, Brenda went through the process of applying for a district transfer and was approved. But when she went back to the alternative program to re-enroll her son, she was told his seat had been given to another student.

Like I said, I went to the superintendent . . . I did everything I could do to get it narrowed down to where he could get back into his little spot . . . . And that's what happened. She looks up and says, "Sorry, his place has already been taken. . . . He said, "I can't believe it." I said, "All this money. I spent $250 to the

courts so you could go to school. I said all the humiliation that you went through. The counseling that you went through. The DHS coming in and checking on us like they did." And I said, "We survived everything. And then they turn around and now you can no longer attend school, just when you was getting to enjoy being there." Would it have hurt for him to have been 20 years old and graduate from _____ High? . . . He was willing to do that. There was kids already in there that was the same age as him.

Community Interventions: A Blessing and a Curse

Brenda had mixed feelings about community interventions. When Michael began skipping school for days on end, school administrators referred his case to juvenile authorities. Brenda felt it was unfair when the judge fined her for her son's truancies.

I thought everything was working out fine, then all of a sudden he's not going again. That time his dad took it upon himself to call the school to see if they'd do something about it because you know dad was . . . he decided . . . since he couldn't get him up to go to school that the school should do it, it's their job. So that time we went back to juvenile. We went back to [the judge]. They fined us 250 dollars, money I didn't have, supposedly because it was me not sending him to school. And then I have to pay the money in a certain length of time. I got all that paid and had to go to the courthouse and pay that.

The next time Michael started having attendance problems, a DHS worker came to the house to intervene. The outcome of the visit was positive, since Michael was referred to counseling which seemed to help him. He was also given some new clothes which Brenda was thankful about.

So then they have him on probation again and this time they called in the Department of Human Services and they had a lady come out and talk to us. I guess they'd been worried maybe about dad drinking. I don't know. But they had her come out. Had her talking to him. Got Michael set up with a counselor. . . . He'd go there once every week, once every two weeks. I'd drive him down there and he'd get out of the car. I think it helped him. He got to tell her his stories. And the little girl at Human Services went out and bought him a whole bunch of clothes, you know. She just thought the world of him.

Family Problems Took Time Away from Our Son

Michael was the least of Brenda's problems over the years. The biggest priority in her life was her older son's kidney disease. While working low-paying retail jobs to support her family, she frequently took her son to doctor's visits out of town. In addition, her husband had a drinking problem, rendering him unavailable to provide much help.

I just feel like he was one of those victims of circumstance. Because he was born to an older couple. We were both 36 when we had him. We already had the older child that was sick. And then my husband had gone back on alcohol. So, between those three things and the fact that mama had to pull the weight . . . work, keep that job, afraid to lose that job. I worked for _____ and _____, and worked at the bread store, and worked a paper route while I worked at ____ I was working two jobs to supplement what daddy wasn't able to do. He worked for the _____, and retired from the _____ early because of his problems. He wound up getting a DWI. He was a transport person. He was supposed to drive patients. And it was his second offense DWI, in a certain length of time, so they had to demote him

from the job he had down to a lower paying job. So he worked in that job for a couple of years, then he couldn't stand it any longer and retired early. Things might have been so much different.

He's Not the Perfect Child

Brenda admitted that Michael often used his charm to get what he wanted. As young as the first grade, he started practicing telling stories to cover for his misbehavior.

He was one of these that could manipulate. . . He was real good. Even the first grade teacher, he got her a couple of times. He was out roaming in the hallway and the kindergarten teacher come out and asked him what he was doing and he said, "I'm going to the bathroom." She said, "Do you have a hall pass?" He said, "Yes, I do." She said, "Where is it?" And he said, "It's invisible."

Another time Michael got in trouble for calling another student a name. He had known the boy from a previous school, and was excited to see him at his new school. The boy's name rhymed with a popular snack food, so Michael teased him a bit when he saw him, yelling out his name with the rhyme. A principal overheard the teasing, and assigned Michael to a day of Saturday school. Though Brenda admits that her son should not have teased the other boy, once again she felt that the punishment did not fit the crime, that her son was disciplined unfairly.

Cindy & Courtney

My Child is Very Bright & Athletic

Even though she was only four when she started kindergarten, Courtney stood out as one of the brightest students in her class. Her grades were excellent in grade school, and she was soon identified as "Gifted and Talented" by her teachers.

> *She started early because her birthday is in the end of August. So she was four when she started kindergarten. And she's been an exceptional student all the way through. As and Bs mostly. And she was in the Gifted and Talented program. . . . No behavior problems. Everybody loved her. She was our third child, so, you know how you are, you learn from the first ones. But she got along with everybody and all the teachers loved her because she was so smart. She was dependable. She was real responsible.*

Courtney was born into an athletic family. At various times she enjoyed softball, soccer, basketball, and volleyball, and was a strong team member in each.

> *Yeah, she played softball. What else did she play? S Soccer. She played soccer for three years. . . . Yeah, started basketball in 5th grade and loved it.*

We Were Super Involved

Courtney's mom and dad showed parental dedication to their children in several ways. Dad coached basketball, and Mom coached softball.

Cindy, Courtney's mom, was so involved with the elementary school that she started working there as a part-time employee. In large part she was motivated by the needs of Courtney's older brother who suffered from autism. But Cindy enjoyed being close to

Courtney's classes as well. She always knew exactly what was going on in their classes and was able to attend every special event that was hosted at the school.

> *Oh yeah. I was the home room mom, I worked at the school part of the time. She has a brother that was autistic. And he was in the school too. So I stayed there and worked so I could be with both of them. . . . I knew what was going on. . . . [every conference] . . . [Every awards ceremony] . . . Every ribbon, every time.*

As Courtney grew older and started having trouble making it to school and getting her work done, Cindy became involved in another way. She became her homework cheerleader and her tutor.

> *Not her junior year. They let her make it up. She spent all her time doing makeup work. And I came down on her to get it done, cuz I knew if she didn't get it done it was gonna be bad. And it was a fight, all the time, it was constant, "Go get your homework, I'll help you with it. Get it done."*

Cindy was also an advocate for Courtney when there were problems at school. She always communicated with school staff if she believed it would be helpful to Courtney.

My Child Wasn't Challenged

Cindy often felt that her very bright daughter was not being challenged by her teachers, which led to boredom, a decrease in motivation, and behavior issues such as talking in class. Courtney was also put off by busy work. It seemed that some teachers had unreasonable expectations based on arbitrary numbers they wanted students to finish, ostensibly to keep them overloaded with work. One teacher had fixed an unattainable reading requirement on Courtney, who read at a high level.

She got a little bit lazy about her grades. She got to where it just wasn't very important. I think she was bored. And their gifted and talented program at the middle school level was nothing. They met once a month and messed around. They didn't do a whole lot . . . And Courtney figured out it wasn't important. "Why do I need to read 25 books I don't wanna read?" . . . She read constantly . . . Which was adult level. . . . And then she was on to her for reading those books. It wasn't the right level.

Another teacher expected students to define and learn what seemed to be a ridiculous number of vocabulary words every week.

She had to do a hundred vocabulary words each week and she just didn't understand why. . . And 20 of them they had to write the definition three times. Without typing.

One teacher seemed not to want to prepare lesson plans that would prepare his students, frequently showing movies instead.

Yeah. She flunked a biology class. Which was really the teacher's fault because they watched movies all the time and she didn't teach them anything and 38% of that class failed. So she had to take it again the next year.

Cindy was aware when a teacher made an extra effort to catch the imagination of his students. Courtney was inspired by such teachers.

She loved history. They had Contemporary U.S. History. It was Cush. And he teaches it by music. The music of the different eras. It was a really cool class. . . And old movies . . .

School Relations Worsened Over Time

In the early years, since she worked at the school, Cindy enjoyed great communication with Courtney's teachers and administrators. But as Courtney got older, started having health problems, and missing a lot of school, the relationships became negative. In one instance, a teacher accused Courtney of lying about her health issues. This upset Cindy and Courtney and infuriated Courtney's father.

> *So they started giving us a hard time about how much she was missing. We actually had a teacher tell us that they didn't buy that she was really sick because she'd missed that many days. . . .It didn't go over well.*

When school relations went from bad to worse, Cindy began to suspect that school staff were conspiring to get rid of her and her family.

> *And the lady at the front desk, the receptionist, I was like, "Linda you know with my kids, they have doctor's notes. I don't take them out without doctor's notes." "I know. I don't know what happened, Rhonda." Bet I do. They hit File 13.*

Cindy believed the ill will against her family stemmed from situations in years previous, when she had pressed school officials to make accommodations for her son's disability.

> *From the time, all the kids, I think it was mainly from Dakota. It was kind of payback from him . . . making them do the right thing for his IEP, with his modifications and everything else. We was there all the time, making them, "Do this, do this. And if we have to, we'll get Child Advocacy in here." . . . Making them do what the law says. . . . Because he was so intelligent, they thought that we babied him and that was the reason he didn't do the work. . . . And we had meetings all the time. And I was up there constantly, "You gotta do this, you*

gotta do that. State says you can do this. You gotta do that." And they didn't like me. . . . They didn't like being showed up.

Cindy's suspicions that the school would be happy to be rid of her and her family were confirmed when she asked for an administrative waiver releasing Courtney to drop out and get her GED. She expected resistance to getting the waiver signed, as she had encountered resistance at every turn in the past. But she was as hurt as she was surprised when the waiver was signed without a fight.

We had to get a waiver from our district. And I was like, "Great. They're not going to give me the waiver." He was like, "Oh yeah, I'll give it to you." He was ready to get rid of us. So he gave us the waiver.

My Child Developed a Stress-induced Illness

Aside from Courtney's boredom and frustration with her teachers, she had an even bigger problem that kept her from keeping good attendance. She had developed an unusual medical condition that kept her doubled over in pain.

It was her stomach and headaches. And they actually diagnosed her with abdominal migraines which I'd never heard of. . . It's a migraine that starts in the abdomen. It starts with stomach pain and then the regular migraine. She'd throw up. . . And then her junior year she started using that to stay home.

Courtney spent many many hours in doctor's offices when she should have been in school. But even after her condition was diagnosed, there was no real cure, and no real understanding of the cause of it either. It wasn't until she had made the decision to quit school that the real cause, or aggravator, of her pain was discovered–stress.

But once she made the decision, or all of us made the decision, to go ahead and get the GED and let her drop out, I think we all felt better. Making a decision right or wrong, we had made a decision. Her stomach problems backed way off and her headaches backed way off. . . Most of it was stress-induced.

Credit Issues Were Mishandled

Courtney missed 51 days of school during the fall semester of her senior year, mostly due to illness. But Cindy kept bringing in medical notes, helping her get her makeup work and complete it, and talking to school officials about her status. Courtney's case was assigned to the school attendance committee.

And she was told if she did all the makeup work and made up all the semester tests, she'd have credit at semester. They'd give her credit for the classes and everything. . . . Right. And they told us, if you'll get a note from the doctor. And I always had notes. And all of a sudden in her chart there were not any notes. . . And the one I had they couldn't read very well so it didn't count. . . . [I was feeling] furious.

When Courtney's parents received a letter telling them that Courtney would not receive credit despite what they had been told by the committee, Cindy sprung into action and approached the superintendent, someone she had known and worked with for many years, and advocated for her daughter.

I went to the superintendent because I've known him for years and I was like, "Randy, what's the deal?" I called him and he went through her records and was like, "She's missed too many days and we just can't give her credit for it." And I

said, "But they told me this, this, and this." And he said, "I know. But they shouldn't have told you that."

At this stage, Courtney had had enough. She told her parents that she was unwilling to go back to school. After pulling her credit for the fall semester and the endless battle with administrators, she was given two options: attend an alternative program where she could earn credit at an accelerated pace, or come back in the fall for an extra semester of school to make up the credit. Courtney felt that neither option was worth pursuing. She had heard that many of the students in the alternative program had drug problems and were "rough" kids; she did not feel she would fit in socially. As for coming back in the fall, she was not interested in receiving a diploma after the rest of her classmates had gone on to college and careers. She decided that a GED would be the best option for her, allowing her to start college in the fall as she had always planned. Courtney's GED scores were some of the highest her college admissions officer had ever seen.

Paul & Kyle

He's a Very Bright Child

Paul had no doubts about his son's innate intelligence. He also took some credit for fostering that intelligence through vocabulary games and drills.

> *He [Kyle] was very bright. He knew answers to everything cuz I used to drill him all the time. You know, I'd say just a hypothetical word like 'antidisestablishmentarianism.' He would tell me the word and repeat it verbatim. No messing it up or slurring or anything like that. He'd also tell me the definition. . . I made sure he was intelligent. I didn't want him to fall into the same stigma that I did when I was in school. I wanted him to be in the upper ten percent.*

When Kyle started having trouble in school, it frustrated Paul because he knew his son was capable of doing the work.

His Medical Condition Affected His School Behavior

With a dual diagnosis of ADHD and Asperger's, most if not all of Kyle's school behavior issues were connected to his medical issues, as far as Paul was concerned. From the early elementary years, psychiatric symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations kept Paul from fully participating in his academics, even though he was clearly bright.

> *When he was three he had an ephemeral seizure. And that was one of the major turning points of his life.*

One of the symptoms of Kyle's Asperger's was extreme difficulty accepting change. He became upset when he had to change schools.

After he finished kindergarten he had to transfer to _____Elementary because of an annex. But he thought, 'This is where I'm going to go to school . . . this is where I'm going to go. . . . And it's like, the whole upheaval to transfer him from _____ to _____. Around that same time he was diagnosed ADHD and Asperger's. He has all the classic symptoms of someone with ADHD and Asperger's. . . . Not finishing his work, mind drifting off. If you know anything about kids with Asperger's, they like a set routine. It has to be chiseled in concrete. That's the way they expect it to be. If you turn around and change one little thing it messes up their entire world. And I was the cornerstone of Kyle's world.

Kyle was also upset by changes in the family such as divorce or the new relationships his parents started.

Second grade I thought I found someone else to be involved with. He kind of took a liking to her at first, then just didn't want nothing to do with her. . . . I was the cornerstone of Kyle's world. And the whole . . . everything just kind of . . . I think he took it the hardest (the family breakup).

The psychiatric issues Kyle suffered from included living in a fantasy world, which made normal communication difficult.

He was fantasizing that he was a character in video games and stuff like that. . . . [Even in kindergarten] He was having some psychological issues. With minor delusions and seeing things and stuff. . . He ended up on some psychotropic medications.

By the time Kyle reached middle school age, psychotic symptoms were not his biggest issues. Rather, getting along with others and turning in his homework had become the biggest concerns Paul remembers.

> *Seventh grade he was in trouble all the time. Then eighth grade, I would say every other week something was happening where either I would have to go get him or his mother would have to go get him. . . . Something. Just some altercation. And he . . . there was a lot of times where he wouldn't do his homework. Or if he did do his homework, it was in his locker. He never turned in papers. . . . He literally had a pile in the bottom of his locker, that high, of papers that he had completed, that he had never turned in. That's what? Two and a half feet deep?*

Schools Were Not Supportive

Paul felt his ex-wife, the custodial parent, would concur that the schools were just not supportive of Kyle. Teachers were impatient; modifications were not implemented. Paul did not feel that school staff showed personal care for him or his son. This was evidenced by what seemed to be overly harsh discipline and higher than necessary expectations.

> *Every little tiny thing he did wrong, they called him on the carpet. Everything. It could be chewing his pencil. Breaking off the eraser. Burping, just something stupid, and they called him on it all the time. . . . They were alienating him.*

Paul and his wife also felt that teachers often did not follow the modification requirements on his Individual Education Plan (IEP).

> *Even after he was given the IEP, the teacher expected him to do the full thing, with no leniency on anything at all. So no matter how hard he tried, it wasn't*

good enough. . . And some of the medication he was on, during certain times of the day it would mess with his system. It really takes a lot more to balance a younger child's medication out than it does on someone in their teens. They've got to really amp it up a lot and revamp it once in awhile just to . . . "Okay, you're tired in the afternoons? Let's try this. You're falling asleep during recess? Let's try this."

Ultimately, Paul felt that his child had been rejected by the school system. Because Kyle's was a difficult case, school staff were intolerant of him as a person.

They were singling him out. "You don't fit the criteria; you don't fit in our mold. You're the weak link." . . . Ostracizing him. . . Personally I just believe the school system just passed him on, just to get rid of him. . . maybe a teacher's aide every once in awhile . . . tried to steer him in the right direction.

The Community Was Not Involved

Paul did not feel that community interventions were helpful either. When he tried involving his son in scouting, once again Paul felt that expectations of his disabled son were too high. He also felt that his financial situation was not understood by the scout leaders, as there were certain expenses associated with membership.

They [scout troop] were all about the family unit, money. They were a higher class than just your average everyday people. So they were expecting more as far as participation from me, as far as finances and stuff like that was concerned. And then they were also expecting Paul to be the model citizen, so to speak. A lot of that didn't work out because of his conditions.

Paul also felt that an incident involving Kyle's older brother was not handled well by the Department of Human Services. His statements were misrepresented, and the entire ordeal became so stressful for Kyle that he ended up in a psychiatric facility for an extended period of time.

> *At one point in time his older brother had a hard time keeping control of him while his mother was at work. And the only way to watch him was to make him do everything that you did, right? So, he had brought him into the shower with him, right? Just to keep an eye on him. Which turned into a big fiasco. And that really affected Kyle. His brother got charged with child molestation. . . He was like twelve, thirteen years old. Kyle was still in grade school. [DHS became involved]. And then he ended up at _____(facility) which is in _____. He was down there for I would say probably a couple of months . . . He was majorly messed up in the head over the whole thing . . . I don't think [the abuse really occurred]. And they had twisted my words around. They'd ask a question, I'd answer it, and they turned it around and twisted it on me.*

His Mom Was More Involved Than I Was

Because Paul was not the custodial parent, he felt he had less opportunity to be involved in Kyle's education. Fortunately, however, Kyle's mother was able to stay connected to the school.

> *She was more involved in the parent conferences than I was because I was working nights. So that kind of messed up . . . I was always at work. Unless it was like . . . if I knew about it like three, four, five weeks in advance I could schedule it. . . . They were really stringent about it.*

In fact, Kyle's mother was proactive in ensuring that her son received the attention and accommodations he needed.

She was rallying for [the school] to acknowledge these problems. And it ended up affecting other kids like Kyle also, all the rallying she did. . . She gets on a soapbox, she ain't gonna get off it. That's the kind of person she is.

Paul did try to help Kyle with his schoolwork at times, but found that because his tutoring style was different than that of Kyle's mother, his efforts only caused conflict.

I was trying to help them get their schoolwork and everything done. But apparently my way of, "Okay, get it done. When you get it done, then you can have some free time to do something," wasn't the right way to do it. Because, I don't know, that's the way I am, you know. "Get in there, get done with it. I can go do something else." . . . Instead of, work on it for ten minutes, take a break, work on it for ten minutes, take a break. And that's what they were accustomed to. So there was a little bit of an upheaval there, too, because my methods were different than mother's methods.

When Paul became disabled himself and had to quit work, he attempted to be more involved in helping Kyle. However, since he could no longer work, his financial situation became a new obstacle. He could no longer drive or provide the activities that he and Kyle had once enjoyed doing together.

When I became disabled, I had a lot of free time on my hands. I was trying to do more stuff with him. But not having a vehicle kind of made a difference. I wasn't able to do a lot of stuff and he kind of shunned me for not being able to do the stuff I used to do.

Jennifer & Hannah

My Child Was Bright

Hannah was very bright for her age. When she started kindergarten, her teacher found she was so far ahead of her peers, that she referred her to first grade. Jennifer, however, did not feel her daughter had the social maturity she would need to thrive among older children, and sent her back to the kindergarten classroom.

She went to kindergarten in _____. She did really well. She was actually advanced to the first grade, but she wasn't ready. So she, by my choice, she went back to kindergarten because that's where she felt comfortable.

Hannah was an above average student in elementary school. She was a quiet, compliant little girl who listened and did her work.

She did really good. All the teachers liked her. Never got any complaint at parent teacher conference. . . . As and Bs. She did very well. The only complaint I ever got from a teacher was that she needed to speak up. . . . because she'd know the answers, but she wouldn't raise her hand to answer it.

Throughout school and through her junior year in high school, Hannah continued to make good grades, even in honors and Advanced Placement classes. Jennifer had no doubts about Hannah's academic potential.

She's in the Spanish Honors Society. She's in Spanish III. She's in AP classes. And she's already got all these college packets and she's checking this out and she's got all this stuff. Didn't even worry about Hannah. Didn't cross my mind that, you know . . .

I Was More Involved in the Elementary Years

Jennifer felt fortunate to live in a small town where everyone knew and cared about each other. She was also grateful to work for an employer who believed in the importance of family, allowing her to leave work to attend school events and conferences.

> *I went to every single parent teacher conference, every single practice, every single game. I didn't miss anything. I never missed anything with all my kids. And it was easy, because it was all right there. I never missed a party. Would go to one kid, say, "Okay, I'm going to go see your sister," go to another kid. And then when my youngest got in school I'd say, "Okay I love you," and then go see another kid. When they were in kindergarten and had snack days or whatever, I always brought snacks.*

In addition to attending school events, Jennifer encouraged her children to excel by helping them with homework, studying spelling words, and reading with them.

> *We had a routine. They had, like, so many books. They had like a scholastic thing. I always wanted my kids to get awards. That school was really good. Every child got an award for something. But I wanted mine to get more awards. They would read to me or their siblings or whatever. . . . It just made me feel good, and I know it made them feel good. She always got the citizenship award. I mean, she always had more awards than just about anybody. And we did things like study for spelling words. I'd call the word out.*

Unfortunately, when the family moved to a larger town, Jennifer did not find the small town support she had enjoyed before. She was not able to be involved at the same level she had previously. On top of that, being in a larger school district meant that teachers and administrators did not know her or her children.

Up here they weren't family-oriented. They were like, "You want this job, I got ten other people lined up for it." You do what you got to do or whatever. . . . I was able to go to a couple of things, like Meet the Teacher in junior high, eighth grade, maybe two or three things that year and that was about it. I was working all the time and so was her dad. I was excited because I love the area, but I was like, "I guess my kids are going to have to raise theirselves now. I mean, I'm there in the evenings. But, school don't me. Cuz at the other school, they all knew me. And here, I'm just some face that comes in sometimes. "I guess she's somebody's mom," you know.

Problems at Home Weren't Too Severe

Hannah had spent most of her childhood without a father. But as she grew older, she tracked him down and made contact with him. Through Hannah's effort, Jennifer rekindled her relationship with her daughter's father. The renewed relationship led to a move for the family.

She found her dad. So we started talking. I had my oldest two really young. Their dads were never involved. They kind of denied them. So she never met her dad. But I told her about him, and always good things because I used to be a really good mom. So I met him and we moved up here. He and I, I mean, we all moved in together. . . . I got back with him.

Jennifer felt that their home was a pretty stable place, but there was an incident that caused upset for the family. Hannah's brother fell in with the wrong crowd and was arrested for burglary.

When we got up here, he (brother) got in with a boy that he started hanging out with. He was an older kid. He ended up breaking and entering a house. He

thought he was going to see a girl. Well, the girl ended up not being there. This particular boy had already stole some stuff. So this day, because we didn't have all the stuff . . . Oklahoma my kids had everything. Whatever they wanted they had. And it wasn't like big fancy stuff cuz they were little; it was just, like, five dollar notebooks instead of dollar notebooks. Well, anyway, I turn them in because they brought the stuff to our house. And when I found out it was stolen or might be stolen, I called the boy's parent, his mom, then we called the cops because I said, "That's not what I'm raising." Well, she (Hannah) did have to deal with the fact that we were going to go to court. He was on probation. He was fifteen, she was fourteen. That was right after we moved here.

In addition to watching her brother go through dealings with the law, Hannah tried to help her sister who was dealing with emotional rejection from her father. Hannah had had a similar experience with her own father, so she supported her younger half-sister through the ordeal.

Her (little sister's) dad said he didn't want her because she wanted to live with me. . . . Hannah dealt with that. Her dad didn't want her until she was fourteen, you know. So she's trying to help her little sister. And my oldest son, his dad's not in the picture.

When Jennifer's rekindled relationship with Hannah's father didn't work out, it toook Jennifer a long time to get on her feet financially. Housing was a particular challenge. The family ended up in a hotel for nine months, most of Hannah's junior year.

We lived in a hotel for a little while. Actually about nine months we stayed in a hotel. . . this was recently. We actually just got into an apartment. We were

living in a hotel for awhile while they were in school, most of her junior year, we were in the hotel. They started school . . . when she started her junior year we were in the hotel. . . We had two rooms. But there was me and my brother-in-law and my fiancee and my two girls and my son. So there was six of us in two rooms. . . . After I left her dad I was working two jobs. So I was going all day. I would work at _____ and then I would work at _____ at night. And then they would have to take care of the house. We didn't have any food because we didn't qualify because I made too much money. . . and my son's working.

Communication With School Staff Was Good

In the elementary years, Jennifer felt her relationship with school staff was positive. She felt respected.

It was good. . . . Everybody respected each other.

When Hannah made it known that she wanted to drop out, however, Jennifer felt resentful toward the school counselor who she felt had perhaps made it too easy for her to choose the GED option.

At the end it really made me mad, and I told the counselor, it's stupid, I didn't want her, I didn't feel like she should have known she had the option to drop out. . . . But in the counselor's defense, because she said, "We've never had issues with Hannah." I guess she thought if she talked to Hannah and said, "You're an adult, here's what the options are," I guess she thought Hannah would make the right choice. But that's not what she was hearing.

Moves Were Minimal

Jennifer felt that, for the most part, she had provided a stable home environment for her children. She noted that they had lived in one house from the time Hannah was in kindergarten until grade seven.

> *[In elementary] they never changed schools. She went from kindergarten to seventh grade at one [small town] school.*

When the family did leave their small town to come to an urban area, at first they felt like it was a good move. But soon Hannah began to have trouble fitting in. She had been involved as a cheerleader at her small town school, but she was intimidated by the cliques and competition of the larger school community. She started to withdraw socially.

> *So we moved up here . . . it was nice. We like it. I had a job before I moved. We checked the schools out and stuff. Was excited at first. Got into the school. She liked it. But it was such a big school. Because, where we come from, she grew up there, small school, everybody knew everybody. And everybody loved Hannah. I mean, everybody loved all my kids. But up here, it's harder to fit in. And it's more clique-y. Down there it wasn't at all. She was going to try out for cheerleading, but then she saw how many girls and what they could do because she couldn't do the back flips and stuff like that, but she was just really good. So she decided not to even try out. So that's kind of where she started pulling back, not being as social. She didn't do any sports after we moved here. She talked about it, but she never actually did it.*

My Child Felt Inferior

When the family first moved to the city, Hannah tried to socialize. But soon she began to feel that she didn't fit in because of social differences. The other girls lived in big houses and wore fashionable clothes. She began to pull away.

> *When we first moved here she found these friends. They were kind of the uppity crowd, you know, their parents owned gigantic houses, prissy. But she started pulling away from them as they went. I don't know. I think because we lived in a trailer house on a chicken farm and they'd come over. And at first she was fine, because where we came from if you lived in a trailer it's fine, if you lived here, whatever. She started pulling away from them. . . . She didn't really dress like those girls.*

Hannah's social issues intensified as she became a victim of bullying. Her sophomore year she began to avoid going to school. Jennifer tried getting tough with her daughter, to force her out of hiding.

> *There was a couple of times her sophomore year where she didn't want to school and she locked her closet and I said, "Get your ass out of the closet! You're going to school, you're not missing school!" Finally she opened the door and she was crying and she said they were making fun of her. So I think that she just didn't want to deal with that anymore. . . She found herself, then reinventing herself, and having to deal with that. . . . She's not a social butterfly, poor little girl.*

She Started Skipping Before She Quit

Hannah had been an excellent student academically right up until her junior year. She had especially excelled in Spanish, and was enrolled in pre-AP Spanish that year. The first sign Jennifer noticed that Hannah might be having problems in school was a request to quit her Spanish class.

> *Half way through the year she switched from . . . she wanted to quit Spanish. Which was weird, cuz I was like, "What?" So she did the first semester. Then she joined yearbook [class].*

The next sign of Hannah's disengagement from school was a call from the school saying that she had several unexcused absences from classes. This came as a complete surprise to Jennifer.

> *After that, we got a call, she was checking the mail. She would hide the letters from us that said that you'd missed . . . But [my fiancee] had gotten a call saying Hannah had missed so many days and they were going to have to call DHS, or, I don't know, truancy officers. So we went up there and talked to the counselor. She was skipping two particular . . . fifth and sixth period . . . and I was like, "Well, that don't even make any sense." And it didn't dawn on me that those classes, maybe the school should have checked that out. That's what I'm thinking. Because if they knew and they'd seen this . . . she'd leave for two hours and then she'd come back and finish.*

In less than a semester's time, Hannah had gone from a high-achiever to discussing dropping out with her school counselor. Jennifer was disappointed that the counselor had given Hannah information about her right to drop out of school when she turned eighteen.

So she talked to the counselor and asked if she could drop out. She wanted to just quit. And she started saying, after we found out that she was skipping, that she wanted to quit and get her GED and I'm like, "No." I thought, in the state of Arkansas, legally, I was responsible until she was graduated or eighteen, but if she was still in school until she graduated I was responsible and I said, "I'm not letting you get your GED." . . . She just snapped. She refused. That one day we all went to talk to the counselor. She said, "I'm just gonna drop out when I'm eighteen." I don't know why the counselor told her when you're eighteen you can drop out.

I Have Theories

Jennifer was confused by Hannah's sudden loss of interest in school. She had always been such a good student. One possible explanation Jennifer came up with was a friendship Hannah had struck up with a young man from church. When the young man went to prison, Jennifer discovered that Hannah had continued the relationship. She theorized that perhaps Hannah wanted to get out of high school and start working so the young man could be released early or have a place to go when he was released.

I did find out that she has been talking to this kid she met in a church. But apparently before he started going to church had done some stuff and he's in prison. So she doesn't know that I know that she's still writing him. But I don't know how long she's been writing him. I don't know if that had something to do with it because apparently, like, if she had a place and could have things set up it would maybe look better for him to where he can get out early or something. This is my thought. I don't know.

Another theory Jennifer held was that Hannah may have been feeling a lot of pressure to be perfect. As a middle child, Hannah not only felt responsible to be a role model for her younger sister, but she felt she was being compared to her troubled older brother.

> *I really thinks it's the middle child thing. Because, I mean looking back . . . and she did make the comment that . . . when she was changing to un-Pentecostal ways, her religious stuff, she made the comment, "Mom, I have to be a certain way for _____. I got to set an example for her." And I'm like, "No, you . . . I mean, you need to but it's not like that, you can be you. You don't have to, you know whatever, don't be so angry. Everybody makes mistakes, whatever." . . . I think she felt like she was expected to be this other kid that went to college right after school, made perfect grades, did this, did this, because she was never the one that got in trouble. Hannah was like the favorite. The teachers would be like, in the old school, "Hannah's nothing like her brother," Teachers probably shouldn't say that, but . . . she just wanted to make sure she wasn't like her brother . . .*

The Move Affected Our Lifestyle

When Jennifer's family made the move from a small, rural town to an urban area, a variety of factors led to a change in their financial status. Also, the simple pleasures of small town life weren't available any longer. In the city, entertainment costs money.

> *We don't have near the money, near the, you know, since we've been [here] things have kind of gone down financially. And they're used to going and doing and, it wouldn't be a lot, but [there] we'd go to the lake, we'd go to the cemetery . . .*

Jennifer also found that she could not afford as nice a place as she had in the small town. Hannah had to share a bedroom, and it was very small. In their former town, the kids frequently had friends to visit. In their new circumstances, they weren't comfortable inviting friends over.

> *She had her own room in Oklahoma. She does not like sharing a room. And they're tiny. The bedroom's a little bit bigger than this [study room]. You could fit two beds in it and barely open the door. And she wants her friends. In* _____ *they always had company. Always, always, always.*

Stephanie and Shannon

My Child is Smart

Shannon was a bright child. She seemed to enjoy learning, her grades were above average, and she had a love for music. She enjoyed playing in the school band as she got older. But Shannon had one big problem that kept her from being successful in school during her early elementary years: she feared leaving her grandmother to go to class every morning. Morning after morning she cried and begged grandma not to leave her at school. Stephanie believes that her daughter suffered abandonment issues–since Mama left and didn't come back, couldn't Grandma disappear as well?

> *It wasn't that she didn't like school, it was the fact that she didn't want to be away from my mother. But once she made it through the day, she made good grades. We knew that she was smart. She just really didn't want to be there. . . . I mean, that was pretty much the whole thing for Shannon. I mean, she was capable, and she was smart.*

Stephanie's mom did the best she could to raise her three grandchildren together with her own youngest child, but she worked long hours, and more often than not the children were left to fend for themselves until six or seven every night. Grandpa was somewhere in the picture, but he had substance abuse issues as well, so taking care of the children was not a priority for him either.

Neglect and Abuse Occurred

Stephanie came to believe that this lack of supervision was a contributing factor toward Shannon's behavior problems as she got older. Shannon's grandmother worked long hours, and

since their grandfather had a drug problem and was also unavailable to them, the children were left to fend for themselves.

> *I think this is what happened with these particular kids. They got a pattern of being in charge of themselves. So basically they could do whatever they wanted as long as it wasn't far from home and it wasn't against the law. You know, but kids can get into all kinds of stuff when there's not an adult around. . . . She had that same attitude at school. I can do this if I want as long as I don't get caught. Or, they didn't say don't do this, they said don't do that . . . You know, she carried that attitude to school with her, and it wasn't so much when she was younger. Once they had several years of that taking care of themselves after school, that's when they started to get that attitude.*

When the children grew older, their father decided he would like to have them live with him. Since Stephanie was battling to stay clean and was not yet ready to take on parenting responsibilities, custody was given over to him. But soon the children began to come to her with complaints of their father's abuse. Stephanie called the Department of Human Services (DHS) to make reports frequently. Another problem Stephanie noted, once again, is that her children were being left at home with no adult supervision.

> *It was summer time. Dad was working. There was no girlfriend. So they pretty much had run of the summer. Just, totally unsupervised. And the two girls ended up getting arrested for being out around 12 o'clock at night and they were with two older boys and they were on private property and one of the boys had marijuana in his jean pocket. . . .*
>
> The girls' father engaged in emotional and physical abuse as well.

But she had a lot of trauma when they were there. He would lock them in their room for hours and hours at a time with no telephone. He would lock the door from the outside. . . . She told me about some times when he would pin her up against the wall by her throat.

My Child had Serious Behavioral Issues

As Shannon reached middle school age, her behavior issues became more prominent and led to more serious consequences for her. For instance, though she loved being in the school band, she showed disregard for her band director's authority and was ultimately removed from the band because of her behavior. Stephanie remembers the incident that led to Shannon's dismissal:

Shannon went to a band concert and her sister went to a different school in a different town and they had friends there, and she ended up at a band concert at that school and she went in her uniform and sat in the other band (laughter). Just, you know . . . So she got kicked off the band. . . She talked to 'em real nasty and when they tried to tell her that she was gonna have to leave she kind of took off on her own and we had to go find her.

In high school, Shannon's behavior problems continued. She developed a "tough girl" image, though Stephanie explained that it was a lot of talk; Shannon was not one to get in physical altercations.

She's a freshman, she's missing lots of classes. She's having lots of behavior problems. Like, the days that she did stay at school, she just misbehaved the whole time. She was getting constantly in ISS. She spent a lot of days in ISS for talking in class. Just absolute disregard for rules. Just, I'm Shannon, and I'm

bad, and I have to be here and that's why I'm here but I'm gonna do whatever I want when I'm here.

But as far as Stephanie was concerned, Shannon did not always have control of her own behavior. Rather, her emotional and mental health was the cause of many of the negative behaviors Shannon displayed.

Like, she would be okay when we would leave the house, and then by the time we would drive from the house to the school, she couldn't get out of the car. She didn't want to go there. . . . I think she was having more anxiety, and it was a little more severe, and she was in a much bigger school, a much bigger place with many more students. . . . And I can't tell you how many days she would just be at school for an hour and just couldn't take it no more and be in the principal's office and I would have to leave what I was doing and go and pick her up from school and try to figure out how I was going to get it excused.

Finally, Shannon was expelled from school for her outrageous behavior.

That wasn't . . . I don't remember . . . she was . . . I'm trying to remember. She was having really bad behavior. Throwing books . . . Threatening people. Violence. Just fits of violence. They weren't really anything, but she tends to make them think that it's something.

I Had Serious Problems

Stephanie was a troubled teenager. She had given birth to Shannon and two siblings before she was nineteen years of age. Stephanie was not ready for motherhood, and chose to leave her children in the care of their grandmother. Nurturing a drug habit had become her first priority. She disappeared from her children's lives while they were very young.

I stayed away for a very long time. Probably ten years.

As the children grew older, Stephanie was in and out of prison. When she was out, she had made a reappearance in her children's lives, which was far from a smooth transition.

I went to prison a couple of times and when I got out I actually went to live with my mother. And so the kids were there and we were starting to do things and trying to mend things but you know I never could stay clean. . . . Two or three months out of prison I would do really really good, and the parole officer wasn't on my back and I would just kinda fall back into that stuff. It's just hard.

One consequence of Stephanie's drug use was being forced into drug court by the legal system. Drug court basically allows its participants two choices: jail time or sobriety. Stephanie took the opportunity to get clean, but at no small cost. Drug court officers place heavy requirements on participants. Their time is not their own. They are required to go to meetings with their probation officer, 12-step groups, counseling sessions, and hold down a job all at once. Little if any time is left for family relationships. But now at least Stephanie was clean and sober, allowing her to begin to take more responsibility for the welfare of her children.

Family, Facilities, and Programs Were Involved

Because Stephanie had so many court-ordered requirements to attend to, she looked to her mother and boyfriend to help her with Shannon–driving her to school, picking her up when she had anxiety issues during the day, taking her home or to the doctor or counseling.

They were trying to fix me and my problems. [Shannon] was secondary. So you know, I had to get my mother involved, I had to get my son's father involved, there was many many days when he would go to the office to pick her up because she was having an episode, not wanting to stay . . .

But soon Shannon became more than the family could handle, and she was sent to live in another youth shelter. The shelter had trouble with Shannon. She threatened a staff member and, consequently, was sent back home. Over time, Shannon was referred to several programs, sometimes in lieu of jail time, sometimes just for her emotional acting out.

> *. . . during the four years that I've had her she's been gone probably two years of the four years to behavioral places, institutions. And she does the same thing, like me, every time she gets out, she's good for a little bit, she's an angel, she does the same thing, she gets back , she doesn't have that fear anymore, and she's right back to the same thing.*

I Advocated for My Daughter

Once Stephanie had made a commitment to staying clean and accept responsibility for her children, she tried to advocate for her daughter as best she could. When things didn't go well at one high school in town, she petitioned the district to let her switch to another school so she could get a fresh start. However, Shannon's behavior didn't change.

A somewhat successful intervention was an alternative school Shannon was referred to. They tried to work with Stephanie to keep Shannon at school day after day when she would ask to leave.

> *Yeah, well this was a much more, a much different environment with a fence around the building that they couldn't get out of and a much smaller group of kids. And many more staff. They were being watched constantly. There wasn't gonna be no walkin' off. . . And by this time I could see the pattern with Shannon and I said, "She's gonna come in here probably every other morning and she's gonna try to tell you that she's freakin' out. She's gonna try to tell you that she's*

sick. She's gonna try to tell you a bunch of stuff. And they would call me and they would say, "Shannon is saying that this is going on and we're just letting you know and she's wanting us to call you." And I would tell them, "She needs to stay at school." And they would keep her there. You know, she wanted them to call me so they would call me and they already knew what I was going to say. And it wasn't a big deal, they would just call me just to prove . . . and then they could turn to Shannon and say, "Your mom says that you need to stay at school." So then it wasn't on them anymore, it was on me. . . . And we played this game a lot.

After Shannon left the girls's shelter, she was sent back to court. The judge was ready to send her to Department of Youth Services, a juvenile discipline facility. Again, Stephanie stepped in to help her daughter get the best possible services. She began to research other options that might be available, including finding out what kinds of places the judge had sent kids to in the past. Stephanie began calling these places and found a psychiatric hospital that had a bed. After days of phone calls and negotiating with authorities, she was able to convince them to transfer her to the new facility. After that, Stephanie drove out of state many times to visit her daughter and show her emotional support which involved getting special permission from her own probation officer and taking her baby with her. Stephanie showed courage and compassion as she advocated for her daughter in these ways.

Each place she went to involved medical testing, phone calls, and other red tape.

My Daughter's Education Lacked Rigor

The alternative school staff was helpful in keeping Shannon in her classes for awhile, but it wasn't long before Shannon would move on to yet another facility. By now Stephanie had

noticed that the curriculum her daughter was being taught was "too light," as she put it. Although Shannon's behavior and emotional issues were at the forefront of her concerns, she couldn't help noticing that her intelligent daughter was not being academically challenged in the facilities and programs she had been referred to.

She reflects:

> *And the thing is, when they get to these alternative schools, and they get to these behavioral places, the level of teaching or the level of curriculum that they're getting is so minimum. It's so light, it's not . . . It's just basic basic basic. Just barely what you need to get by. Because really they're spending the least amount of time in school, and the most amount of time in therapy and discipline and all these things trying to fix these kids. . . And they're just getting the minimum amount of school to by law keep them okay and by grade-wise--just whatever they need to pass a grade.*

When Shannon came home from a behavioral facility after a ten-month stay, she was kicked out of high school within two weeks due to "violent fits" and threats. Stephanie decided there was no point in forcing the school issue any longer. Shannon had accumulated a negligible amount of credit and was seventeen years old. Stephanie decided to pursue the GED option for her daughter and contacted the local community college. Even in GED classes, Shannon's behavior drew her teachers' attention and was reported to her probation officer. However, she eventually completed her studies and passed the GED exams.