Dreams Deferred: A Qualitative Study of Latino Youth Who Left High School Prior to Obtaining a Diploma

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Dedication

To my wife Isa and our children Joey and Johanna for bringing me infinite joy, unconditional love, and unwavering support.

To my parents, Richard and Ann Barnet who made all of this possible, for their steadfast patience, guidance and support.

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Abstract of Dissertation

Dreams Deferred:
A Qualitative Study of Latino Youth Who Left High School Prior to Obtaining a Diploma

Each fall, approximately one million children enter the ninth grade with little prospect of completing high school. Of the 1.1 million students projected to leave school without a diploma for the 2012 school year, a staggering 27 percent (approximately 310,000) will be of Latino descent (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). The purpose of this study—"Dreams Deferred: A Qualitative Study of Latino Youth Who Left High School Prior to Obtaining a Diploma"—was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth as they attempted to make meaning of the factors that led to their leaving school before graduation. Utilizing phenomenological research methods, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with ten individuals who had the shared experience of leaving high school prematurely. The phenomenological in-depth interview research design was chosen because the occurrence of Latino students leaving school without a diploma cannot be examined without consideration of how the experience was defined and felt by the students. In addition, multiple factors must be considered including the subjective impact of the students' social, cultural and educational histories on their school experience. The individuals were participants in a community-based GED program and were selected through purposeful sampling based on pre-identified selection criteria. The study focused on the participants' perceptions of their school experience and the events and influences that precipitated their premature departure from school. Data

were collected through the in-depth interviews and detailed field notes of observations made during the interviews and program activities. Data analysis consisted of coding responses and clustering relevant statements into themes and patterns, which were then synthesized into descriptions of the participants' school experience and the factors associated with their leaving school prior to graduation. Data from the study revealed that the participants began to feel disengaged in middle school, and they perceived that their interaction with school personnel had a significant impact on their school experience. In addition, the participants cited multiple factors outside of school that diverted their focus from learning and ultimately contributed to their leaving school without a diploma. Recommendations for practice and additional research are included following a discussion of data.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore-
And then run
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over-
Like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?
—Langston Hughes

The goal of obtaining a high school diploma and then moving on to higher education or training for employment *is* a dream deferred for many youth throughout the United States. Each fall, approximately one million children enter the ninth grade with little prospect of completing high school. According to a 2009 report prepared by the Alliance for Excellent Education, an astonishing seven thousand students drop out every day. While these grim statistics may have garnered little attention fifty years ago, when a high school dropout could earn a living wage, the current economic landscape presents a significantly different reality for students who leave school prior to graduation. According to a recent report prepared by the Pew Research Center, Latinos are expected to account for 74 percent of the growth in the nation's labor force from 2010 to 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2012). The rapid growth in the Latino population is due both to birthrates and immigration. At the same time, the aging of the non-hispanic White

population is expected to reduce their numbers in the labor force. Latinos are a younger population than other U.S. ethnic groups and have a high rate of labor force participation. In the coming decades, education will be central to ensuring full participation in a 21st century economy.

Students who leave school before obtaining a diploma are faced with the prospect of high unemployment, decreased lifetime earnings, and an increased chance of incarceration (Sum, Khatiwada, Mclaughlin & Palma, 2009). The high school dropout rate has long been used as an indicator of educational and social outcomes for secondary level students. In addition to severely diminished opportunities for employment and post-secondary education, students who are unsuccessful in obtaining a high school diploma are far more likely than their graduating peers to be mired in poverty, incarcerated, on death row, unhealthy, and divorced. They are at high risk for single parenthood and their children are more likely to drop out of high school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, Jr. & Morison, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011).

Statistics show that secondary-level Latino youth are particularly vulnerable to leaving school without a diploma (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010; Pew Hispanic Center, 2004). Although there have been recent gains in the graduation rate of Latino students, the percentage of Latinos obtaining a high school diploma is still far short of the national average (Education Week, 2012). According to a report prepared by *Education Week* entitled "Diplomas Count 2012," the national graduation rate for 2009 was 73.4 percent, an increase of 1.7 percent compared to the previous school year. Consistent with the national trend, the Latino student graduation rate also improved from

57.6 percent in 2008 to 63 percent for the 2009 school year. Despite the increase, the Latino student graduation rate lagged well behind Asian students (80.5 percent) and White students (78.8 percent). Of the 1.1 million students projected to leave school without a diploma for the 2012 school year, a staggering 27 percent (approximately 310,000) will be of Latino descent (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). The economic landscape portends a bleak future for those that leave school early. According to a recent report prepared by the Pew Hispanic Center, more Latino children live in poverty (6.1 million in 2010) than children of any other racial or ethnic group. Two-thirds (4.1 million) of Latino children living in low-income households are the children of immigrant parents. Latino students, who leave school and enter the workforce without a diploma, are often relegated to low wage jobs, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Pew Research Center, 2011). The high rate of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation underscores the deficiencies of our educational system and highlights the importance of identifying factors associated with the Latino dropout rate as an important first step in developing effective programs and substantive intervention strategies.

Overview

The occurrence of Latino students leaving school prematurely is by no means a new phenomenon. Although there is a body of research on factors such as poverty, language, and disengagement underlying the Latino dropout rate (Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Orozco-Suarez, 2001; Hoyle & Collier, 2006), there have been few studies that have attempted to gain the perspective of the students themselves. As such, there is an

absence of research focusing on the perspective of Latino youth who have left school prior to graduation. In recognition of the multiple spheres of influence impacting behavior and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), the crisis of early school leaving was examined in the present study within the context of myriad factors influencing the experience of Latino youth who have left school prematurely. The purpose of this descriptive qualitative research study was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of secondary-level Latino students in order to understand the factors that contribute to the event of early school leaving. Utilizing a phenomenological approach to in-depth interviewing, the researcher gained a perspective from Latino youth who left school in an effort to develop understanding of their experiences.

The rate of Latino youth leaving school prior to graduation has reached epidemic proportions and underscores the need for developing substantive and thoughtful responses to address the issue. As part of that process, there is a need to develop understanding of the factors associated with Latino students leaving school without a diploma. While there is a body of research examining issues related to students leaving school prematurely, there is a need for research specific to Latino students who have experienced the phenomenon of early school leaving. Gaining the insight of youth regarding their experience of leaving school addresses a gap in the literature and may play a key role in the process of developing substantive policy and programmatic responses to address the problem.

Statement of the Problem

The dropout rate throughout the United States is at a crisis level. With over one million teenagers annually leaving school without a diploma, the dropout crisis is one of the most complicated and urgent problems confronting the nation (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Minority youth who are low-income and reside in single-parent households are disproportionately affected by the crisis. At present, approximately 18 percent of Latino students between the ages of 16 and 24 leave school without a high school diploma, a rate twice as high as African-American students and approximately three times as high as White students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). According to the U.S. Department of Education, Latino student enrollment will increase by 166 percent by the year 2050 (to 28 million from 11 million in 2006). The projected high enrollment of Latino students portends a bleak future if the challenges that currently confront educators in addressing the achievement gap of the Latino population are not successfully overcome. For Latino students identified as educationally disabled, the challenges are particularly daunting. According to a 2009 report prepared by the Alliance for Excellent Education, Latino students in need of special education services are twice as likely as White students to be removed from a general education setting and placed in a restrictive educational environment. Overall, 36 percent of Latino students classified as learning disabled spend the majority of their day in a separate setting compared with 20 percent of White students identified as learning disabled (Education Law Center, 2008).

During the past two decades, the dropout rate for most segments of the population has steadily decreased (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Between 1980

and 2009, the dropout rate for African-American and White students diminished by more than 50 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics 2011). Although the dropout rate for Latino students also declined during this period, the percentage of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation remains more than twice as high in comparison to their African-American counterparts and three times as high in comparison to White students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). While the high percentage of Latino students leaving school without a diploma illustrates the systemic failure of U.S. public schools, the lack of outrage suggests a populace that is unaware of the severity of the problem.

Contributing to that lack of awareness is a history of imprecise and confusing methods of calculating the dropout rate, which have implications for policy and programs to address the crisis (Swanson, 2006). The high stakes associated with assessing the extent of the dropout rate underscores the importance of accurately measuring the phenomenon. A review of the literature indicates little uniformity and significant variation in the calculation of dropout rates depending on how the concept of "dropout" is defined. Different school districts examine a variety of factors and review a multiplicity of variables in determining local dropout rates thus adding to definitional confusion (Swanson, 2006). The absence of consistent reporting methods contributes to the public being unaware of the gravity of the problem. As Eugene Hickock, former Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education observed in a 2005 interview with the authors of a Gates Foundation commissioned study on the dropout crisis (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006):

> Many schools in America can't tell us on any given day who's in school and who's not, nor in any given year how many students have successfully made it through their four years of schooling to graduate and how many have dropped out.

Since 2010, states have been struggling to implement federally imposed guidelines designed to force more uniform and accurate calculation of the graduation rate. Under the new federal mandate, states are now required to track individual students and capture the number of ninth graders who proceed to graduate with a standard diploma four years later. The newly mandated method of calculating the graduation rate is considered more accurate than previous methods but not surprisingly yields a graduation rate that is significantly lower—in some cases, 20 percent lower—in comparison to the results of the states' prior methods of graduation rate calculation (Zubrzychi, 2012).

Accurate measurement of the rate of Latino students leaving school without a diploma poses an even greater challenge given the characteristics of the population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). For example, there are significant differences in the dropout rate between U.S.-born Latino students and those who have emigrated from Latin America. A significant percentage of Latino students who leave school prior to graduation are recent arrivals to the United States and enter the country with low Spanish-language literacy skills and a history of academic struggles in their native countries. According to a 2009 report prepared by the Pew Hispanic Center, 32.9 percent of foreign-born Latino youth left high school prior to graduation compared to 9.9 percent of native-born Latino students who left school without a diploma. The authors cited foreign-born Latino youths

who leave school prematurely as the primary reason that the high school completion rate for all Latino youth is below the national average.

The decision to leave school is rarely a snap judgment; rather, students leave school prematurely due to multiple factors, typically after a long period of failure and disengagement. For Latino students, the factors associated with early school leaving are complex, involving individual, systemic, and cultural barriers that place them at risk for educational failure (Berends & Koretz, 1996; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990). A review of previous research studies on the student dropout rate reveals a strong emphasis on demographic issues such as gender, ethnicity, and family socioeconomic status as primary causal factors (Alvarado, 2011; Suh & Suh, 2007; Egemba & Crawford, 2003). While there is little debate that these factors should be considered when examining the dropout rate crisis, the suggestion that they are primary causes of early school leaving is an oversimplification and perhaps over-rationalization of a far more complex problem. There is developing understanding among educators, counselors, and other professionals working with Latino youth vulnerable to early school leaving that consideration must be given to multiple spheres of influence including family, community, culture, and environment. The high percentage of Latino students dropping out of high school has reached a critical stage and requires immediate response.

Although there is a body of research focusing on factors underlying the Latino student dropout rate (Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Orozco-Suarez, 2001; Hoyle & Collier, 2006), few studies have attempted to gain the perspective of the students themselves. Developing an understanding of the factors associated with early school leaving based on

the reported experiences of youth who have experienced the phenomenon addresses a gap in the literature. Moreover, the data obtained through the interviews will potentially help in the development of substantive policy and intervention strategies to meet the needs of vulnerable youth at risk of leaving school without a diploma.

Statement of Potential Significance

The absence of understanding from the viewpoint of the students underscores a gap in the research and points to the importance of highlighting the phenomenon from the student perspective. The purpose of this study was to develop understanding through phenomenological interviewing research methods regarding the factors underlying Latino students' decision to leave school prior to high school graduation. While studies have shown that there are dramatic differences in the dropout rate between Latino students born in the United States and those who have emigrated from Latin America (Fry, 2003), there has been limited research examining the experiences of the two groups in order to identify risk factors and possible intervention strategies to discourage early school leaving. Moreover, few programs have been developed based on the unique perspective and lived experience of Latino youth who have experienced the phenomenon of early school leaving. This is a population without advocates. Unlike other groups within school systems that have a legacy of advocacy and mobilization to affect change, there has been seemingly little attention accorded to the older, recently arrived Latino students. Gaining the perspective of U.S.-born and immigrant Latino youth who have left school without a diploma is an important step in the process to initiate change in policy and programs to

address the phenomenon of early school leaving. The goal of this study was to gain the perspective of Latino students who have experienced the phenomenon of early school leaving. Developing an understanding of the lived experiences of the youth who have left high school without a diploma may be central to developing appropriate intervention strategies. In addition, the researcher gathered information specific to this population so as to expand the literature base on the phenomenon of Latino youth leaving school prior to graduation.

Conceptual Framework

When examining the phenomenon of Latino students leaving school prematurely, consideration must be given to multiple factors that influence this occurrence, including the educational, cultural, and linguistic demands confronting the students. While research has shown that individual and family factors correlate strongly to factors underlying student's decision to leave school without a diploma, no study concluded that any one single factor was a reliable predictor of why youth leave school (Slavin & Calderon, 2001; Egemba & Crawford, 2003). Instead, research highlights an array of risk factors across several domains that reliably help to predict who will drop out and when (Cairns et al., 1989; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Ingles et al., 2002; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Understanding those risk factors is key to the process of developing a substantive response to address the crisis of early school leaving.

This inductive interpretive research was approached from the lens of Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model (1977, 1979) to explore the question of why

Latino students leave school prematurely without a diploma. This theoretical framework divides factors into five levels: macro-, exo-, meso-, micro-, and chrono-, which describe influences as intercultural, community, organizational, interpersonal, individual, and historical (respectively). Bronfenbrenner's perspective (1979) was founded on the person, the environment, and the continuous interaction of the two, which is constantly evolving and developing. The ecological model highlights the differences in individuals' knowledge, development, and competencies through the support, guidance, and structure of the society in which they live. According to Bronfenbrenner, the interaction between the overlapping ecosystems has a significant impact on an individual. Understanding the interactions of these systems is key to understanding how an individual develops and the factors that contribute to difficulties in school.

Bronfenbrenner developed the Ecological Systems Theory as a means to examine the myriad factors affecting the progress of children. He believed that development could only be understood within the context of the child's interactions with institutions and individuals. The ecological model stresses the relationship between individuals and the groups in which they participate. Bronfenbrenner wrote that a individual's development must be examined within the context of multiple factors including the child's family, school, and community. He believed that behavior and development must be examined within the framework of those spheres of influence in order to fully understand and elucidate behavior and development. The ecological model of human development stresses that individuals do not function in isolation but are instead affected by a multitude of contextual and historical conditions in which development occurs.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory provides insight into the factors that impact growth and development and how those factors are intertwined. Developing an understanding of those factors is a crucial step in the process of developing substantive policies and intervention strategies.

With that in mind, the researcher employed the ecological model as a framework to highlight the interaction between Latino youth and the entities, which impact their lives. As a researcher, I utilized this framework in seeking to understand the phenomenon of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation, to identify factors that influence the decision of early school leaving, and to recognize in greater detail the interaction between these factors. This approach provides a powerful method of distilling directly from the experiences of Latino youth in order to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of early school leaving.

The research was also undertaken within the context of critical theory (Giroux, 2001), which provides a context for understanding that delayed development and destructive behaviors are often related to negative interactions between the individual and institutions rather than personal failings. Finally, the research was undertaken through the lens of constructivism (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2009), which provides a framework for exploring the unique experience of individuals as they strive to make meaning of their world. Constructivism suggests that each individual's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other, thus providing an opportunity for multiple representations of reality. The framework was appropriate for the present study as the researcher employed phenomenological research methods in order to focus on the unique

perspective of individuals who had experienced leaving high school prior to graduation. The constructivist framework linked critical theory and the social ecological model in that each study participant reflected on the personal and institutional factors that led to the event of their premature departure from school.

Summary of Methodology

Qualitative research methods are effective for examining life experiences in an effort to understand and give meaning to those experiences. Creswell (2007) writes that qualitative research is valuable when there is a need to study a group or population in order to hear "silenced voices." He contends that a qualitative research approach is an effective means for developing a complex, detailed understanding of the issue under consideration. Developing a comprehensive understanding involves talking directly to people, going into their communities and listening to their stories unencumbered by expected findings or what has been previously cited in the literature. Creswell (2007) adds that empowering individuals to share their stories helps to "minimize the power relationship that often exists between a researcher and the participants."

Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that focuses on the lived experiences of humans and strives to make meaning of those experiences (Seidman, 2006). The focus of a phenomenological study is on the experience itself and how experiencing a phenomenon is transformed into consciousness (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology is concerned with depicting the essence or basic structure of experience. In contrast to a narrative study focusing on the life of a single individual,

phenomenological research describes the lived experience of a phenomenon for a group. Through in-depth interviews, a phenomenological study facilitates deep understanding of a phenomenon experienced by several individuals. According to Creswell (2007), the primary purpose of phenomenology is "to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence of the experience under study" (p. 58). At the heart of the interviewing research method is a profound interest in the lives of individuals who typically do not have the opportunity to tell their stories. As noted by Seidman (2006, p. 10), "Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior."

Phenomenological research methods are particularly effective in highlighting the experiences and perceptions of an individual from his or her own perspective, thus enabling the questioning and challenging of structural or normative assumptions. While there has been a significant amount of research conducted on public education in the United States, few studies actually incorporate the perspective of the students, teachers, parents, counselors, custodial staff, bus drivers, PTA committee members, etc., whose individual and collective experiences constitute schooling (Seidman, 2006). Phenomenology is important when examining "affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). As a mode of inquiry, interviewing is a powerful tool that facilitates deep understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

With the above cited authors' descriptions in mind, the underlying epistemology chosen for the present study was that of phenomenology. The phenomenon under investigation was the experience of Latino students who leave school prematurely

without a diploma with particular focus on the factors that contribute to early school leaving. A phenomenological research method was utilized in order to gain the perspective and "give voice" to Latino students as they make meaning of their experience of leaving school prematurely. The goal of this study was to gather data in order to provide "thick, rich" descriptions of the individual's perceptions regarding the experience of leaving high school prior to graduation.

The phenomenological in-depth interview research design was chosen because the occurrence of Latino students leaving school without a diploma cannot be examined in isolation. Rather, multiple factors must be considered, including the impact of the students' social, cultural, and educational histories on their school experience. Phenomenological research methods provide the latitude needed to examine variables that are not necessarily causally related but rather are inextricably linked by factors such as culture and shared experience. This study will incorporate multiple forms of data collection in an effort to create a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon under study.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth as they attempted to make meaning of the factors that led to their leaving high school prior to graduation. The data were collected from a sample of Latino youth who had left school and were participants in a community-based GED program. The study examined the following research questions:

1. How do Latino students perceive their experience of leaving high school without a diploma?
2. What do Latino students perceive as the influences that contributed to the event of early school leaving?
3. What do Latino students perceive as possible solutions to address the phenomenon of early school leaving?

This study focused on ten Latino youth who had the shared experience of leaving U.S. high schools prior to graduation. The researcher recruited the participants through purposeful sampling. To examine the phenomenon of Latino students leaving school without a diploma, it was critical that all of the participants had experienced the phenomenon. Thus, criterion sampling was employed to insure that the participants had experienced the phenomenon under investigation. In keeping with criterion-based sampling, the researcher identified a list of attributes that were essential to the study and selected the participants in accordance with those characteristics. Students who were enrolled in the GED program and met the eligibility criteria, as detailed in the methodology section of this proposal, were recruited for participation in the study by program staff and the researcher.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Participants were recruited from a community-based organization that provides a broad range of services to youth confronted with challenges such as gang involvement

and early school leaving. The main focus of the program is to address youth violence, gang activity, and early school leaving by providing viable alternatives for vulnerable youth. The program's services include mental health counseling, case management, and GED instruction.

The researcher worked in a volunteer capacity at the program providing academic support to students in the program's GED class. Volunteering in the GED class afforded the researcher the opportunity to provide support to the organization while developing trusting relationships with the participants. The program's site manager assisted the investigator in identifying participants who met the selection criteria for participation in a pilot study as a preliminary step to data collection. The researcher conducted a field test of the interview protocol with two participants and used the collected data for critical examination and modification of the protocol. Once the pilot phase was completed and modifications were made to the data collection instrument based on the results of the pilot study, the data collection stage commenced. For data collection, the ten Latino youth who met the selection criteria were recruited at the program with the assistance of the site manager, senior case manager, and lead GED instructor.

The primary mode of data collection was in-depth interview to gain the perspective of Latino youth who left high school prior to obtaining a diploma. The researcher employed the Three-Interview Series technique as described by Seidman (2006, p. 17) in which the first interview focused on the life history of the participant, the second interview examined the details of the experience, and the final interview encouraged the participant to "reflect on the meaning of their experience." Interview was

the optimal mode of inquiry for providing opportunity for individuals to make meaning of their lives. As noted by Seidman (2006, p. 14), interviewing "affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration." In addition, the researcher maintained a field journal to document notes, observations, reactions, and reflections the investigator made throughout the data collection phase. The field journal was an important tool for assisting the researcher to triangulate the data; moreover, the journal also helped the investigator be cognizant of assumptions and preconceptions in order to control for potential bias during the participant selection, data collection, and data analysis segments of the study.

Subjectivity of the Researcher

This research is of personal and professional interest to the investigator. As a teacher specialist in one of the country's top ten largest public school systems, the researcher has enjoyed the privilege of working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students for the past 18 years. In that time, the researcher has witnessed significant changes in the delivery of services to students as the system has grappled with developing strategies and programs to address the complex needs of English language learners (ELLs) and in particular, children who have recently arrived to the United States. Improved early intervention services have had a positive impact on helping CLD pre-school-aged children develop the skills needed for success in the kindergarten classroom. Research-based intervention strategies have helped elementary and middle school ESOL students develop reading skills.

However, I believe that the system has fallen woefully short in the provision of services for a significant number of secondary level ELLs, particularly those who have recently arrived to the country and are in the early stages of the English acquisition process. Throughout my time working with CLD students, I have witnessed an absence of a thoughtful and substantive response on the part of the school system to address the needs of those CLD students who are vulnerable to early school leaving. Recently arrived, secondary level students who have limited prospect of obtaining a high school diploma due to academic and linguistic barriers are particularly at risk for leaving school prior to graduation. Many arrive to the United States with limited educational experience in their native country, thus intensifying the task of acquiring the requisite credits for graduation before "aging out" of the system by their 21st birthday. This population has limited support. Unlike other groups within public school systems that have a legacy of advocacy and mobilization to affect change, there has been seemingly scant attention accorded to the older, recently arrived Latino students.

The marginalization of this population is heightened by the reality that a significant percentage of the students have limited resources and low prospects of obtaining opportunities for higher learning, which goes against the grain of the high achieving, college-bound culture of the school system. It has been my impression that there has been a callous attitude on the part of some decision makers within the system who maintain an "all or nothing" perspective viewing those who are not on a high school diploma track as insignificant and not worthy of consideration.

I am a product of my experience, and I make no pretense of the fact that I enter this research project with assumptions and biases based on those experiences. It is conceivable that the empathy that I feel towards the students who are the focus of this study can potentially bias how I interpret the data. It is also plausible that the sense of injustice that I feel towards a school system which marginalizes these youth could also influence how I analyze the information. I acknowledge that it will be important throughout the research process to record my thoughts, reactions, and assumptions to control for potential bias in my research findings. Rather than run from those assumptions, I celebrate my subjectivity as the driving force that contributes to my passion about the topic. As noted by Glesne and Peshkin (1992, p. 104), "My subjectivity is *the* basis for the story that I am able to tell. It is the strength on which I build. It makes me who I am as a person *and* a researcher, from the selection of topic clear through to the emphases I make in my writing."

Assumptions

A basic assumption of this study was that there were myriad factors involving multiple spheres of influence, which directly impacted the phenomenon of Latino youth leaving school prematurely. It was also assumed that the act of early school leaving is a process rather than an event, as it is believed by this researcher that youth rarely make a snap judgment to leave school. The phenomenon of early school leaving is typically the result of a long period of disengagement combined with failure on the part of schools to address the multidimensional and often complex needs of youth vulnerable to leaving

school prior to graduation. It is further assumed by this investigator that there is currently an absence of thoughtful and substantive policy and programs to address the issue of early school leaving of Latino youth.

An important assumption maintained by this researcher was that the participants of this study were not a homogeneous group. The participants were both male and female, U.S.-born and immigrant Latino youth from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, and it was assumed that significant cultural differences existed among the interviewees. It is further assumed that gender differences exerted specific pressures and responses. Beliefs, behaviors, and perspectives may have differed dramatically within the group of participants as well as from other Latino youth throughout the country. There may have been, however, commonalities discovered that could form the basis for intervention strategies.

The findings of this investigation were based on the perceptions and beliefs of the participants interviewed for the study. It is assumed that the participants responded to the interview questions openly and honestly. This assumption was based in part on the trusting relationships that the researcher hoped to have established by working as a volunteer at the site.

Limitations

The participants of the study were purposefully selected from a community-based organization located in Langley Park, Maryland serving Latino youth who have left high school prior to graduation. Given the relatively small sample size, the results of the study

cannot be broadly generalized to the larger population. The findings are preliminary and are intended to guide future research that focuses on the factors underlying the phenomenon of early school leaving of Latino youth.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to two groups of Latino youth: those born in Latin America and those of Latino descent born in the United States. The research addressed a gap in the literature regarding factors associated with early school leaving. Although research has been conducted focusing on factors underlying the Latino student dropout rate, there are only a few studies that have attempted to gain the perspective of the students themselves. Of those studies examined by the researcher, none have focused on the experiences of Latino youth of Central American descent who have immigrated to Maryland.

Definitions

Acculturation. An adaptation to the presence of two (or more) cultures in the environment. This is a process that is highly individualistic and influenced by multiple factors including exposure to the second culture, interpersonal relationships, personal adaptation patterns, duration, purpose, and other factors (Collier, 2009).

Bilingualism. The ability to speak two languages.

Community Member. For the purposes of this study, a community member is a member of a group that is organized around common values and is attributed with social cohesion within a shared geographical location (Parada, 2012).

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD). A term used to describe individuals who come from a culture or a home where a language other than English is spoken (Baca & Cervantes, 2004).

Culture. Culture represents the communication, socialization, interactions, values, and behaviors of a particular group or subgroup of people (Baca & Cervantes, 2004).

Dropout. An individual who leaves high school prior to graduation. For the purpose of this study, the term "Status Dropout Rate" will be utilized as defined by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to describe the phenomenon of early school leaving. (Please see the "Dropout Rate Defined" section for additional information regarding student dropout rates on page 38 of this study).

Early school leaving. For the purposes of this study, the term refers to students between the ages of 16 and 21 who leave high school prior to graduation.

English language learner (ELL). Refers to students whose first language is not English, and encompasses both students who are just beginning to learn English (often referred to in federal legislation as "limited English proficient or LEP") and those who have already developed considerable proficiency but are in the midst of the English acquisition process (The George Washington University Center for Excellence and Equity in Education, 2012).

English for speakers of other Languages (ESOL). Instruction for ELLs to assist them in learning sufficient English to help them function linguistically and culturally in Montgomery County Public Schools and in the mainstream of American society (www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org).

Graduation. The award or acceptance of an academic degree or diploma.

Latino. Individuals originating from Latin America or the U.S.-born offspring of individuals of Latino descent. While the descriptor "Hispanic" has been used to represent the Hispanic cultural community (Clemente & Collison, 2000), many regard the term as inadequate as it neglects to address the unique identities (i.e., language, social, political, historical and personal) of individuals from Mexico, Central, and South America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Immigrants from these separate geographical areas often identify more strongly with their nationality rather than their language (Dotson-Blake, Foster & Gessard, 2009). For the purpose of this study, Latino refers to male or female individuals who were either born in Latin America or are the offspring of parents of Latino descent.

Participant/interviewee. These terms refer to the participants selected to participate in this study (Seidman, 2006).

Regular high school diploma. Refers to a state-administered official document given to students who successfully complete the required secondary school program.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Our nation's public schools have become increasingly diverse with respect to their students' racial, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. With a total of almost forty million foreign-born residents in the United States, immigration is rapidly transforming all aspects of society (Passel & Cohn, 2012; Hirschman, 2006). The transformation is particularly evident in the public school system, where school personnel have struggled to meet the multidimensional needs of immigrant children entering schools.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (Passel & Cohn, 2008), the Latino population, which is already the largest minority group in the United States, will more than double its share of the population to 29 percent by 2050. At present, Latino students are the fastest growing ethnic group entering public schools in the United States. Between 1990 and 2009, the percentage of public school students who were Latino doubled from 11 to 22 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). While the dropout rate for Latino students aged 16-24 decreased from 32.4 percent to 17.6 percent during that period, the percentage of Latino students leaving school without a diploma in 2009 remained twice as high in comparison to their African-American counterparts and three times as high as White students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). The elevated rate of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation is an indictment of our education system and society as a whole. The phenomenon underscores the importance of

identifying factors associated with Latino students leaving school prematurely as an important first step in developing effective programs and substantive intervention strategies.

Purpose of the Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of Latino youth as they attempted to make meaning of the factors that contributed to their leaving school prior to graduation. This qualitative, exploratory study was based within the framework of the social ecological model, which emphasizes that behavior and development are impacted by multiple spheres of influence. In addition, this study will be situated within the framework of critical theory, which is a set of theoretical principles that provide a way to explore issues related to power, status, culture, language, and diversity (Meriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Smitherman, 2006). These analytic tools—a social ecological framework in concert with critical theory—can, I believe, afford the researcher a means to gain a deep understanding of the dropout phenomenon, and perhaps guide efforts at remediation of the crisis.

This chapter begins with a review of the theoretical framework for the study providing an overview of the social ecological model, critical theory, and constructivism, which serve as the conceptual basis for the research. A description of the current research literature in relevant fields will then be examined, with a focus on identified factors impacting the experience of Latino students who left school prior to graduation.

While the bulk of existing literature focuses heavily on factors associated with early school leaving among the general student population, there is a growing need for research on risk factors that are specific to the Latino student population. As such, this literature review was an examination of the current state of research regarding the phenomenon of Latino students leaving school without a diploma in order to identify gaps in the literature where further research is indicated. The present literature review was conducted within the established conceptual framework, which stresses that individuals do not function in isolation but are instead impacted by myriad contextual conditions in which development occurs. Relevant studies were reviewed and the findings discussed. The conclusions extrapolated from the literature review lead to the fundamental questions addressed in this study.

This review of the literature was guided by the following research question:

1) How do socio-economic, cultural and school factors influence the phenomenon of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation?

The following diagram of Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model demonstrates the topics addressed in this review and how the literature interrelates as perceived by the researcher.

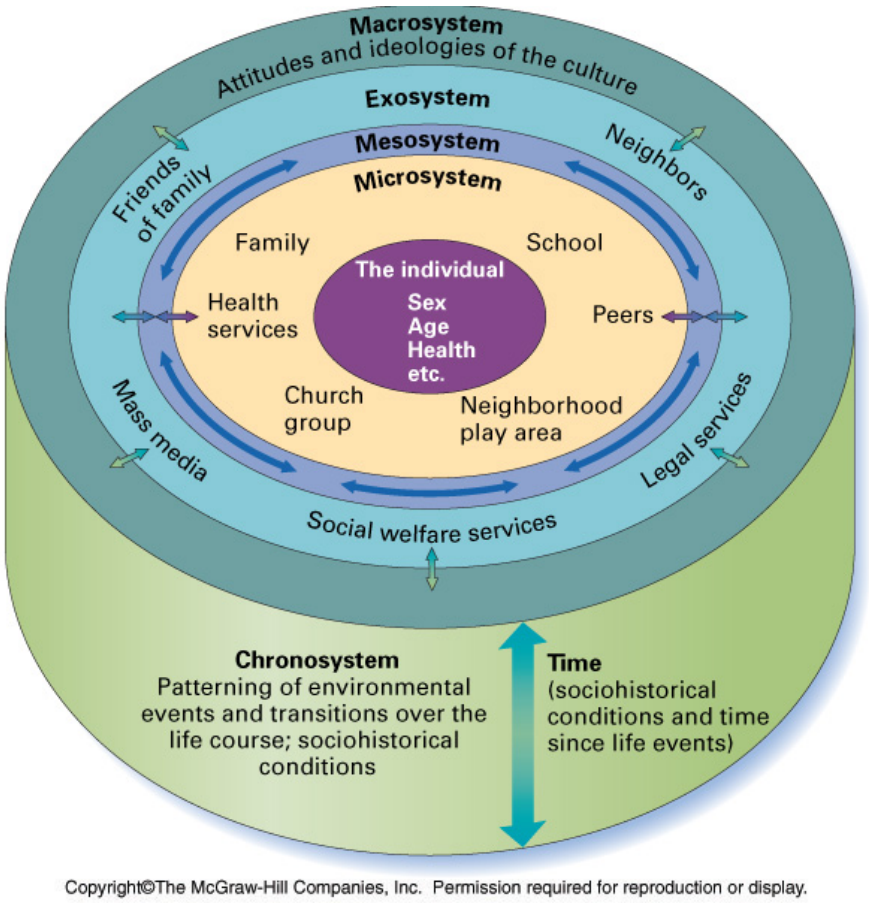

Figure 1: Social Ecological Model

Research Databases

This review of the literature was based on research conducted using the following databases: ProQuest, Academic Search Premier, Career and Technical Education, ERIC (Education) ERIC.GOV, JSTOR, Proquest Research Library Plus, and Project Muse. Article, journal, and database searches were conducted using the following terms: *high school dropouts-factors*, *Latino student dropout, factors associated with Latino student dropout, Latino graduation rates, risk factors associated with Latino student dropout,*

Hispanic dropout rate, and *reasons underlying the Hispanic dropout rate.* In addition to the above cited methods, searches were conducted via Google Scholar and databases maintained by the What Works Clearinghouse of the U.S. Department of Education, the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, and the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University.

Theoretical Framework

Social Ecological Theory

This literature review was approached from the conceptual framework of the social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) in combination with critical theory (Giroux, 2001) and constructivism (Crotty, 1998; Merriam, 2002) to explore the factors behind the high rate of Latino students leaving school without a diploma. The social ecological model provides an overall societal framework for understanding the impact of external factors such as culture, community, and institutions on individual behavior and development. Critical theory provides a context for understanding that delayed development and destructive behaviors are often related to negative interactions between the individual and institutions rather than being attributed to personal failings. Constructivism links the social ecological model and critical theory in that the individual constructs meaning based on his or her lived experience of the factors that led to leaving high school without a diploma.

The social ecological framework divides factors into five levels: macro-, exo-, meso-, micro-, and chrono-, which describe influences as intercultural, community,

organizational, interpersonal, and individual (respectively). Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) was based on the interaction between the individual and the environment. Bronfenbrenner considered the individual, organization, community, and culture to be nested factors, with each level operating fully within the next larger sphere. The social ecological model advances the idea that human development takes place through processes of complex reciprocal interactions between an active, evolving bio-psychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). The ecological model stresses the relationship between individuals and the groups in which they participate. Bronfenbrenner posited that multiple factors impact the development of the individual, including the characteristics of the student, the student's family, the school where the student attends, the culture and language of the individual, and the community in which the student lives. He maintained that the child must be considered within those spheres of influence in order to fully understand and explain the development and behaviors of the individual. In keeping with the ecological model of human development, individuals do not function in isolation but are instead affected by myriad contextual conditions in which development occurs. Developing an understanding of the realities confronting students can be achieved by recognizing the systemic barriers and bridges to hope impacting their lives on a daily basis. These include cultural and institutional factors, which influence the behavior of the students.

Velez and Saenz (2001), in examining dropout activity of Latino students, used the ecological model as a framework to explore the phenomenon. They maintained that

the ecological model is the most advantageous approach in making the connection between individuals, the groups in which they participate, and the environments in which they live. The results of the study indicated that the factors underlying the Latino dropout phenomenon are extensive. These factors include family, school, and community, which do not operate in a vacuum because the "effect of one variable depends upon the value of another" (Velez & Saenz, 2001, p. 445).

Perreira and Smith (2007) also utilized Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to study cultural factors impacting Latino youth in an effort to understand the experiences that form their social identities. The researchers noted that the characteristics of children and families interact to form the ecology within which development takes place. They cited immigration and social identification as additional key contextual factors that must be considered when examining the development of vulnerable Latino youth.

Critical Theory

This literature review was also conducted within the framework of critical theory, a set of theoretical principles providing a means to examine issues of power, race, culture, language, and diversity. These principles are particularly germane to the issue of Latino students leaving school without a diploma as they address students' psychological and physical availability for learning, school climate, and power dynamics within the classroom (Freire, 1972; Smitherman, 2006). Bohman (2008) advanced the idea that critical theory is not solely descriptive but can also be thought of as "normative" in that the theory can lead to change in policy and codes of behavior. Kincheloe and McLaren

(2008) concluded that critical theory can be "understood best in the context of empowerment of individuals…connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or public sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor…critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world" (p. 406).

Resistance theory (Giroux, 2001) is an area of critical theory that relates specifically to the challenges confronting marginalized students in schools. The theory provides a framework for understanding the complex and interrelated ways in which students are marginalized and experience educational failure and disengagement from the mainstream community (Giroux, 2001). The concept of resistance rejects traditional notions of school failure that attribute negative school outcomes to character flaws and low academic achievement. Rather, student failure should be examined within the context of dominant and subordinate cultures that shape the school environment. Giroux (2001) noted that resistance theory redefines the causes and meaning of oppositional behavior by arguing that it has little to do with deviance, individual pathology, and learned helplessness but rather oppositional behavior and school failure is attributed to "political and moral indignation" with the school culture and structure.

Resistance theory is steeped in a critique of the dominant culture and an interest in social emancipation. As the theory applies to students who have experienced school failure, those who resist are engaged in a process of freeing themselves from the dominant culture and are involved in a path of emancipation within schools. Resistance as social critique can be considered theoretically as a social good whether or not it results

in a positive outcome for the student leaving a flawed educational system from which he or she is not benefitting. In fact, students who resist are often further penalized. These young people, because of their developmental stage, struggle to articulate their concerns, especially to adults. Educators and policy makers should address how the moral energy of resistance can be better directed to the student's benefit. What changes in programs and policy would satisfy the students' quest for justice? Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model may be useful in giving educators and policy makers insight and guidance on this issue. The characteristics of the developmental stage during which youth are prone to give up and drop out; that is, adolescence and young adulthood, must be taken into account as questions of "resistance" are addressed.

Mehan (1997) explicates this concept. He examined the dropout phenomenon in social rather than personal terms, arguing that to define dropouts in terms of character flaws, personal pathology, or individual failings is aligned with a deficit model, which assigns blame for underachievement to the students and their families. He believed that terming youth as "at risk" reinforces the notion that social, economic, and cultural conditions impacting academic achievement are personal characteristics. Mehan (1997) argued strongly against the notion that dropping out can be attributed to a student's personal choice, emphasizing that schools facilitate the decision to drop out through institutional practices that promote isolation and disengagement. He cited the placement of students in classes by ability groups resulting in the isolation of minority students as an example of an institutional practice that engenders disengagement from the school community.

Critical theory can be an effective framework for examination of the issue of early school leaving, as the underlying principles of the theory are based on analysis of race, culture, language, and class (Baca & Cervantes, 2004), which are all factors associated with Latino students leaving school prior to graduation. Critical theory has been defined as an attempt to understand the oppressive aspects of society in order to promote societal and individual transformation (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Critical theory was also well suited to the qualitative methodology of this study as it facilitates deep understanding of the way in which issues of race, class, culture, and environment impact the students' perceptions and experiences.

So-called LatCrit theory evolved from the literature on critical theory and is concerned with Latino pan-ethnicity while addressing issues associated with language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, and sexuality (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). LatCrit theory suggests that the use of "micro-aggressions" is pervasive in society. These aggressions are covert (or sometimes overt) actions directed at people of color such as promoting and perpetuating stereotyped beliefs that reinforce social isolation of ethnic groups.

In his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Paulo Freire (1972) emphasized the importance of individuals who are oppressed being active participants in their own transformation and liberation. He defined the pedagogy of the oppressed as having two distinct stages, "humanist" and "libertarian." He noted that in the first stage:

> [T]he oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of

> oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation (p. 39).

The culture of domination is confronted through changes in the way that the oppressed view their world of oppression. He added, "The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption" (p. 39). Friere wrote extensively about *conscientizacao,* a Portuguese term that speaks to the way that people, through education, become cognizant of the social, economic, and political contradictions of the world and to address those elements with either passive acceptance or active resistance (Friere, 1972). For Latino students who have left school or for those that are vulnerable to early school leaving, development of *conscientizacao* combined with opportunities for sharing their experiences could play a crucial role in dropout prevention efforts.

In accordance with the constructionist perspective, meaning is developed based on the interaction between the individual and his/her world. The world is not a fixed, solitary phenomenon; instead, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are constantly changing and evolve over time (Merriam, 2009). Considering the perspective of those who have actually experienced the phenomenon of early school leaving could be a critical step in developing appropriate policies and programs to address the dropout crisis.

Hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of listening to the voices of students, particularly those who have been invisible and marginalized within schools. Students must be valued and their stories "heard" in order for them to feel empowered and

engaged in the process of transforming schools. She underscored the importance of not only teaching students but also learning from them as part of a process to initiate positive change. Seidman (2006) noted that while there has been a great deal of research conducted on schooling in the United States, very little is based on the perspective of the students themselves.

The decision to leave school without a diploma is a complex affair. It is a process and not an event because students rarely make a snap decision to leave school. Latino students face individual, systemic, and cultural barriers during the school year that places them at risk for educational failure (Egemba & Crawford, 2003). Past research studies on the Latino student dropout rate have tended to focus on demographic factors such as sex, ethnicity, and family socioeconomic status (Davis, 1990; Fernandez & Velez, 1989; Valverde, 1987). For instance, prior research has shown that poverty tends to be highly correlated with lower student achievement. A student's socio-economic status is one factor that tends to impact a variety of educational outcomes. For example, researchers analyzing data from a national survey found that 82 percent of all students who left school between the eighth and tenth grades were from families with low socio-economic status (Jordan et al., 1994; Alexander et al. 2001).

However, to adequately understand why such a high rate of Latino students leave school prematurely, consideration must be given to myriad factors that influence the decision including the educational, cultural, and linguistic demands confronting the students. While individual and family factors were determined to correlate heavily to factors underlying student's decision to leave school prematurely, no study concluded

that any one single factor was a reliable predictor of why youth leave school prior to graduation. Instead, research points to multiple risk factors across several domains that reliably help to predict who will drop out and when (Cairns et al., 1989; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002; Ingles et al., 2002; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

Dropout Rate Defined

There have been numerous attempts to identify the most effective approach to calculating the dropout rate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). The calculation of dropout rates can vary dramatically depending on how the concept of "dropout" is defined. When the definition of dropout and the manner in which it is calculated is not consistent, comparisons are difficult to make and interpretation of the data may be faulty (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio & Thompson, 2004). Several studies have demonstrated the variety of definitions used to define the dropout rate (Hammack, 1986; Thurlow, Johnson & Sinclair, 2002). As noted by Lehr (2004), several factors contribute to the definitional confusion, including:

- Variation in grade levels or age of students who can be classified as dropouts. For example, some figures include only 10th through 12th grades, whereas others include data from 9th through 12th grades.
- Variation in the length of time that a student is required to miss school before they are considered a dropout (ranges from 15 to 45 days of unexcused absence).
- Variation in the length of the accounting period during which dropout is calculated.
- Exclusion of some groups of students from the calculation of dropout rates (e.g., those who receive special education services).
- Variation in defining which programs count toward enrollment. Some

> calculations include students enrolled in GED programs, night school, or other alternative programs, and some only include those enrolled in traditional day schools.

Moreover, clerical errors and inconsistencies in accounting procedures for students as they transfer in and out of programs add to the confusion in obtaining accurate data regarding the dropout rate. Additionally, the absence of effective communication and tracking procedures between public and private schools as well as within school districts and across districts, leads to misidentification and faulty calculations (Sinclair, Christenson, Thurlow & Evelo, 1994).

The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) uses three kinds of dropout rate statistics to examine the phenomenon. These are (a) event, annual, or incidence rate; (b) status or prevalence rate; and (c) cohort or longitudinal rate. Each has a different definition and produces a different rate and varied picture of the magnitude of the problem as shown in the following table:

Table 1: Dropout Rate Definitions

Type of Dropout Statistic	Definition	Example	Relative Value
Event Rate (may also be referred to as the annual rate or incidence rate)	Measures the proportion of students who drop out in a single year without completing high school.	Five out of every 100 young adults (ages 15-24 in grades 10-12) enrolled in high school in October 1999 left school before October 2000 without successfully completing a high school program (NCES, 2002).	Typically yields the smallest rate.
Status Rate (may also be referred to as the prevalence rate)	Measures the proportion of students who have not completed high school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out.	In October 2000, 3.8 million young adults were not enrolled in a high school program and had not completed high school. These youth accounted for 10.9% of youth ages 16-24 in the U.S. in 2000 (NCES, 2002).	Yields a rate that typically falls between event and cohort rates.
Cohort Rate (may also be referred to as the longitudinal rate)	Measures what happens to a single group (or cohort) of students over a period of time.	The district percentage of ninth graders in Minneapolis who were reported as dropouts four years later was 35.2% (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, 2000).	Typically yields the largest rate of dropout.

Numerous states are currently revising their definitions and modes of calculating dropout, which contributes to the difficulty in comparing rates across jurisdictions and time frames (Lehr et al., 2004). To complicate matters, dropout rates do not directly translate to an accurate graduation rate. Multiple methods and definitions can result in what appears to be conflicting pieces of information. For example, it is possible to simultaneously demonstrate a low rate of dropout based on event or status calculations while showing a low rate of graduation as well. The confusing statistical presentation underscores the importance of carefully examining and explaining the formula and parameters (e.g., age, grade, accountability period) used to determine the rate (Lehr, et al., 2004).

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), enacted in 2002, requires that public elementary and secondary school systems be held accountable for achieving high levels of educational proficiency for all students. Under NCLB, the evaluation of high schools is based in large part on the percentage of students graduating with a regular diploma. The NCLB statute sets rigorous federal standards for meeting the graduation rate criteria but allows states considerable latitude as to how dropout and graduation rates are defined and measured (Swanson, 2006). On the surface, NCLB's definitions and requirements appear adequate to ensure accurate, comparable calculations. The law defines graduation rates as "the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years." Unfortunately, a dearth of clarity, enforcement, capacity, and initiative has led to the current use of dramatically varied federally approved calculations that render rates incomparable across states and which often overestimate the number of students who graduate on time with a regular diploma. Consequently, the graduation rates that are publicly reported and used for accountability purposes do not accurately reflect actual student outcomes.

Measuring the Latino Dropout Rate

Accurate measurement of the rate of Latino students leaving high school without a diploma poses an even greater challenge given the characteristics of the population (Fry, 2003). It should be noted that a small percentage of Latino youth enters the country and never engages with the U.S. educational system at all (Fry, 2010). Dropout estimates in the literature vary. Moreover, there are dramatic differences in the rate of early school

leaving between U.S.-born Latino students and those that have emigrated from Latin America. While the estimated dropout rate for U.S.-born Latino 16-to-19-year-olds was approximately 6 percent in 2009, the dropout rate for U.S.-educated immigrant youth was significantly higher at 20 percent (Pew Hispanic Center Fact Sheet, 2009). In 2008, approximately one-third of Latino 20-to-29-year-olds had left high school prior to obtaining a diploma. However, it should be noted that a percentage were immigrants who arrived to the United States during adulthood, having never enrolled in U.S. schools. Among native-born Latino 20-to-29-year-olds (who were educated in U.S. schools), 20% left high school prior to graduation (Fry, 2010).

According to a 2005 report of the Pew Hispanic Center, a significant percentage of the immigrant youth who have dropped out of U.S. schools are recent arrivals to the United States and were struggling academically in their native countries. Many seek employment and never enroll in school, while others strive to work while attending school. The influx of Latino teenage adolescent immigrants who left school prior to coming to the United States has dramatically increased the ranks of the total number of Hispanic students counted as dropouts in the United States by approximately 15 percent (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). The accurate reporting of the rate of Latino students who leave school before graduation is clouded by the reality that many of these students have never entered a school in the United States.

Factors Underlying Latino Student Dropout

During the past two decades, graduation rates for most segments of the population in the United States have steadily increased. Between 1980 and 2009, the dropout rate for African American and White students diminished by more than 50 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). While the dropout rate for Latino students also declined during this period, the percentage of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation remains twice as high in comparison to their African-American counterparts and three times as high as White students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010).

Why has the dropout rate among Latino students remained so high? Research suggests that there is no simple response to this question (Dynarsky et al., 2008). Multiple factors impacting Latino students reflect the complexity of the population. The Latino student populace is by no means homogeneous. The experiences of Mexican-American students residing in Texas differ dramatically from those students of Puerto Rican heritage residing in New York City. The school experiences of Latino children living in Miami whose parents arrived from Cuba in the 1960s are significantly different from the experiences of children who have recently arrived from Guatemala and now reside on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Despite the heterogeneity of the Latino student population, research suggests that there are common factors impacting Latino students who leave school prematurely (Valdiviesco & Nicolau, 1994; Glennie & Stearns, 2002).

The reasons are multi-layered and often complex**.** Research has shown that the decision to dropout is the result of a long-term process involving academic failure and

disengagement occurring over a substantial period of time that typically commences in elementary school (Barton, 2005). While several studies have attempted to identify a primary risk factor for early school leaving (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002, Balfanz & Herzog, 2006), there is an absence of evidence that demonstrates a singular factor that stands out as a primary cause leading to the decision to leave school. Instead, a number of studies have concluded that dropping out of school stems from multiple factors, including individual, family, school, and community (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Rumberger, 2001). Gleason and Dynarski (2002) examined the impact of multiple risk factors on students' decision to leave school prior to graduation. They identified 40 factors associated with dropping out, including: low socio-economic status of the family, high absenteeism, low academic achievement, teen pregnancy, having a sibling that dropped out, and the impact of living in a single parent household. The researchers found that the likelihood of a student dropping out increases as the risk factors accumulate.

Reardon & Galindo (2006), Jensen (2008), and Collier (1987) highlighted an array of characteristics impacting the academic success of ELLs, including: the language used in the home, single versus dual-parent household, social and economic characteristics of the family, parents' educational level, and background and the student's level of acculturative stress. Another study (Garcia, Jensen & Scribner, 2009) found that the achievement gap of ELLs is attributed to a whole host of interrelated out-of-school factors, including socioeconomic status, parental education, and mathematics achievement. The researchers noted that in 2007, Spanish-speaking kindergartners on average fared an entire standard deviation below their peers in terms of socioeconomic

status and maternal educational attainment. Cappy et al. (2005) emphasized that ELLs were more likely to have parents with limited formal education relative to their English-proficient peers. Hernandez, Denton, and Mccartney (2008) explained that as the number of risk factors confronting the ELL student increases, so does the probability that the student will experience academic difficulties and leave school without a diploma. Thus, rather than highlighting one or two student background factors impacting academic performance, research suggests that many interrelated out-of-school factors account for the ELL achievement gap (Garcia, Jensen & Scribner, 2009).

Poverty

Poverty is one factor that is linked directly to the Latino student dropout rate. According to a recently released report by the Pew Hispanic Center (2011), the poverty rate for Latinos living in the United States was the highest of all ethnic groups in the country. In 2010, the poverty rate for Latinos living in the United States was a staggering 28.2 percent as compared with African-Americans (25.4 percent) and Whites (11.1 percent). The Latino student dropout rate correlates strongly with parents' socioeconomic status (Slavin & Calderon, 2001). Dropout rates for low-income Latino students are almost twice as high relative to the dropout rates of low-income students from other ethnic groups. In fact, poor students are three times more likely to drop out of high school in comparison to students from upper income homes (Garcia, 2001).

Chapa & Valencia (1993), Rumberger (1995), and Padilla (1997) also explored the relationship between low socioeconomic status and dropout rates, concluding that

Latino students from low-income families are far more likely to leave school prior to graduation in comparison to their more economically advantaged peers. A significant percentage of Latinos live in high-poverty neighborhoods and attend schools with a high concentration of other low-income students. As one might expect, many of the schools serving students from low-income households tend to be poorly maintained, underfunded, and staffed with minimally prepared personnel—factors which often times contribute to low academic achievement and student disengagement (Garcia, 2001).

For Latino children who have recently immigrated to the United States, the challenges associated with poverty are accentuated as immigrant children often suffer the impact of downward mobility during the transitional stage of settling in the U.S (Capps, 2001). Of the 6.1 million Latino children living in poverty, more than two-thirds (4.1 million) are the children of immigrant parents (Lopez & Velasco, 2011). The remaining two million are the offspring of parents of Latino heritage born in the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). These low-income students often struggle academically in comparison to their more economically advantaged peers. Arum (2000) noted that the attending conditions of poverty, including substandard housing, an absence of medical care, and lack of financial resources, contribute to low academic achievement. He attributed the "cloud" of poverty that hangs over the head of low-income Latino students as a significant barrier that serves to distract students from focusing on academic activities. Children living in poverty are more likely to become teenage parents, leave school early, and earn low incomes, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Students who are confronted with poverty and the

attending hardships such as unsafe and unstable home environments often find it impossible to be available for learning, which ultimately contributes to failure and early school leaving (Mazur & Givens, 2004).

Immigration

Recent immigration is an additional factor impacting the rate of Latino students leaving school without a diploma. Latino children born outside of the United States are far more likely to not complete school in comparison to their U.S.-born Latino peers (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). In Egemba & Crawford's (2003) longitudinal study of factors underlying the Latino student dropout rate, the researchers found that the overwhelming majority of Latino students who dropped out of a large urban high school were foreign born. The researchers concluded that low socioeconomic status combined with foreign-born status is strong predictor of Latino students leaving school prior to obtaining a diploma.

For Latino students who have recently arrived to the United States, the challenges associated with engaging the U.S. educational system can often be heightened by differences in the educational structures and processes of schools in the U.S. compared to those in the country of origin. For many recent immigrant students, the transition from schooling in their home country to schooling in the U.S may be negatively impacted by interrupted or substandard education, different teaching styles, cultural differences, trauma experienced in the home country or during their travels to the U.S., and limited time to fulfill graduation requirements before reaching the maximum age of attendance

(Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Structural barriers impeding educational progress, such as tracking Latino students into low-level classes, exclusion of Latino culture, and elimination of bilingual curriculum contributes to disengagement and can result in the process of "subtractive schooling," thus diminishing the worth of schooling over time (Nesman, 2007). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) contend that securing legal immigration status helps to alleviate a significant portion of the stress experienced by immigrant children entering school. Conversely, undocumented students often feel distrustful of school personnel and experience fear as an element of their school experience. The researchers found that many immigrant students live in constant fear when at school, which ultimately contributes to the decision to leave without a diploma.

Undocumented Latino students who aspire to post-secondary educational opportunities and ultimately professional careers may come to realize that they are foreclosed from pursuing such opportunities due to their lack of documentation that precludes them from pursuing higher education. When they realize that college is not an option, they may experience feelings of anger, depression, and hopelessness. Those feelings may result in a decision to drop out of school as remaining a student offers little in the way of tangible reward (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

In 2001, The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM Act) was introduced in the Senate. Under the bill, undocumented minors who meet certain criteria would be granted conditional permanent residency and thus have the opportunity to qualify for in-state tuition for college. The Act has been met with fervent opposition by some who argue that the students and families who are undocumented

should be removed from the country. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan noted that passing the DREAM Act would play an important role in the nation's efforts to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (White House Blog, 2010). In 2010, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) conducted an analysis of the potential impact of passage of the DREAM Act and concluded that over two million individuals could have attempted to become legal permanent residents (LPR) had the bill been enacted. Approximately 43 percent (934,000) of the estimated 2.1 million potential beneficiaries were children under age 18 in elementary or secondary school. The Center for Immigration Studies (CIC) estimated that with passage of the Dream Act, 1.4 million individuals would have met the high school graduation (or equivalent) requirement for conditional LPR status (Bruno, 2012). In June 2012, President Obama announced the latest version of the DREAM Act, which enables eligible youth who were brought to the United States at an early age to remain in the country and not face deportation. To be eligible under the new policy, an individual must have arrived in the United States under the age of 16 and resided in the country for at least five years.

The process of emigrating from one's home country to the United States is often traumatic. The shock of the experience can be large enough to negatively impact academic outcomes. In their study on educational outcomes of immigrant youth, Crosnoe and Turley (2011) suggest that a change as small as moving from one school to another within the same country or even within the same school district can negatively impact academic achievement. Regardless of whether it occurs within the school year or between

school years, a change of school, either voluntarily or otherwise, can disrupt academic progress.

Transitions are inherently stressful. Mental health professionals have long regarded such events as relocation, marriage, change of employment, and ruptured social relationships as highly disruptive (Schlossberg, 1984). Transition can trigger a variety of reactions including excitement and anticipation but also anxiety, anger, and depression. Immigration is one of the most stressful events that a family can endure (Sher & Vilens, 2010). The process can fracture relationships and remove family members from the predictable and comforting context of community ties, employment, cultural norms, and language. The changes in relationships and familiar contexts brought on by the immigration process can result in feelings of disorientation and loss. For many recently arrived Latino children, the prospect of coping with a new country, language, and culture seems daunting. The added shock of exposure to a new educational system renders the experience overwhelming for many immigrant children.

Language

Lack of English proficiency has been identified as a factor underlying poor school performance and early school leaving (Shargel, 2004). In the U.S., 43 percent of first-generation Latino students are not fluent in English and 47 percent of their parents have less than a high school education (Fry et al., 2009). Children who arrive to the U.S. with limited literacy skills in their native language face a tremendous challenge in mastering English academic language skills for reading, writing, and comprehension of academic

concepts presented orally (Orozco-Suarez et al., 2001). Given that it takes approximately five to seven years for ELLs to develop the cognitive and academic language needed for academic success in the high school classroom, Latino students who immigrate to the United States with limited English language skills are at a profound disadvantage for academic success (Cummings, 1989).

According to Fillmore (2000), language loss occurs in immigrant children due to internal and external pressures. External pressures arise from a society that views cultural and linguistic differences with disdain and generally treats immigrants with hostility. The daily barrage of media reports detailing policies against immigration fuel the anti-immigrant sentiments that pervades many segments of U.S. society. Policies such as the "English only" initiatives in California and Arizona serve to designate Spanish speakers in schools as "pariahs" who shirk their responsibility to learn the national language (Worthy et al., 2003). The influence of English-only advocates is considerable perhaps due to the mistaken belief that continued use of Spanish in the home by Latino children will negatively impact their ability to learn English. However, numerous studies have refuted that notion by demonstrating that even recently arrived children have the capacity to learn English relatively quickly (Fillmore, 2000; Orellana, Elk & Hernandez, 2000). Moreover, students who develop strong linguistic and academic skills in their native language have greater success in accessing academic content in English (Worthy et al., 2003).

Immigrant Latino students who socialize with other children in Spanish and serve as language brokers for their families begin to internalize pressures to assimilate to the

dominant culture and speak English exclusively (Fillmore, 2000). In their study of immigrant children entering U.S. schools, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2000) reported that a significant percentage of the students in the study felt hostility directed towards them and perceived negative images of themselves in school. Several authors have asserted that the assumptions a teacher makes about his/her students, both consciously and unconsciously, can impact the educational climate and student performance in the classroom (Cummins, 1989; Lee, 1996). These assumptions can lead to differentiated treatment and have a significant impact on student-teacher interactions (Vollmer, 2000).

School Experience

Numerous risk factors associated with early school leaving involve a student's level of engagement with school. A high rate of absenteeism is an obvious warning sign that a student is detaching from school. Several studies have shown the correlation between low attendance rates and early school leaving (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey 1997; Gleason & Dynarski, 2003). In a longitudinal study of dropouts in Baltimore public schools, one study (Alexander, Entwistle & Kabanni, 2001) found that multiple absences beginning in the first grade correlated strongly to early school leaving in later grades. The researchers determined that for every week missed during the school year, the chances of dropping out before obtaining a diploma increased by 25 percent.

In a study commissioned by the Gates Foundation entitled *The Silent Epidemic*, researchers found that students who dropped out reported that they felt increasingly

alienated from school for up to three years before they decided to leave (Bridgeland et al., 2006). The report also illustrated that seventy-one percent lost interest in school in the 9th or 10th grade. Forty-five percent reported frequently cutting classes the year prior to dropping out, and a majority (59 to 65 percent) reported missing class often the year they dropped out (Bridgeland et al., 2006). "Students described a pattern of refusing to wake up, missing school, skipping class, and taking three-hour lunches—and each absence made them less willing to go back" (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 8). In the Gates study, the top five reasons for dropping out as cited by the students themselves were the following:

1. Classes were not interesting
2. Excessive absences made catching up seem impossible
3. Spent time with people who were not interested in school
4. Had too much freedom and not enough rules in my life
5. Was failing in school

Theoretically, schools are designed to be the critical focal point for dropout prevention efforts; however, several studies have exposed school practices that contribute to an opposite affect resulting in the alienation and disengagement of Latino students. Researchers working on The Hispanic Dropout Project (HDP) (Secada et al., 1998) revealed that Latino students and their families were viewed negatively in some schools and were often stereotyped for their culture and beliefs. The personnel at such schools showed a tendency to view Latino students and their families as deficient due to cultural

and linguistic differences. The study noted a perception among some school personnel that Latino parents were disinterested in their childrens' education and thus partly culpable for their low academic performance. As reported in the HDP, some school personnel noted that the Latino dropout rate was attributed to lack of student readiness or desire to learn, lack of English language proficiency, excessive student mobility, excessive cost, lack of parental concern, and the absence of parental support. In interviews conducted in conjunction with the HDP, school personnel reported that little could be done to reduce the Latino dropout rate because of student poverty, lack of motivation/readiness, language, excessive mobility, and lack of parental concern.

Secada et al. (1998) noted that school personnel who hold such attitudes towards Latino students and their families essentially divest responsibility for educating the very students that they are charged with serving, and thus often deny them a quality education. The feeling of isolation and separation from the student's culture has been noted to be another factor confronting immigrant students, impacting their feelings about school. Several authors have asserted that the assumptions teachers and administrators make, both conscious and unconscious, can negatively impact how students perceive themselves and their educational environment (Cummings, 1989; Lee, 1996; Vollmer, 2000; Patterson, Hale & Stessman, 2008). Suarez-Orozco et al. (2001) examined classrooms where teachers "convey a sense of pessimism about the immigrant students' abilities to learn, and fail to engage them." Karabenick and Noda (2004) emphasized that teacher attitudes towards English language learners may influence their motivation to engage with their students and may color their receptiveness to receiving professional

development aimed at improving their skills in working with the population. These attitudes and assumptions held by teachers can contribute to negative stereotypes and low expectations and adversely affect teacher-student interaction, which may further perpetuate isolation.

In a report on dropout prevention strategies published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2001, schools were encouraged to examine policies that tacitly encourage students to drop out while strengthening the capacity of teachers and other caring adults to reach out to youth at risk of early school leaving. The report cited lack of alternative programming combined with a shortage of culturally competent school personnel as primary factors underlying the dropout problem. The federally funded HDP found that teacher perception and preparation could significantly affect the quality of their interactions with Latino students and thus influence their decision to leave school. An overarching conclusion of the HDP project focused on the attitudes and perceptions of teachers who work with Latino students nationwide. Project members concluded that many teachers are mired in a negative, self-fulfilling prophecy that has more to do with their pre-service education (or lack thereof) than with their student population. The HDP report further concluded that a significant percentage of teachers were ill-equipped to engage low-income Latino students in the classroom setting, particularly those who were recent arrivals in the U.S. and in the preliminary stage of the English acquisition process.

An additional finding of the HDP regarding perceptions of teachers was that many reported believing that Latino students are difficult to educate and that the task exceeds their capabilities. Researchers posited that these views held by some teachers might be

reinforced by school structures that do not encourage classroom experimentation, project-based learning, or high-quality bilingual education. When addressing the needs of Latino youth in schools, teachers may also be influenced by the political volatility of issues associated with immigration and bilingual instruction. Project members further pointed out that when teachers are uncomfortable with Latino students or unschooled about linguistic and cultural issues, they may disengage (consciously or otherwise) from the students, thus accentuating the feelings of isolation experienced by many Latino youth vulnerable to early school leaving. In schools where the interaction between general education teachers and bilingual education and ELL teachers is strained, Latino youth can end up in an "educational ghetto" that consists solely of their peers. In such situations, Latino students may view dropping out as a sensible response (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).

These attitudes held by school personnel can extend to the ways in which the school community interacts with Latino families. The HDP found that some school personnel identify the students' family members as the primary cause of poor achievement and early school leaving of Latino youth. This "blaming the victim" mentality provides an easy rationale for school staff to disengage from the families completely. If teachers and other school staff are disengaged or alienated from Latino families, they may abandon efforts to involve parents in the ongoing life of the school and their children's academic performance. The HDP found that in schools serving high concentrations of Latino students, many staff assumed that parents and family members would not come to school, would not be interested in their children's progress in school,

and had little interest in formal education for their children (Hispanic Dropout Project, 1998).

According to a report from the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at UCLA's Civil Rights Project, well over three million students were suspended on at least one occasion for the 2009-2010 school year. Recent federal data indicates that African-American and Latino students as well as students with disabilities are far more likely to be suspended in comparison to their White counterparts (Schott Foundation for Public Education Report, 2012). This current trend in discipline runs contrary to the notion that schools need to keep students engaged and enrolled in school in order to educate them and close the achievement gap. Research has shown that students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out by the tenth grade in comparison with students who have never been suspended. Those students who do leave school prior to graduation are three times more likely to be incarcerated later in life. One recent study following 400 incarcerated high school freshmen in Baltimore revealed that 75 percent had been suspended at least once in middle school (New York Times, 2010). With the rise of so-called "zero-tolerance" school discipline policies, the percentage of students suspended each year has nearly doubled from the early 1970s through 2006. In many states, African-American and Latino youth are disproportionally impacted by the use of out-of-school suspensions, which is often the preliminary step towards pushing students out of school and thus diminishing their chances to graduate. Despite much publicized efforts to close the achievement gap, data on suspensions indicate that Latino students—those who often need to make the most academic progress—are the ones who are most

likely to be temporarily sidelined from their classes due to suspension or pushed out of school entirely due to expulsion.

Several studies have noted the connection that is established between school personnel and Latino students is critical in keeping students engaged and invested in school (Orozco-Suarez, et. al.2001; Bridgeland, et. al., 2006) Immerwahr (2003) and Valenzuela (1999) noted that the positive relationships formed by teachers, counselors, and administrators with Latino students was the critical factor in keeping students engaged in school. Teachers who believe that their students will master academic objectives and will do everything in their power to assist them towards that end often bring forth positive outcomes. The role that the teacher plays in the emotional and educational development of Latino students is often the difference between whether or not students choose to remain in school. Teachers are a source of the necessary resources, support, and guidance to help students maintain a positive perspective and engage in school. However, the opposite can occur if students come in contact with school personnel mired in negative attitudes about Latino students.

Culture

The process of acculturation impacts heavily on the level of school engagement for Latino students. For Latino immigrant children, attending school may represent their first exposure to mainstream American culture and to the English language. The values and cultural norms of Latino students may differ from those of those of the mainstream culture as well as from those of the teachers who are predominantly female, Caucasian,

monolingual, and middle class (NCES, 2009). The cultural dissonance between Latino students and school personnel can result in poor school-student relationships that can contribute to feelings of alienation and ultimately lead to early school leaving. Cultural disconnect, such as a lack of understanding regarding cultural norms and beliefs between school personnel and the families in the community served by the school may contribute to a perception that the family's cultural values are not accepted or valued thus fueling the disengagement of the student and his/her caregivers from the educational process (Ramirez, 2003). Banks & Banks (2001) explored the implications of culture in the classroom. The researchers addressed the point that a better understanding of students' cultural environment and their level of identification with specific cultures could help teachers understand students who are from different cultures and ease the number of conflicts and miscommunications between teachers and students.

Inter-generational conflicts can arise between Latino children and their caregivers due to differences in the level and rate of acculturation, which can accentuate feelings of isolation and disengagement. As with the English-language acquisition process, children typically acculturate to mainstream U.S. culture at a far more rapid pace in comparison to their parents and other caregivers. The rapid acculturative experience of these children contrasted with the cultural isolation of the parents creates potential difficulties within Latino families, including the possible embarrassment of the children regarding their parent's traditional values and social mores (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The academic success of Latino children in the classroom can depend heavily on whether the teacher can connect with the students who are often linguistically and culturally

different. Research has shown that teachers who are able to present material in a culturally relevant manner are far more equipped to engage Latino students and produce better outcomes in learning, student morale, and classroom dynamics. Efforts to make the curriculum relevant to the social and cultural experiences of the students promotes interest and engenders enthusiasm (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2001; Ndura, 2004).

Conclusion

Latino children are the fastest growing ethnic group entering public schools in the United States. Sadly, Of the 1.1 million students projected to leave school without a diploma for the 2012 school year, a staggering 27 percent (approximately 310,000) will be of Latino descent (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). Research points to a number of factors that contribute to the dropout phenomenon. Each individual makes a uniquely personal decision to leave school, but issues confronting and influencing the student are systemic and generalizable to the population as a whole. The issues underlying the Latino dropout phenomenon are extensive and include immigration, language, school, community, and political factors. Recognition of the systemic, economic, and cultural barriers impacting the lives of Latino students vulnerable to early school leaving combined with identification of impending difficulties affecting the students is of paramount importance to developing a substantive response to the crisis.

The high Latino student dropout rate merits immediate large-scale attention from policy makers, educators, and parents. Interventions provided through many traditional educational programs have proved to be ineffectual, and the failure of mainstream

programs to address the problem underscores the need for alternative strategies. Research findings suggest that an absence of bilingual and culturally competent school personnel to address the needs of vulnerable Latino youth contributes heavily to the occurrence of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation. These studies underscore the need to reanalyze existing paradigms and develop new models and strategies designed to support vulnerable Latino youth. Survey of research in the field reveals surprisingly little inquiry addressed directly to those most impacted, i.e., the students themselves. To best serve Latino students at risk of not completing high school, school personnel need to connect with the youth by providing culturally competent and relevant services to the students and their families. The connection that is forged between caring staff and students is arguably the most important aspect of dropout prevention efforts.

Summary of Chapter

This literature review incorporated significant research with respect to factors associated with Latino students leaving school prior to graduation. The chapter provided a description of the theoretical and conceptual framework utilized by the researcher to shape the study. The literature review was an examination of research focused on multiple issues impacting Latino youth in high schools including economic, cultural, and political factors. The researcher concluded with a synthesis of the literature and recommendations for further investigation with respect to the development of programs and intervention strategies to support Latino youth vulnerable to early school leaving.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth as they attempted to make meaning of the factors that led to their leaving school prior to graduation. Utilizing phenomenological in-depth interviewing, the researcher derived meaning from the experience of Latino students who left school without a diploma from their own perspectives. In this chapter, the researcher delineates the research design and methodology used for the study, including: information regarding participant selection; the research site; instrument design; pilot testing and review; data analysis; and ethical considerations. The chapter also details how the data was collected and analyzed to highlight general themes related to the phenomenon of early school leaving of Latino students. Ethical questions concerning the study are also addressed.

Research Purpose and Questions

The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of Latino youth who had left school before graduation in an effort to identify and examine factors associated with early school leaving of the population. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do Latino students perceive their experience of leaving high school without a diploma?

2. What do Latino students perceive as the influences that contributed to the process of early school leaving?
3. What do Latino students perceive as possible solutions to address the phenomenon of early school leaving?

Methodology

This study was positioned within the framework of constructivism (Crotty, 1998) in an effort to identify the ways in which individuals construct meaning from their personal experiences, lives, and environments. Crotty (1998) defined constructivism as the belief that all knowledge and "meaningful reality" is contingent upon human practices being constructed based on the interaction between individuals and their world. In accordance with the constructionist perspective, meaning is constructed rather than discovered by individuals as they interact with the world that they are interpreting. Merriam (2002) wrote:

> Meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, or reality, is not a fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research. Instead, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time (pp. 3-4).

The framework afforded the researcher the opportunity to identify participants' perceptions and beliefs in order to produce a detailed and comprehensive description of the phenomenon of early school leaving. Consistent with the constructivist framework, the researcher chose qualitative research methods for this study, as such methods are

particularly suited to developing understanding of "meaning" for participants in the study as well as understanding the particular "context within which the participants act and the influence that this context has on their actions" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 22). In qualitative research studies, the individual's perspective is part of the reality that the researcher attempts to identify and understand (Maxwell, 2004). When researchers conduct qualitative studies, they are embracing the idea of examining, analyzing, and reporting multiple realities of the individuals under study (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research examines life experiences in order to understand and give them meaning. This study sought to identify the ways in which the participants constructed meaning and made sense of the factors that led to the event of their leaving school prior to graduation.

This study was also situated within the social ecological model as postulated by Bronfenbrenner (1977). The model highlights the relationship between individuals and the spheres of influence that impact their lives. Bronfenbrenner wrote that an individual's development must be examined within the context of an array of factors, including the person's family, school, and community. He believed that behavior and development must be considered within the framework of those spheres of influence in order to fully understand and elucidate behavior and development. The ecological model of human development stresses that individuals do not function in isolation but are instead affected by a host of contextual conditions in which development occurs. The goal of this study was aligned with the purpose of qualitative research methods in that the perceptions of Latino youth who left school prior to graduation were examined within the context of spheres of influence including family, community, and school factors. This inductive

interpretive research was approached from the lens of the social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) to explore the phenomenon of Latino student early school leaving. The researcher sought to gain the perspective of the youth through qualitative interview methods and then interpret that information within the milieu of their lives, the community in which they have lived, and the schools which they attended.

Finally, the research was conducted within the context of critical theory, which can be an effective framework for examination of underlying factors associated with early school leaving involving race, culture, language, and class (Baca & Cervantes, 2004). Critical theory has been described as a means for understanding the oppressive aspects of society in order to promote societal and individual transformation (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Critical theory was also well suited to the qualitative methodology of this study as it facilitates deep understanding of the way in which issues of race, class, culture, and environment impacted the perceptions and experiences of the participants.

Methods

Consistent with interpretive, descriptive qualitative studies, the researcher gathered information focusing on the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth regarding their experience of leaving school prior to graduation. Accordingly, the initial focus of this study was on gaining the perspective of the youth through in-depth interviews and then interpreting those perspectives within the context of their "lived experience" (Creswell, 2007). Through the use of "transcendental" phenomenological research

methods as outlined by Moustakas (1994), the researcher focused on the descriptions of the participants in order to gain the perspective of the youth regarding the phenomenon of early school leaving.

Phenomenological Research Method

Phenomenology concentrates on the lived experiences of humans and attempts to make meaning of those experiences (Seidman, 2006). Merriam points out that the focus of a phenomenological study is on the experience itself and how experiencing a phenomenon is transformed into consciousness (2009). At the heart of phenomenology is a belief that truth and understanding of life can emerge from people's life experiences. Phenomenologists believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world and cannot be quantified or reduced to numbers or statistics (Byrne, 2001). Phenomenological research is based on the notion that there is an essence to shared experience. This essence forms the foundational meaning mutually understood through the collective experience of a given phenomenon. As noted by Kvale and Brinkmann (2008, p. 122), "Phenomenology…points to an interest in understanding social phenomenon from the actors' own perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects, with the assumption that the important reality is what people perceive it to be." The main take-away from a phenomenological study for the reader is the feeling that they have an enhanced understanding of what it is like for an individual to experience the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). At the heart of phenomenological research methods is a deep interest in the lives of individuals who typically do not have the

opportunity to tell their stories. The mission of the phenomenologist is to represent the essence or basic structure of experience. An important tenet of phenomenological research methods is that the researcher must set aside or "bracket" prior beliefs and assumptions regarding the phenomenon under study so as to not allow preconceptions to interfere with "seeing or intuiting the elements or structure of the phenomenon" (Merriam, 2009, p. 25).

With those descriptions of phenomenology in mind, the research design chosen for this study was that of phenomenological interviewing. Consistent with Seidman (2006), who noted that interview methodology is the optimal approach to gain access to "the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior," this study utilized interviewing as the primary data collection method for the purpose of providing a "thick, rich" description of Latino youths' perceptions regarding their experience of leaving high school prior to graduation. Moustakas's (1994) transcendental approach to phenomenology in which the focus of the in-depth interviews rests on the descriptions of the participants rather than on the interpretation of the interviews by the researcher was the method of phenomenological inquiry selected by this investigator.

The phenomenological research design was chosen because the phenomenon of Latino students leaving school without a diploma should not be examined in isolation; rather, the occurrence of early school leaving must be considered within the context of multiple factors impacting the youths' experience. The perceptions of the youth regarding

those experiences were elucidated through in-depth interviews in an effort to derive meaning from their descriptions of the phenomenon.

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews conducted with Latino youth in a community-based program in an effort to gain insight into the experience of those who left school prior to graduation. The researcher also used participant observation as an additional data collection method. Qualitative interviewing begins with the premise that the perspective of others is meaningful and as a method of inquiry, interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning of a phenomenon through language. "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). A process of in-depth individualized interviewing was chosen for this study in order to develop understanding of the phenomenon of Latino youth leaving school prior to graduation. Because the researcher is fluent in Spanish, the study participants were afforded the choice of responding to the interview questions in their language of preference.

The phenomenological interviewing approach as developed by Seidman (2006) involves conducting a series of three separate interviews with the first interview focusing on the life history of the participant, the second on the details of the participant's experience, and the final interview designed to encourage the participant to reflect on that experience. Consistent with this approach, the researcher used open-ended questions with

follow up probing to build upon and explore the participants' responses to the questions. The interview method helped to ensure that the interaction between the researcher and the participants remains focused while allowing individual perspectives and perceptions to emerge. Seidman points out that even though the focus of the final interview is on the participant's understanding of their experience, the participants make meaning of their experience throughout all three interviews. The very process of using language to describe an experience is a "meaning-making process" (Vygotsky as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 19). Seidman (2006) noted that when we ask participants to describe their experiences, they are selecting events from their past and imparting meaning into those experiences.

Creswell (2007) defines participant observation as a method used to conduct research through observation of the culture-sharing group. The researcher spends a period of time in the research setting to better understand the ways of life and cultural mores of the participants. Patton (2002, p. 268) emphasizes the importance of maintaining a balance between "insider" and "outsider" in qualitative research: "Experiencing the program as an insider accentuates the participant part of participant observation…The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the setting as an insider while describing it to and for outsiders." Merriam (2002) points out that observation enables the researcher to have a direct encounter with the phenomenon of interest.

With those descriptions of participant observation in mind, the researcher volunteered at the research site providing academic support to several of the participants

of the study. The investigator's presence at the site enabled him to build trusting relationships with the participants, thus helping to facilitate the in-depth individual interviews.

Site Selection

Participants were recruited from a community-based organization located in Langley Park, Maryland. The program provides a broad range of services to youth confronted with challenges such as early school leaving and gang involvement. The program is located in a community where 76 percent of the residents are Latino and 20 percent of the households are below the federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The main focus of the program is to address youth violence, gang activity, and early school leaving by providing viable alternatives for vulnerable youth. Services include mental health counseling, case management, GED instruction, community outreach, tattoo removal, job readiness training, and "positive youth development" programs which include gender specific support groups, supervised recreation, and community service projects.

The center is located at the intersection of New Hampshire Avenue and University Boulevard in Langley Park, Maryland, a location that could perhaps be characterized as the epicenter of gang activity in the area. The program provides an array of services to support vulnerable youth, including case management; individual and group counseling; community outreach; HIV testing and referral; job readiness training; and GED instruction. The research site was purposefully selected due to the availability

of the population being studied in the GED instruction class. In addition, the researcher gained access to the site due to previously established relationships with program staff.

General Characteristics of the Study Population

The population of the research study consisted of male and female participants drawn from the GED class and the counseling program of the community-based organization. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years of age. For the 2011-2012 school year, 61 percent resided in the most populated county in Maryland and 39 percent of the program participants lived in the second most populated county. Thirty-three percent of the participants were female and 67 percent were male. Fifty-five percent of the program participants reported the United States as their country of origin, 23 percent were born in El Salvador, 7 percent in Guatemala, 5 percent in Honduras, and 3 percent in Mexico. Twenty-five percent of the participants reported being undocumented, 32 percent reported being without medical insurance, 14 percent reported that their housing situation was precarious, 26 percent of the participants had left high school prior to obtaining a diploma, 10 percent had been suspended or expelled from school, and 15 percent reported having children. The majority of the participants reported high exposure to gangs, whether due to having been active participants, having family members who were in gangs, associating with active gang members, or having been the victim of gang attacks.

Participant Selection

This study focused on Latino youth who have had the shared experience of leaving U.S. high schools prior to graduation. The sample size of ten participants was selected based on a comparative review of the literature on this topic. A review of recent qualitative studies examining the experiences of Latino students in high school revealed a sample size ranging from four to twelve participants (Johnson-Brown, 2005; Poro, 2010; Baker, 2011). Patton (2002) recommends identifying a minimum sample size "based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study." Polkinghorne (1989) wrote that phenomenological researchers should interview 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon under study. With the assistance of the program's site manager, lead case manager, and lead GED instructor, the researcher recruited the participants through purposeful sampling. Patton (2002, p. 46) contends that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information rich* cases" for in-depth study. Chein (1981) likens purposeful sampling to gaining the perspective of "expert consultants" who are asked to provide input on a difficult medical case. The "experts" who are purposefully selected are not recruited to provide an average opinion that would correspond to the average opinion of the entire group, in this case, the medical profession; rather, their perspective is solicited precisely due to their unique experience and expertise.

Creswell (2007) noted that purposeful sampling affords the researcher the opportunity to select individuals who can "purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and the central phenomenon in the study" (p. 125). Among the

purposeful sampling techniques, "typical" sampling as defined by Merriam was selected because "it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest" (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). The research site provided the "average person" within the target population upon which this study was focused because participants in the GED program were all Latino youth between the ages of 18 and 25 who had left school prior to obtaining a diploma. This sampling approach was selected because the participants at the site had the shared experience of the phenomenon of early school leaving and were able to provide rich descriptive data regarding their experiences. Criterion sampling is an effective technique for recruiting individuals who have the shared experience under investigation (Creswell, 2007). In keeping with criterion-based sampling, the researcher identified a list of attributes essential to the study and selected the participants in accordance with those characteristics. The researcher conducted purposeful sampling to identify ten individuals who met the participant criteria reported below:

- Individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 who have been enrolled in a U.S. high school but left school prior to obtaining a diploma;
- Recent immigrants from Latin America with "recent" defined as the individual residing for seven years or less in the United States *or* U.S.-born Latinos who entered high school in the 9th grade but left school prior to completing the 12th grade; and
- Participants of a community-based GED instructional and social services support program.

Instrument Design

The researcher developed an interview protocol with the assistance of faculty who had expertise in phenomenological research methods, special education, second language acquisition, and issues impacting culturally and linguistically diverse students. The interview questions were also formulated based on a review of the literature with particular focus on factors associated with Latino students leaving school prior to graduation (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Rumberger, 2001; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). The interview protocol was written in Spanish and English so as to afford the participants the opportunity to respond to questions in their primary language based on self-reported preference. The researcher is fluent in Spanish, and he received input from two native-born speakers of the language regarding the wording and overall clarity of the interview questions posed in Spanish. Interviewing in qualitative studies involves less structure and more-open ended questions relative to a structured interview format (Merrian, 2009). Accordingly, the researcher designed a semi-structured interview protocol aligned with the proposed research questions in order to facilitate a "conversation" with the youth regarding their experience with the phenomenon of early school leaving. The use of semi-structured questions served as a guide for the researcher, so that focus was maintained during the interview (Patton, 2002). At the same time, the semi-structured, open-ended questions enabled the participants to reflect on the phenomenon in unique ways that were specific to their personal experiences. The participants were asked central questions regarding background, school experience,

challenges faced in school, their experience in leaving school, and their perception of solutions designed to address the phenomenon of early school leaving. When appropriate, the researcher asked follow-up questions as the semi-structured format allowed for the use of follow-up probes to delve more deeply into the participant's responses.

Interview Format

Seidman (2006) wrote, "People's behavior becomes more meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them. Without context there is little possibility of exploring the meaning of an experience" (p. 16). The *lived experience* as well as the meaning of that experience within the context of the participant's life is explored through substantive, in-depth interviewing with the desired result being the attainment of thick and rich data. Interviewers who attempt to explore their topic through the course of one meeting with the participant "tread on thin contextual ice" (Seidman, 2006).

With that in mind, the researcher conducted a series of three semi-structured interviews with the participants to gain insight into their experience of leaving school prior to graduation. The initial interview focused on the background and experience of the participant with questions designed to elicit information regarding the life history of the respondent within the context of their experience of leaving school before graduation. The second interview focused on the details of their lived experience. The participants were asked to reconstruct details of the their experience in school and the factors that contributed to their leaving without a diploma. The final interview incorporated questions

designed to encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. Deriving meaning from experience involves examination and reflection of how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. Developing understanding from experience further requires that the participants examine their present day situation within the context of their past. Detailed description of past experiences combined with an examination of the participant's present situation establishes the conditions for reflection on the phenomenon under study (Seidman, 2006).

Pilot Study

The researcher piloted the protocol with two participants purposefully selected from the community based organization. One interview was conducted in English and the other in Spanish with two participants who met the selection criteria as described above. The respondents provided feedback regarding the wording of the questions and the overall clarity, effectiveness, and relevancy of the interview protocol. Both respondents stated that they encountered little difficulty understanding the interview questions reporting that the overall clarity of the interview questions was good. However, one of the participants remained silent for a sustained period of time after being asked the question, "Was your peer group supportive of your efforts to succeed in school?" When the interviewer rephrased the question substituting the word "friends" for the phrase, "peer group," the interviewee demonstrated no difficulty responding to the question. Based on that exchange, the interview protocol was amended as described above.

The interview questions were aligned in accordance with the central research questions driving this study as displayed in the following table:

Table 2: Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Items
How do Latino youth perceive their experience of leaving school without a diploma?	1-4 with follow-up questions
What do Latino youth perceive as the influences that contributed to the event of their leaving school prior to graduation?	1-5 with follow-up questions
What do Latino students perceive as possible solutions to address the phenomenon of early school leaving?	5

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to conducting the initial interview, the researcher met with the participants to review the consent form detailing the purpose of the study. An additional authorization form specifically addressing consent for the audio/video recording was also reviewed with the participants. The consent forms indicated willingness to participate in the study, as well as agreement to be videotaped for interview transcription purposes and possible inclusion in a documentary video on early school leaving. The first session served as a time to further clarify the purpose of the study and address issues associated with confidentiality, as well as address questions and concerns expressed by the participants.

In an effort to insure reliability through triangulation of data sources, data compilation took on a variety of forms including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and maintenance of detailed field notes. The researcher worked on site as a volunteer prior to recruiting the participants, thus giving the students the opportunity to interact with the investigator in a context other than the interview process. Through the

course of the volunteer work, trusting relationships between the investigator and participants were established. The volunteer work also afforded the researcher the opportunity to conduct observations and engage in ongoing conversation with the participants regarding the intent and purpose of the study.

Once consent was obtained, the researcher contacted the participants individually either by phone or in person to schedule an appointment for the interviews. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, interviews were conducted on site at the community based organization in empty classrooms, vacant offices, or other mutually agreed upon locations as prearranged with program participants and staff. The researcher conducted the intended three interviews with each participant. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes, though it should be noted that the participants were given latitude to extend or shorten the interview as needed. The semi-structured interview format enabled the participants to share their "lived experience" while allowing the researcher a view of their world and perspective regarding the phenomenon of early school leaving. The semi-structured interview format facilitated an open exchange that encouraged the participants to share their opinions while addressing specific areas germane to the research questions.

The researcher began each session with an overview of the interview process in order to familiarize the participants with the structure and format of the interviews. In addition, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study and gave a general description of the topics to be covered during the interview. A video recorder was used to record the interview and was set up on a tripod in the corner of the interview room, thus allowing the researcher flexibility to take notes and record observations. After the completion of

each interview session, the researcher held a "debriefing" which encouraged the participants to share final thoughts and reflect further on how the interview topics may be applicable to their lives. Consistent with the constructivist epistemology, the process of continual reflection supports the ongoing construction of meaning for both the researcher and the participants with respect to the phenomenon of early school leaving.

The interviews were video-recorded to enable the researcher the opportunity to review the interviews to better ensure accurate transcription and data analysis (Merriam, 2009). The researcher then transcribed the interviews and the accuracy of the transcription verified by cross checking with the video recording. Digital video data was maintained on a memory card held in a locked file cabinet.

The researcher also collected data via observations conducted during the program activities and the individual interviews. The researcher maintained detailed notes describing observations and the nature of the interaction involving the participant. The recorded observations comprised an integral part of the data, as the researcher reviewed impressions, perceptions and interpretations formed at the program site and during the interviews with the participants

.

Epoche

Phenomenological research focuses on the essence of experience, and the phenomenological interview is the main method of data collection. Merriam (2009) points out that prior to conducting the interviews with those that have direct involvement with the phenomenon, it is crucial for the researcher to examine his or her own

experience to explore existing viewpoints, personal prejudices, assumptions, and preconceptions. This process of self-reflection is called *Epoche* and involves setting aside (bracketing) prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas while exploring the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) noted that *Epoche* is a process requiring the researcher to set aside prejudices and preconceptions thus "allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time…the opportunity for a fresh start, a new beginning, not being hampered by voices of the past that tell us the way things are or voices of the present that direct our thinking." (p. 85). In keeping with those descriptions, the researcher made a concerted effort to bracket personal beliefs, so as to enter the "lived world" of the participants unfettered by preconceived ideas. As part of the process of bracketing, the researcher reviewed his personal subjectivity statement (as described in Chapter 1), while keeping detailed notes listing potential areas of intersection between the interview content and personal bias.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth as they sought to make meaning of the factors that led to their leaving school prior to graduation. In analyzing the data, the researcher answered the research questions by identifying and presenting the voices of the participants who had the shared experience of early school leaving (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). By gathering responses to open-ended questions, the researcher made an effort to capture and understand the perspective of the participants by focusing on their explanations, perceptions, beliefs, and feelings. The

participants' responses were then "reduced" and "condensed" into themes through a process of coding (Creswell, 2007). In accordance with the selection of interview as the central methodology, the researcher conducted data analysis based on the principals of phenomenological inquiry and consistent with the data analysis process outlined by Moustakas (1994). Data analysis in this study consisted of the following:

- Interviews with the participants were audio and video recorded;
- The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher;
- From the transcriptions, statements relevant to the phenomenon under investigation were identified;
- Relevant statements were clustered into categories, themes, and patterns;
- Themes were synthesized into descriptions regarding factors associated with leaving school prior to graduation; and
- Themes were analyzed and conclusions were drawn.

The intent of this research was to allow categories to emerge based on the participants' responses rather than develop predetermined categories. The categories evolved from an analysis of the transcripts, observations, and field notes. The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts for salient themes and extracted compelling or illustrative statements from the participants to highlight those themes. Analytic memo writing consisting of questions, musings, and speculation regarding emerging themes and theory were utilized during the analysis phase. The memos were written to "document

and enrich the analytic process, to make implicit thoughts explicit, and to expand the data corpus" (Creswell, 2007, p. 290). Analytic memo writing and coding occurred concurrently highlighting the "reciprocal relationship between the development of a coding system and the evolution of understanding a phenomenon" (Saldana, 2009, p. 33).

Data obtained from the interviews and observational field notes was organized according to each individual participant. The researcher created electronic and paper files for each interviewee for storage of transcripts, correspondence, other relevant records, and electronic records were backed up on a daily basis (Yin, 2003). Maintaining the interview transcripts in separate files enabled the researcher to examine each participant's responses as an individual entity before analyzing the data in conjunction with the responses from the other interviewees.

As themes emerged from the data, the researcher examined the themes within the context of the research questions and study purpose. After reviewing each interview in conjunction with the data analysis process, the researcher then studied and compared themes across interviews. Themes were then reexamined and identified in the individual interviews as a preliminary step to constructing a written description of the perceptions of the youth regarding the phenomenon of early school leaving. When analyzing the interviews, the researcher revisited his preconceptions, perceptions, and assumptions revealed during the bracketing process in order to maintain awareness of potential biases during data analysis.

Establishing Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) wrote, "being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields because practitioners intervene in people's lives" (p. 209). Creswell (2007) noted that validation is a distinct strength of qualitative research in that "the descriptions made through extensive time in the field, the detailed thick description, and the closeness of the researcher to the participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of the study" (p. 207). In considering the perspectives of Merriam and Creswell, the researcher utilized the following strategies to increase the credibility of this study:

1. In-depth interviews
2. Triangulation
3. Participant observation
4. Member checking
5. Reflexivity
6. Peer review

Triangulation refers to the process of using multiple and varied sources, methods, and theories to provide corroborating evidence in support of research findings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). This study met these criteria by using multiple interviews and ongoing participant observation, thus enabling the researcher to compare and analyze information from varying perspectives. Data was collected in multiple ways including semi-structured interviews, document review, and field notes maintained as a participant

observer. Cross-case analysis of individual interviews was conducted to determine commonalties and differences in the responses given by the participants. Multiple data collection methods, including in-depth interviews, document review, and field notes maintained as a participant observer contributed to the triangulation of this study.

A key element of this study involved the researcher's work as a participant observer, which afforded him the opportunity to observe the shared culture of the participants while building trusting relationships. The trusting relationships established through participant observation enabled the researcher to collect thick and rich data during the course of the in-depth interview and prolonged observation. Patton (2002) discussed the importance of maintaining a balance between "insider" and "outsider" in qualitative research. "Experiencing the program as an insider accentuates the participant part of participant observation. Merriam (2009) pointed out that observation enables the researcher to have a direct encounter with the phenomenon of interest. The researcher maintained detailed field notes describing the investigator's observations and interpretations during the participant observation phase of this study in an effort to avoid misinterpretation and false claims (Creswell, 2007).

Merriam (2009) noted that *member checking* is a common strategy for ensuring internal validity and ruling out misinterpretation of the data. The researcher elicited member checks as part of the final interview with the participants. The participants reviewed the interview transcripts and provided feedback regarding the accuracy of the transcriptions and whether or not the interviews correctly reflected their perceptions and beliefs.

Researcher reflexivity is a key component of establishing trustworthiness and controlling bias in qualitative research. Creswell (2007) pointed out the importance of the researcher being cognizant of the biases that he or she brings to the research study. At the outset of this study, the researcher wrote a subjectivity statement describing potential biases, assumptions, and preconceived ideas regarding the research topic. The researcher maintained a field journal detailing observations, reactions, and impressions made during the interviews and other activities shared by the participants. An additional purpose of the journal is for the researcher to engage in critical self-reflection throughout the data collection process in order to account for assumptions, preconceptions, and potential bias.

Peer review consisted of ongoing collaboration with the dissertation committee, program staff from the community based organization, professional colleagues, and fellow doctoral candidates throughout the design, implementation, and data analysis components of this study. Peer review provided an external examination of the research process used in this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the role of the peer reviewer as a "devil's advocate," an individual who keeps the researcher honest; asks hard questions about methods, meanings and interpretations; and provides the researcher with the opportunity for catharsis by sympathetically listening to the researcher's feelings. The peer review helped to ensure that the research findings are plausible based on the collection and analysis of the data.

As noted previously in this chapter, the primary data collection method involved in-depth interview to obtain "thick descriptions" regarding the perceptions of the participants' experiences in leaving school prior to graduation. The researcher provided a

highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and the participants. Creswell (2007) pointed out that "rich, thick" description adds to the verification and credibility of the study. The researcher described the phenomenon under investigation through the voices of the participants who had the shared experience of early school leaving.

Human Participants and Ethical Precautions

The researcher adhered to all guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of George Washington Universtiy and the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center (CYOC). The consent process was conducted individually with each potential participant who received a written and verbal explanation of the study presented in both Spanish and in English. The process of obtaining consent was initiated approximately one month prior to the beginning of the study. The researcher stressed that participation in the study was completely voluntary and the participants were also informed of their option to discontinue their involvement at any time during the research process.

Risks

The participants were informed at the outset of the study of several potential risks related to their involvement. First, participants were advised of the investment of their time with little monetary compensation in return. Second, the interviewees were cautioned that the focus of the study might cause them discomfort due to their reflecting on their personal experiences with respect to the research topic. They were also advised that a CYOC program counselor would be available for them to share and process their

feelings as needed. The issue of early school leaving is an inherently difficult topic to explore for those that have experienced the phenomenon. As noted in Chapter 2 of this study, multiple factors, many of which are highly personal and emotionally charged, impact the experience of youth who leave school prior to graduation. Due consideration was given to these issues, as the researcher treated the participants' values, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences with respect and affirmation, in a fashion consistent with the social constructivist perspective that emphasizes multiple realities and the complexities of particular worldviews and actions (Charmaz, 2006). In accordance with this perspective, the initial interview was designed to encourage the participant to reflect on their background and experience with the second interview focused on the details of their experience of leaving school prior to graduation. The final interview incorporated questions designed to encourage the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. This research design was chosen so that the investigator could elicit information germane to the study while ensuring that respect was accorded to the participants' cultural background and prior experiences.

Benefits

The research benefited the participants in that they were afforded an opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences and express their views on a host of issues involving school, culture and community. The process of describing their perceptions of the phenomenon of early school leaving could prove valuable for some and cathartic for others. Additionally, this research has the potential to benefit educators, program

directors, policy makers, and youth vulnerable to leaving school prior to graduation by identifying and describing critical issues and perceptions regarding early school leaving. Identification of the factors associated with youth leaving school prior to graduation is a crucial first step in the development of a substantive response to address the issue.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher disclosed the purpose and goal of the study so that the participants could make an informed decision regarding their participation. Participation was completely voluntary and the interviewees were informed that if they agreed to participate, they could elect to withdraw their involvement at any time with no risk or penalty. As a participant observer, the researcher was able to maintain contact with the participants before and after the interviews and data analysis in order to ensure that the participants felt comfortable with the process and requirements of this study. All interview and observational data was treated as confidential. The researcher changed the names of all of the participants and staff members referred to in the study. At the outset of the research, participants were assigned pseudonyms that identify them for the remainder of the study. Documents that identify the research participants with pseudonyms was kept separate from the data, locked in a file cabinet, and destroyed after data collection. The researcher was responsible for the safety and confidentiality of the data. Throughout the data collection phase of the study, all data was maintained in a locked file cabinet located in a locked office. Data compiled electronically was stored in a password-protected computer.

Summary of Chapter 3

The purpose of this chapter was to provide an overview of methodology for this interpretive qualitative research study. The chapter addressed the primary research questions that guided the study while describing the methodology and instrument used for data collection. The chapter also listed criteria for participant selection; provided an overview of the data collection process and data analysis techniques; and addressed the risks, benefits, and ethical implications of this research.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Overview of Chapter

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth as they attempt to make meaning of the factors that led to their leaving high school prior to graduation. This chapter presents the results of this study derived from the analysis of interview transcripts as well as field notes from observations and related background and demographic data obtained through document review and discussion with program staff from the community-based organization where the study took place. Individual interviews were conducted with program participants who met the study participant criteria as outlined in Chapter 3 of this study. The participants shared their experiences and insights regarding the factors that contributed to their leaving high school before graduation. Results of each interview are then summarized based on specific groupings including the participant's background, school experience, and perceptions regarding the factors that led to their leaving school without a diploma. A summary of results is then presented based on a cross-case analysis followed by a discussion of the researcher's findings with respect to the study's research questions. In keeping with the idea that it is important to examine the experiences of the participants within the context of their lives, the chapter begins with a description of the community-based organization and the surrounding neighborhoods in which the respondents and their families reside.

With over one million youth leaving school annually without a diploma, the dropout crisis has reached epidemic proportions (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Of the 1.1 million students projected to leave school without a diploma for the 2012 school year, an astounding 27 percent (approximately 310,000) will be of Latino descent (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012). The high percentage of Latino students leaving school prematurely may indicate systemic failure of U.S. public schools, while the lack of outrage suggests a lack of public awareness of the severity of the problem. The purpose of this study was to gain the perspective of affected Latino students. Developing an understanding of the lived experiences of Latino youth who have left high school without a diploma could well be an important step in the process of developing substantive policy initiatives and appropriate intervention strategies to address the high incidence of early school leaving. This explorative, descriptive study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Latino students perceive their experience of leaving high school without a diploma?
2. What do Latino students perceive as the influences that contributed to the event of early school leaving?
3. What do Latino students perceive as possible solutions to address the phenomenon of early school leaving?

The Site

Participants for this study were recruited from a community-based organization located in a low-income neighborhood just outside of Washington, D.C. The program is set on the top floor of a drab, 1950s style office building situated between a Caribbean grocery store and a discounted furniture outlet. On most afternoons, the far end of the parking lot is a bevy of commerce as vendors sell fresh mangos, fried pupusas, and steamed tamales. Fast food restaurants and liquor stores fill strip malls located on the adjacent main thoroughfare, and crumbling garden apartments line the adjoining side streets. The program is located at the crossroads of two major boulevards, an area that some knowledgeable observers characterize as the epicenter of gang activity for the region.

The recruitment site for the project is a private non-profit community-based organization that was established to address youth violence and gang activity by providing viable alternatives for vulnerable youth. A percentage of the funding for the organization is provided by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to provide services for youth who are referred from the courts, correctional facilities, and the police department. Services include mental health counseling, GED instruction, case management, individual and group counseling, community outreach, tattoo removal, HIV testing and referral, job readiness training, diversion services at a youth correctional facility, positive youth development programs which include gender specific support groups, and supervised recreation and community service projects.

The organization is guided by the Positive Youth Development (PYD) theoretical

framework, which emphasizes that vulnerable young adults should be viewed as assets in need of support rather than pariahs to society that require punishment or "fixing." PYD is a holistic approach that encourages the identification and amplification of protective factors in the lives of youth, to help young people negotiate risk factors that lead to negative behaviors such as gang involvement and early school leaving. PYD emerged from a seminal longitudinal study conducted by Werner and Smith (1977) documenting the positive effects of certain internal and external factors on "at risk" youth. The PYD framework evolved from the study's identification of "resiliency" factors, which became the foundation of the PYD model. The program provides a safe physical and emotional environment for youth while incorporating the following PYD constructs:

- ***Competence***: activities that are engaging and promote learning
- ***Confidence***: high expectations and clear limits for youth
- ***Connection***: meaningful opportunities for youth to engage in positive relationships with peers and adults
- ***Caring*** and consistent relationships with adults
- ***Character***: mechanisms to help youth move forward as young adults

The organization's programs, delivered in Spanish and English by culturally competent staff, are designed to foster resilience while promoting social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral competence among the participants.

Since its inception in 2006, the program has assisted hundreds of gang-involved

and adjudicated youth by providing them with counseling, mentoring, and training designed to help the participants lead a positive and healthy lifestyle. The majority of the participants reported high exposure to gangs, whether due to having been active participants, having family members who are in gangs, hanging out with active gang members, or having been the victim of gang attacks. Group and individual counseling sessions combined with program services have been instrumental in helping to defuse tension between gang members while ultimately providing alternative paths to gang involvement. An important element of the program's anti-gang initiative is a tattoo removal service for gang members wearing gang-specific tattoos that are often a source of conflict and a significant barrier to employment. By establishing trusting and caring relationships between staff and the participants, the program provides a viable alternative to gang involvement. An important aspect of the program is that each participant is provided with a case manager who helps to coordinate services while providing individualized support and mentoring. Based on a needs analysis of the youth conducted during intake, the case manager helps to ensure that the participants receive the appropriate services catered to individual needs. In addition, the case managers reach out to the participant's families to help them access needed resources. As noted by the program manager, the organization views youth as "assets that need to be nourished, not as problems that need to be fixed."

Participant Characteristics

This study focused on the lived experience of ten individuals of Latino descent who left high school prior to graduation. Five of the interviewees were born in Latin America and five were born in the United States. The interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 25 and were either current or former participants in the community-based organization's GED and counseling programs. The purpose of the interview was explained in either English or Spanish to potential participants who then gave written permission for the interview. All ten respondents spoke English and Spanish with varying degrees of proficiency; seven interviews were conducted in English and one in Spanish, with the remaining two interviews conducted in both languages. Interviews were conducted over three separate sessions with each session lasting sixty to ninety minutes. All of the interviews were videotaped (with written permission from the respondent) for transcription purposes. The names used below are pseudonyms to protect the participant's identities. The names of their schools are also redacted. Additional information regarding the participants will be presented in the interview summary section of this chapter. The following table summarizes characteristics of the participants that are pertinent to this study:

Table 3: Participant Characteristics (n = 10)

Participant	Age	Gender	SES*	Country of Origin Participant/ Parents	Years in the U.S.	Age Entered US School	Grade Left School
Mario	18	Male	Low	Mexico	7	11	9th
Oscar	20	Male	Low	Columbia	7	13	12th

Rafael	19	Male	Low	Dominican Republic	7	8**	10th
Linda	18	Female	Low	United States El Salvador	18	5	11th
Alex	21	Male	Low	Honduras	6	17	11th
Roberto	25	Male	Low	Mexico	19	6	10th
Manuel	18	Male	Low	Untied States Mother-Peru Father-Argentina	18	5	12th
David	25	Male	Low	United States Mother-Chile Father-Nicaragua	25	5	12th
Leticia	20	Female	Low	United States El Salvador	20	5	11th
Jenny	21	Female	Low	United States Puerto Rico	21	6	12th

*SES-Socioeconomic status self-reported by participant as well as determined by their participation in the Free and Reduced Meal Program in high school.
**See summary regarding educational history

Presentation of Findings

Participant #1

Background. "Mario" laughed uneasily when he noticed the video camera positioned on a tripod. He seemed guarded at the outset of the interview, as he offered single words and word phrases spoken in a low tone of voice in response to the interview questions. However, he seemed to gain confidence as the conversation progressed, and he became more expansive and on several occasions animated, when responding to questions regarding his experiences in and out of school. The interview was conducted in two sessions in the conference room of the organization.

A stud diamond earring protruded from Mario's left earlobe, and a silver chain rested on the front of his shirt. Tattoos advertising his gang affiliation adorned his arms

and neck. A tough stare and hardened expression periodically gave way to a friendly smile. His hard-edge exterior seemed practiced. After responding to several questions regarding his home life, he seemed to loosen up and began to smile with greater frequency.

Mario was born in Mexico. He arrived in the United States at age 11 having never attended school in his native country. Mario's parents immigrated to the United States when he was four years of age, leaving him in the care of his maternal grandmother. The separation lasted for seven years until he was reunited with his parents upon his arrival in the U.S. When asked about the separation, he remembers feeling sad after speaking on the phone with his mother when periodic calls were made to Mexico. He shrugged his shoulders and said that during the period of separation, he missed his mother but added, "My dad and me barely got along." He described feeling "emotional" during their reunion because he was happy to see his mother but he also recalled feeling sad at leaving his grandmother and aunt behind in Mexico. He moved into a two-bedroom apartment with his parents and four siblings in a neighborhood located approximately two miles from the program site. Mario described his neighborhood as "calm" during the day but volatile in the evening, exclaiming: "That's when everything goes off." He added that there was a great deal of "craziness" in the neighborhood by which he meant street robberies and drug- and alcohol-fueled violence. He recalled concurrent feelings of excitement and fear. He said that it was difficult to make friends in his neighborhood.

> It was kind of hard to make friends cause back in the day, people use to be crazy so it was kind of hard. I ain't really speak English like that so I couldn't defend

> myself. My mom use to tell me that when I first came here, people use to speak to me in English and I would always think that they were talking rude so I would curse them out.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Shortly after his arrival, 11-year-old Mario entered the fourth grade at his neighborhood elementary school despite never having attended school in his native country. On the first day of school, he recalled entering the door with his mother filled with feelings of excitement and dread. When asked about that day, he remembered walking the hallways impressed by the students' artwork decorating the wall. He mentioned that drawing was one of his favorite activities, and he felt excited by the prospect that his artwork could one day be proudly displayed as well. He warily eyed groups of students laughing together and walking purposefully down the hallway, and he realized that he had no idea where to go and how to ask for help: "I was trying to get in contact with my classmates. I would try to find someone Spanish to translate for me."

When asked if there were school staff that tried to help him adjust to the environment, he recalled several teachers and one Spanish-speaking counselor who were particularly helpful in assisting him in acclimating to the new environment.
He was placed in beginning-level ESOL classes, and he recalled that his teachers were friendly. He felt that he made strides in developing his English-language skills but he often sat in class not comprehending lessons or the vocabulary used by his teachers.

> My worst class was math. The teacher wasn't really that bad but I couldn't understand what she was saying. I asked for help and she would tell me how to do it but five minutes later, I would forget.

He described ESOL as his favorite class in elementary school because he liked the teacher and the class was small. He recalled his homeroom classes in the fourth and fifth grades as being filled with "lots of kids" and he remembered sitting in silence in the back of the class.

At home, Mario usually spoke Spanish with his mother, but with his older siblings he spoke English. He entered middle school in the sixth grade feeling more confident about his ability to interact in English. When asked to recall what he remembered about the first day of middle school, he said: "It was big. There were so many kids. I knew some of them but most of them I didn't know. Kids were cursing and acting crazy."

Mario continued taking ESOL classes in middle school. He loved his art class and connected with the teacher who he said constantly encouraged him to pursue various forms of art. When asked to provide more detail about his favorite teacher, he responded,

> She was nice. Every time I came late, she wouldn't yell at me. She would just give me the work that I missed. When she saw my art, she told me it was nice. She started talking to me about college. She was like, 'One day you gonna get there.' Sometimes, I would hang in her room for lunch. That was my favorite class.

Mario continued to struggle with math. He recalled sitting down with his math teacher on a few occasions for extra help at lunch and after school, but he continued to struggle despite the individual attention. For the first time since entering school, Mario began to have negative interactions with teachers, primarily around his arriving late to class.

> I had a couple of teachers kick me out of class cause I was two minutes late. I would just wait for the next class and they would call my mom.

Mario recalled having many friends in middle school. He mentioned that he sat in the lunchroom with "the Spanish kids" adding that having friends was the best part of being in school. When asked about his friendships, he candidly shared that when he first met other students, he was often asked,

> Do you smoke? Do you drink? I couldn't say no cause I done it. Instead of helping me, they tried to get with me with that stuff. They tried to get me to skip school. And since I've done it before, it wasn't that hard to skip. I just fell into it. And that's how it started. I just started skipping every day.

During his eighth grade year, Mario estimated that he missed approximately three months of school due to skipping and suspensions. His relationships with some of the school staff deteriorated, and he mentioned one administrator who he felt treated him poorly and wanted him out of the school.

> I had one administrator, she didn't really like me. She's Spanish too, but she seemed racist to me. I could tell by the way she looked at me. She always wanted to get me suspended.

Mario did in fact get suspended towards the latter part of his eighth grade year due to an incident involving his least favorite administrator. Mario shared that he was in a classroom when he saw the administrator projected on the school television making an announcement. Using his thumb and forefinger simulating a gun, he pretended to shoot at her image on the television screen. The teacher in the classroom witnessed the incident

and Mario was suspended for 45 days as a result of the incident. During the period of suspension, Mario attended a "special" program thus enabling him to move on to high school. Mario described feeling excited about moving on to high school. He felt that the environment was not much different from middle school, and he felt confident that he would make new friends. When asked how he felt the first day of high school, he recalled:

> I was happy 'cause I never thought I'd make it to high school. I was ready to do my work; it was time for me to get new friends. Meet new friends, 'cause you know, when everybody goes to high school, they just separate so I was happy to meet new friends. I thought I was going to have some good ones so I don't need to skip school or miss my classes. Yea, so I was happy. I was doing good, too. Until I found gangs and that took me down.

Mario reported that he skipped numerous days of school during his ninth-grade year. He was reluctant to go into detail about his interaction with the gang, but he mentioned that he was "running with a group" that frequently held "skipping parties" where the group would assemble during the school day in a home or in a park to drink alcohol and smoke marijuana. He recalled that the schoolwork in the ninth grade seemed much more challenging in comparison to middle school. When asked about his teachers, he mentioned that he felt that they tried to help him but he wasn't interested in receiving their assistance. He added that he frequently encountered difficulty understanding the spoken and written English used in the classroom. When asked to estimate the number of days that he skipped school, he shared:

> I missed a lot of day. It felt like almost every day. You know when you get your grades, they have a paper that shows if you're in school or not in school. She gave me five long pages that said 'not in school, not in school, not in school' and I had to show it to my mom. It was kind of bad.

At the beginning of the spring semester of his freshman year, Mario was arrested for stealing a car and possessing marijuana. He was incarcerated for several months in a juvenile facility while awaiting disposition of his case, and he was eventually placed on probation. Mario noted that he intended to return to high school for his tenth-grade year but was dissuaded from doing so by his probation officer.

> I told my P.O. that I wanted to go back to school. He was like, 'What's the point of you going back to school if you're going to do the same thing; might as well take your GED.'

Mario opted to follow the advice of his probation officer. He briefly considered the implications of his not returning to high school but ultimately felt that it was his best option given the significant amount of school that he had missed during the ninth grade. He didn't spend a great deal of time wrestling with the decision. "I told my mom, 'All I want to do is have fun, so I might as well take my GED.' She knew what my probation officer told me, so I guess she was OK with it." Mario believed that no staff at his high school seemed to notice that he was gone the previous spring during his period of incarceration. When he did not return to school the following fall, there was no discussion with school staff, nor was there a process of formal administrative withdrawal. He simply stayed away from the building.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. Mario stated that he had numerous distractions in his life that contributed to his leaving school before obtaining a diploma. He believed that his incarceration combined with the ensuing advice that he received from his probation officer to pursue the GED and not return for the tenth grade were the central factors contributing to the event. He perceived that his involvement in the "gang life" was a key distraction contributing to his difficulties in school, as he acknowledged that he was far more interested in hanging out with friends than attending school. Mario missed a significant amount of school due to skipping and suspensions. His excessive absences began in middle school and continued through the ninth grade. Mario acknowledged that he struggled academically throughout school, which contributed to his feeling demoralized and disengaged from the school community. When considering Mario's academic experience, it is important to note the lack of continuity in his educational programming during his elementary school years, as he was placed in the fourth grade upon his arrival to the United States despite never having attended school previously in his native country. As a new arrival, Mario entered the fourth grade with limited English language skills. His challenges in learning the language as well as accessing the curriculum were exacerbated by his lack of opportunity to acquire basic concepts and Spanish literacy skills during early childhood.

Throughout his middle and high school years, Mario perceived that there were school personnel that wanted him out of the school. He believed that many of the suspensions that he received were unjust and attributed to overly punitive school policies. Mario also perceived a school administrator as "racist" and vindictive, believing that she

was committed to having him banished from the school. When he opted to not return to school after his period of incarceration, he observed that no school personnel seemed to notice, as no staff attempted to talk with him regarding his decision to leave school: "For real, they seemed like they didn't really care. I guess they wanted me out of the school."

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. When asked what the school could have done differently to encourage him to stay in school, he struggled to formulate his response. He acknowledged that it was hard for him to focus on school because of his difficult relationship with his father at home as well as his relationships with friends outside of school. He thought further about the question before responding,

> I don't know. I guess….I mean…I don't really know. I guess they got to have a little more programs that have to do with having fun, so they [students] don't have to think about other stuff. Cause when you're in class and you're all bored, you just tired of doing the same work; you just feel like leaving.

Mario explicated further by saying that he believed that it was important for the school to provide programs that were not solely academically oriented. He noted that the school could better engage students by offering classes and programs that appealed to individual interests and addressed topics that are important to students. He recalled taking a cooking class during his ninth-grade year that he described as engaging and fun, though he was not able to complete the class due to his incarceration. Mario also shared that he had difficulty focusing on school work in a large class, and he believed that students would be more engaged in a small group setting whereby they could receive more

individualized attention. He also felt that the school could engage students by creating opportunities for the students to discuss issues of importance.

> I guess every Friday, I would have not exactly a big party, but just buy pizzas for every class. To have one class that talks about drugs, so kids could actually think about it and not leave school.

Mario expressed regret about leaving school in the ninth grade, because he felt that he had disappointed his mother.

> She wanted me to finish school and go to college, but I couldn't do that. What I'm going to do is get my GED and surprise her. And after I get my GED, I may want to go to college and she'll be happy about it.

Mario was optimistic about his future. He proudly showed the interviewer a worn folder containing his sketches. Then as the conversation proceeded, he revealed his goal of opening a tattoo art studio. At the time of this interview, Mario was enrolled in the GED class at the community-based organization. He noted that the GED was a much harder test than he originally anticipated, but he added that he was committed to staying with the classes until successfully completing the exam. When asked what advice he would give to other Latino students, who were considering leaving school without a diploma, he said:

> I'd tell em straight up. Don't mess up. Your mom brought you here to have a good life. The same thing my mom told me. She brought me here to have a good life. I mean, I'm having a good life, but not good like she wanted me to have it. So work hard to get what you want if you really want it. And show your mom that you are able to do it.

Postscript: Mario continued attending the GED preparation classes, which helped prepare him to pass two of the five sections of the exam. Three weeks after our final interview, Mario was arrested for his involvement in a street robbery of a cell phone.

Participant #2

Background. "Oscar" was described by his case worker as "hard working" and "conscientious," qualities that contributed to his passing the GED several months prior to the interview. His successful completion of the exam was no small undertaking, as he worked full-time while taking GED classes at the center. During the interview, Oscar maintained a solemn expression on his face that conveyed deep sadness. He expressed himself with little difficulty while looking directly into the camera. He periodically directed his gaze downward when discussing his childhood and the events that led to his leaving high school.

Oscar was born in Medellin, Colombia. Abandoned at birth, he spent the first 12 years of life living in an orphanage and a group home along with his older sister. He attended the first through sixth grades in his native country prior to his arrival to the United States. Oscar recalled that his teachers were strict but skilled instructors who taught him to read and write in Spanish. He mentioned that he stayed in the same classroom throughout the day with different teachers shuttling in and out to deliver the core subjects. Though he reported feeling moderately challenged by the school work, he proudly stated that he made the honor roll for his fifth and sixth grade years, and he

recalled being accorded the coveted duty of taking down the flag in front of the school at the end of the day as a reward for his good grades.

Oscar had mostly good memories of the group home in Colombia, describing the staff as kind and caring. Shortly before his 13th birthday, a family from the United States adopted Oscar and his sister. The two siblings flew from Medellin to Maryland and were instantly immersed in a new country, culture and family. Oscar and his sister spoke no English upon their arrival to the U.S., though their adoptive parents were fluent in Spanish. When asked about his initial impressions of the United States, Oscar recalled his feelings when the plane was taxiing on the tarmac after landing from Colombia.

> I was crying. I mean, I thought about everything I left in Colombia. Like I said, I enjoyed living there so everything was really new. I didn't know if I was going to get use to it. Was this what I really want? I mean, I was little but I still knew that my life was changed and would never be the same. I was scared. *Really, really scared*. When I was in Colombia, I was excited to come here 'cause everybody talks about the United States, but when I got here I was nervous because everything was different. The food, the weather, the way people are so it was really hard in the beginning.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Two weeks after his arrival, Oscar entered the seventh grade at his local middle school and his sister was enrolled in the neighborhood high school. He recalled feeling terrified on the first day.

> I just remember, I was looking around trying to see if somebody could talk to me in Spanish. Cause I knew I wasn't able to go to their classes. The school was way bigger than the school in Colombia. Like I said, over there it's the teachers that switch classes. When I started reading the schedule, it was in English and I didn't understand. I didn't know anything. I didn't know what PE meant. I didn't understand what math meant, whatever class I had. It was hard. I was just standing there in one place hoping for someone to come to my aid.

After walking the hallway aimlessly, Oscar was approached by a school security guard who realized that Oscar was lost and in need of assistance. Oscar was led to the front office, but he remembered that there was no staff that could communicate with him. Oscar was then matched with a Spanish-speaking student who also happened to be from Colombia, and Oscar remained with the student for the next several weeks throughout his entire school day. He conversed with the student but remained silent for most of the day.

> When I first started going to school, I didn't talk to nobody. I was scared. I didn't speak any English only like, 'one, two three.'

When asked to describe his initial impressions of the school, Oscar remembered,

> The school was big with lots of kids. A lot of different kinds of kids. Chinese, Blacks, Whites, Spanish, India, everybody…I was like, I never seen this in my life. Also, there wasn't a uniform; here you wear what you want.

Oscar was placed in beginning-level ESOL classes. He took "sheltered" ESOL content classes, including ESOL math and ESOL social studies. He encountered particular difficulty in his math class, because he recalled not understanding a word that the teacher was saying when she presented the lessons. He felt intimidated by the environment. He shared that he wasn't interested in learning because he felt like he was "never going to speak English." His challenges at school were heightened by difficulties that he was experiencing with his adoptive family. Oscar shared that his sister never connected with her new family. There was immediate conflict in the home between his

sister and the adoptive parents and three weeks after her arrival in the U.S., she ran away from home. She was brought back home by the police almost immediately but left the home once again the following day. The parents then went to court to disallow the adoption of Oscar's sister. Oscar was given the choice of remaining with the family or going with his sister.

> When the court was over, they asked me if I wanted to be with them or be with my sister. So I said that I wasn't going to be able to go back and live with them. Of course I was going to choose my sister. That's when everything changed.

The change was dramatic and at times painful. One month after his arrival in the U.S., Oscar was placed in foster care where he bounced between five different placements during his first year. He recalled struggling with the frequent change.

> There were a lot of changes. I was trying my hardest but I was still a little kid. I didn't know how to deal with it. That's how foster care looks like. If the people don't feel comfortable with you, they try to look for something else so my first years over here was moving and moving…I cried a lot. Most of the days, I was really down 'cause to be honest, there was a point when I regretted coming here. I wished I could go back where I was living…I was use to Colombia.

Oscar continued to struggle academically during his seventh and eighth grade years. He made some friends in the seventh grade but he remembered mostly keeping to himself. During his eighth grade year, he made some strides in developing English language skills, but he was still self-conscious about his ability to use English in a social setting. He continued to struggle to understand his teachers when they presented lessons in class.

> The thing with me, I was only speaking Spanish. I wasn't really hanging out with anybody who was speaking English. The only time that I would hear English was when I was in my classes. English, social studies, math. But everything else, hanging out with friends, going out, it was Spanish so my English wasn't that good.

Oscar grew increasingly frustrated with the frequent changes in his home life. The summer before his ninth-grade year, he was informed that he would be placed with yet another family, and Oscar decided that he could no longer live placement to placement. He had lost contact with his sister, which heightened his frustration, anxiety, and sadness. Sleeping on the couches and floors of friends and acquaintances, Oscar entered the ninth grade with no fixed address.

> I started looking for my own places and stuff. Asking friends if I could stay with them and stuff like that. I didn't want to be in the foster care program no more. I felt like, I don't know, I felt like the way they were doing things, I didn't like. They wanted to control me.

In the ninth grade, Oscar began to skip school frequently. He started hanging with a group of kids that he characterized as "gang wannabes" whose primary interests seemed to be drinking and fighting. Oscar estimated that he missed approximately three months of school during the ninth grade. He continued to have difficulty understanding his teachers, and he failed most of his classes. When given an assignment, he would either copy from a classmate or leave the page blank. He was suspended from school several times during his ninth grade year due to fighting and excessive absences.

Oscar used the address of a friend to enroll in a new high school. He entered the tenth grade with a renewed perspective buoyed by the prospect of playing soccer on the school team. He recalled taking school much more seriously during his tenth grade year.

> The reason was that I started getting serious cause I started knowing that the only way that you could play on the soccer team was you had to have a 2.0 [GPA]. And I left all the people that I use to know at the other school. I stopped talking to them. I guess I took it more serious. I wanted to do something good.

Oscar's life was on the upswing. He made the varsity soccer team and received recognition as one of the better players. He improved his English-language skills and he connected with his counselor who he felt genuinely cared and would go the "extra mile" to help him. When asked what he liked about his counselor, he recalled,

> She was understanding. She understood me. She always told me that any time I needed to talk to her or I needed help, anything, just to let her know. She took the initial step with me. She showed that she really cared about me as a person. I never had anybody at the school treat me that way before.

Oscar continued to have a positive school experience during his 11th-grade year. Soccer was his main motivation to put forth a strong effort in school, but he also felt a great to deal of support coming from his counselor. He completed 11th grade without incident and began to dream of attending the University of Maryland on a soccer scholarship. However, at the end of his 12th-grade year, he was informed that he did not have the requisite credits to graduate due primarily to excessive absences and failed classes. In a meeting with school administrators and his counselor, Oscar was told to come back in the fall to repeat the twelfth grade. Oscar watched several friends walk

across the school auditorium floor to accept their diplomas, and he felt demoralized. Oscar moved once again prior to his repeating the twelfth grade. He was invited to live in the basement of a friend's house and school administrators somehow found out that he had changed his address. He was then required to attend his "home school," which was a far less desirable setting in his mind. Oscar missed his friends, but he especially missed his counselor.

Repeating the twelfth grade was deflating, and Oscar lost his motivation to go. He struggled to focus on his schoolwork noting the numerous distractions in his life. Halfway through the school year, Oscar reached the breaking point. He felt disconnected from the school environment, rudderless with no sense of purpose. Attending school seemed pointless. There was no one at the school that he felt comfortable sharing his feelings with. He cited the uncertainty of his living situation combined with his concern for his sister as the main factors underlying his feeling that school just didn't matter anymore.

> I was basically getting kicked out of places. Going to school and dealing with my life was overwhelming. I also lost communication with my sister. Like I didn't know anything about her. Nighttime was the hardest. I was on my own. I was really asking myself if I should be living. What's the point of living if you have to live like this? Thank God I never committed suicide or anything like that. 'Cause I think that's stupid, but I was asking myself a lot of questions. Where am I going to sleep tonight? What am I going to eat? And all these things, I wasn't concentrating at all on school. I was just going just to go. I wasn't taking my binder, pencils, anything. I would just go there just to show up and then I would leave class early. I'd skip school. I wasn't finishing the day.

In reflecting further on what he considered to be the primary factors behind his struggle to return to the school, he shared:

> My sister, I wasn't talking to her and I was worried about her and also the fact that…I mean one thing that has kept me from doing something with my life has been the situation with my mom and my dad; you know, not ever knowing who they are. That's one thing that to this day, I always ask, 'Why me?' When I see a lot of my friends you know, happy with their families knowing that there is a place secure for them to go sleep. And that wasn't the case for me. For me, it was hard. I wish, I wish, I really wish that my mom and my dad were here. I think things would have been better. But, I mean everything happens for a reason. But those two were the main, main reasons why. And also I didn't know if I was going to have a place to sleep. I thought I was going to be in the streets.

When Oscar stopped attending school, no staff seemed to notice. He felt that school personnel were disinterested in his whereabouts, because no one from the school made any effort to contact him. In contrast to his previous high school, Oscar never connected with his teachers or counselors. On several occasions, he recalled being approached by administrators due to his missing school. He also remembered talking with a teacher who asked him about his excessive absences. On two occasions, Oscar spoke with his counselor about his difficulties outside of school, and it was his sense that she believed he was making excuses. She seemed mean and indifferent to his situation. Oscar perceived a pervading lack of understanding and empathy on the part of school personnel.

> They think that I'm making excuses when they don't know the things that you are going through. Not knowing what's happening with you. They don't understand. A lot of people don't understand that because they feel like, 'If you don't go to school…' It's true, specially in the United States. Everything is school here. But they don't see that you have problems, that you have issues in your life. A lot of

> Hispanics, a lot of kids go through things that nobody knows and just cause they don't talk about it doesn't mean that you don't go to school because you don't want to but there are things inside of you that are killing you. A lot of the teachers and counselors at [school name redacted] they didn't understand that so I was like, whatever.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. Oscar faced multiple challenges in his life that contributed to his not returning to school. His tenuous home life, which included frequent moves and constant concern for his sister, made it difficult for him to focus on academics and rendered school secondary to his survival. At times, Oscar was basically homeless. Oscar cited those challenges combined with the profound sadness that he felt in not knowing his parents as the primary factors underlying his difficulty in completing high school. Oscar also mentioned that his frequent absences from school due to skipping and suspensions contributed to an overall feeling that school lacked importance.

Oscar detailed a mostly positive school experience during 11th and 12th grade. Motivated by his participation on the soccer team, Oscar had good attendance while making strides in his academic development. He connected with his counselor at the school, which he said contributed heavily to an overall positive school experience. However, he lacked the required credits to graduate and was compelled to attend a different high school on account of moving into another school district. He had no connection with staff at the new school, and he found the new school environment cold and unwelcoming. Receiving the news that he would have to repeat the 12th grade was overwhelming and demoralizing. The absence of an empathetic adult at the school who

could have helped Oscar process the information was crushing. When he saw his friends graduate the previous spring, he felt depressed and disheartened: "I felt like I was never going to do that. I didn't feel motivated. You know, I felt good for them but I was like, 'Why can't I do that?' I stopped going to school."

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. When asked what the school could have done differently to influence a more positive outcome, Oscar returned to his belief that a heightened understanding on the part of school personnel regarding his difficulties outside of school could have made a difference.

> If they would understand that it wasn't that I didn't want to go to school but I was going through something, it probably would have been different. I don't think they understand that. Some teachers, some counselors think that we always have an excuse for everything. It's not even like that. You go through things, you know, they have to understand. It's not like you're making things up so you can get out of school.

Oscar noted that nine of his friends also left school without a diploma. He cited distractions such as gang life, drugs, and alcohol as causal factors, but he also believed that the absence of interesting and engaging programs was a significant reason that many of his peers left school prior to graduation. He stated that he believed that many students leave school because they feel that school is "boring" and lacks purpose. "Some kids want to work, and they don't really see that high school is going to get them a job." He also reflected on his participation on the soccer team and how key that experience was to his having a positive tenth and eleventh grade year. He related his belief that sports

activities and after school clubs could have a positive impact on keeping students engaged in school.

> You know, you're young and you're energized. You want to do more than go to the classroom and sit there for 45 minutes or an hour. So it's like, so this is what I think, we want more to do, more than just sitting in a classroom. If there were like extra activities for the kids that they could get interested in, that would be a big help.

Oscar returned to his belief that empathy on the part of school personnel could also have a positive impact on keeping students from leaving school. He noted that many of his peers struggle with crushing difficulties that are often met with indifference or disbelief by school personnel.

> I mean, believe them when they are talking about something. It's not just…I don't know, sometimes I feel like sometimes, you just got to believe us. Adults…they don't believe the students. I mean, some students lie but they don't always lie. They don't always have excuses. Be more understanding.

After leaving high school, Oscar enrolled in the GED class and counseling program at the community-based center. He was assigned a case manager who assisted him in acquiring employment and housing. Oscar worked hard in the GED classes ultimately passing the exam last spring. Perhaps most importantly, his case manager was instrumental in helping Oscar locate and reconnect with his sister who he now sees frequently and speaks to on a daily basis. At the time of the interview, Oscar was working in maintenance and housekeeping at a local health spa. He spoke of his desire to enroll in the local community college with an eye towards transitioning to a four-year degree

program. “I just hope I make it. I’m working hard to make it. I don’t want to give up. I’ve been through a lot…I want to go to school to be whatever I want to be.”

Participant #3

Background. At the time of the interview, “Rafael” was enrolled in the GED class while receiving substance abuse counseling at the center under a court diversion order. He travelled by bus to the center for his classes and counseling sessions before heading off to his job at McDonalds, where he had worked for several years. Rafael struggled mightily with the GED. After eight months of GED classes and several attempts at taking the test, he had yet to pass any of the five sections. The frustration showed on his face when discussing the exam.

Rafael wore a hooded sweatshirt with a jet-black skullcap placed tight on his head. He clenched his hands together and shifted uneasily in his chair when offering his responses to the interview questions. Rafael spoke in short staccato bursts frequently punctuating his thoughts with “you know” or “for real.” When told of the purpose of the interview, he seemed eager to offer his perspective. He related that he had a lot to share because he had been through a lot.

Rafael was six years old when he arrived in the United States from his native Dominican Republic. He came to the U.S. to be with his father in New York while his mother remained in D.R. He attended kindergarten through the fifth grades in New York City before going back to the Dominican Republic for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. Rafael entered kindergarten speaking no English. He was placed in beginning-

level ESOL classes, and he recalled a teacher that he liked who worked with him individually on developing his English-language skills. He had particularly fond memories of being taken to Burger King as a reward for doing well in his ESOL class.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Rafael recalled having a positive elementary school experience in New York City. He made friends easily and reported that he had good relationships with his teachers. He also noted that when he returned to the Dominican Republic, school went well. He described his teachers as "nice" and "respectful," though he remembered that there were "a lot of students and only one teacher in the classroom." After completing the eighth grade, he was sent back to the United States to live with his father who had recently remarried and relocated to Hyattsville, Maryland. He recalled missing his mother and resenting his stepmother.

Rafael entered the ninth grade in Prince George's County public schools. He wasn't intimidated by the size of the school, as he had seen schools with large student populations in New York and the Dominican Republic. He continued receiving ESOL instruction, noting that he felt more confident about speaking English with friends and out in the community. He had positive memories of his counselor in the ninth grade, who he felt showed genuine concern for his well being. When asked about his classes, he reported that he encountered little difficulty with the work; he recalled completing the ninth grade without incident.

Prior to entering 10th grade, Rafael started hanging out with a group of kids who he described as a "bad influence." When asked to elaborate, he explained: "I don't know, they just try to ruin my life by doing bad stuff, like robbing, shooting all that stuff just to

get the fast money." Rafael found schoolwork harder in 10th grade. He noted that he frequently encountered difficulty understanding his teachers when they presented lessons. Rafael began attending "skip parties" where he would drink beer and smoke marijuana. He estimated that he missed over two months of school during his tenth grade year. Rafael also recalled engaging in frequent conflicts with teachers and administrators, primarily around his being absent from school or late to class. He perceived that the school policy around tardiness was excessively strict and punitive.

> I'm trying to get my books and my locker and when you get to class like two minutes late, they write you up for that. They suspend you for everything. Like I don't know, they don't believe you and stuff like that. Basically, they making it hard for you just 'cause if you were three or two minutes late, know what I'm saying, it's basically the teacher making it hard for you 'cause they gotta follow the rule.

When asked if he had positive relationships with either teachers or administrators during the tenth grade, he recalled that his relationships with school staff were mostly combative, though he recounted a few positive interactions.

> For real, for real, the security guards was good to me and one teacher was good to me. She helped me out with everything I needed. Let's say, uh, let's say I needed a job. They helped me get a job cause they know me and they know that I'm trying to do good. And they trying to help me out. She helped me get a job at McDonalds, know what I'm saying?

Rafael reported that he was constantly "getting into it" with one administrator in particular. He believed that the administrator had a vendetta against him and wanted him out of the school. It was his perception that her actions were racially motivated.

> I don't know, she was hating on me just cause I was Spanish or something like that and she was black, you know what I'm saying. And like, I use to be walking and stuff and let's say going to my class and they'd be like walking around watching and let's say, let's say one of my friends come up and hug me or something like that, they just look at you like, judging you like you doing some wrong stuff. They just waiting for you to do something or to get a chance to write you up, and then you be like, you lost. You don't even know why or what you did wrong.

Rafael continued to skip school. He was suspended several times during the school year, ostensibly for tardiness though he had only a vague notion as to the specific infractions that led to his being asked to leave the school.

> She said that I wasn't doing what I'm supposed to be doing, and she kicked me out of school. She said, like, like, I don't know, she always said that I'm going late and it wasn't like that.

Rafael described his relationships with school staff as combative and adversarial. He felt isolated and distrustful of the adults at the school and regretted not having a teacher or counselor that he could confide in.

> I knew I was messing up. I was mad. If that administrator wasn't there, I probably would have graduated.

Towards the latter part of the school year, Rafael was suspended once again. During the period of suspension, he was arrested while riding in the back seat of a stolen car. He spent one night in the juvenile detention center and was assigned a probation officer. With only a few weeks left in the school year, Rafael attempted to return to his high school, but he reported that he was directed by the school administrator to not return

until the following school year. He noted that she imposed several conditions for his return including obtaining letters of recommendations from the pastor of the church attended by his family and a letter from his manager at McDonalds. Prior to entering the 11th grade, Rafael turned eighteen. He returned to his school in the fall with the requested letters but was told that he would be unable to re-enter because he had surpassed the maximum age to attend school.

> I had just turned eighteen, know what I'm saying, and basically to let me back in school, they asked for all these things. They made it seem like they didn't want me to come back to school….They kicked me out and they, I was asking why, and their reasons didn't make no sense. I'm trying to come back cause I was doing much better and they still, they was trying to make it more hard for me so I was like, I'm done with this. They not going to hold me down.

With no further discussion with school personnel, Rafael's high school career came to an abrupt end. No meetings with school staff or paper work to complete; he simply stopped attending based on the administrator's contention that he had aged out of the system.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. Rafael felt bitter about the way he was treated by school staff. He perceived that the administrator and other school personnel wanted him banished from the school, and he believed that his experience would have been different had he come in contact with school staff who truly cared about him and wanted to help.

> They need to treat people different and be nice. If you a teacher, you can't take it personally if you come to class a little late…. You're trying to help somebody, know what I'm saying, not try to make it hard for somebody.

Rafael stated that he struggled academically during the tenth grade, which contributed to a feeling of frustration about school. He struggled to comprehend written material, and he had difficulty understanding his teachers when they presented information orally. Primarily, he was frustrated because he believed that he was being singled out due to his adversarial relationship with school staff. He also perceived that school personnel discriminated against him because he was Latino. He acknowledged that his missing school due to skip parties, suspensions, and his arrest contributed to his academic difficulties and disengagement from the school environment; however, he felt strongly that he wanted to return for the 11th grade, and he stated that he was ready to make changes in his life. Though he complied with the request, he believed that imposed conditions were tantamount to setting up roadblocks to impede his return, which further fueled his perception that he was unwelcome at the school.

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. When asked what the school could have done differently to better support Rafael and perhaps influence a different outcome, he responded:

> For real, for real, to tell you the truth, basically, um, they got to treat people the way they treat their family. You trying to help people and help them learn and stuff like that but if you trying to make it hard, you probably not going to make it nowhere.

Rafael shared that he had eight friends who also left school prior to obtaining a diploma. It was his sense they left school prematurely out of boredom or their desire to obtain employment. He felt strongly that schools should make a stronger effort to keep kids

engaged, by offering greater opportunity for academic support and vocational programs. "For real, for real, people need help. Help them with what they need and what they need to learn."

Participant #4

Background. "Linda" smiled easily while looking directly into the camera during the interview. She seemed thoughtful and introspective displaying no reluctance to respond to the various questions. While she spoke in a clear manner, it was noted that the level of her voice rose and dropped depending on the subject matter. She seemed honest and forthright and deeply regretful that she left high school in 11th grade. Several months after leaving school, she enrolled in the GED and counseling programs at the community-based center. Linda seemed personable when interacting with program staff and peers and fiercely determined to obtain her GED. Linda shared that she gave birth to her daughter after leaving high school, and her eyes sparkled when asked about her daughter. She seemed optimistic when discussing the future, but it was evident by her words and the tone of her voice that she felt disconsolate about her past.

In the mid-1980s, amidst rampant violence and grim poverty, Linda's parents left El Salvador believing that there were greater opportunities for success in the United States. Shortly after their arrival in the U.S., Linda's parents settled in a garden apartment in Prince George's County. Linda's older sister was born shortly afterwards and just over a year later, Linda and her twin sister arrived. Their parents were deeply religious, and Linda's involvement in the Catholic Church began during early childhood. After

spending her early years in Prince George's County, the family moved to Germantown, Maryland to a better neighborhood. Linda recalled that her first neighborhood as crime-ridden and volatile.

> We moved for a reason. I remember we'd wake up and there would be blood on the sidewalk from the night prior, from the night before. It would be too loud, we couldn't sleep. There would be too much of a ruckus. Like, it was just too much to the point where families in the neighborhood wouldn't let their kids go outside to play.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Linda entered the first grade in a Montgomery County public school in Germantown. She disliked school from the beginning. She made a few friends through her older sister, but she remembers mostly interacting with her sisters and her cousins who lived in the neighborhood and attended the same school. Linda said that she struggled academically, particularly with math. She spoke only Spanish with her parents, but she recalled learning English fairly easily due to her interactions with her sisters and cousins. Linda reported that she attended ESOL classes for only a couple of years in elementary school. For most of elementary school, she said that she remained quiet and "out of sight" in the back of the classroom. She recalled not connecting with any teachers during that time; however, she had fond memories of her interactions in the third grade with the school librarian who offered a great deal of support.

> Well, I had um, what do you call, a mentor? And she was the librarian of the school. I still remember her face, how she spoke. Every time I had a problem, I would go to her. She helped me out a lot with everything. All the problems I had, the difficulties, most everything, she could help me with that.

Linda had mostly bad memories of her elementary school experience, and she recalled a difficult transition to middle school:

> My school was not the greatest, especially the first year at [name redacted]. Germantown was such a new place for me. Everyone already had their friends, they all hung together. And my sister was older so we didn't really hang in middle school. I remember sixth grade was the worst. I felt distant towards everyone and everything. I would wear like, boy clothes. Like, I was a little chunkier then so I kept to myself. The friends I did have were the girls that would shadow me. They didn't speak English so I would have to translate for them and show them around and then we obviously grew to like each other and became friends. That was more of the people that I chose to hang out with.

She sat with other Latino students at lunch, and she was struck by how cliquish the lunchroom became when it was time to eat. She liked her home economics class, but she continued to struggle with math feeling progressively more self-conscious about her difficulties in the math classroom.

> I didn't understand it. I didn't understand anything. I guess you could say I would feel really, slow you could say, like asking for help. I tended not to do it. It would be embarrassing to me cause I felt like I was the only one who didn't understand. I didn't understand anything 'cause they work at a fast pace and I work slow. …Everyone just got it after being shown it a couple of times and they could do the equations but like, I never got it. It never clicked for me.

Linda had negative memories of her classes in middle school. Although her attendance was good, she achieved low grades in the majority of her classes. She cited her home economics class as her only "good class" attributing her positive experience to the teacher. She smiled when describing the teacher.

> The teacher was older and she was probably in her late fifties. She was friendly and warm. She'd never talk down to you and so like, you felt like you were on an equal level with her. You wouldn't feel below her. Feel like, if you did something wrong in the class, she would judge you. She was like very understanding and she knew how to teach.

Linda recalled her transition to high school as a challenge but made somewhat easier by her older sister who had entered the previous year and helped prepare her for the new environment. Nevertheless, the size and the noise level of the high school felt overwhelming. She found it difficult to focus on her classes due to the distractions. She grimaced when recalling her first days in high school.

> Everyone was so, I'd say vulgar in the way they speak. Cussing…things were inappropriate. Nothing was the same. Nothing. It was hard to concentrate on anything.

Linda struggled in her classes but made friends easily in the ninth grade. She befriended several girls who were recent arrivals in the country. Linda acted as interpreter and helped the students negotiate the new school environment. At lunch, she hung out with other Latino students gaining a reputation as an advocate for new arrivals.

> At lunch, we had like a…they would call it the "Spanish corner" and it would be like a whole flight of stairs from the second floor to the down stairs to the cafeteria and there were a couple of vending machines and we would take like the whole space. That was our space.

Linda was "shadowed" by the newly arrived students throughout the day. Though her experience as a U.S.-born Latina was significantly different from that of the Latin-

American-born children who had just arrived, she felt empathy towards them as they struggled to cope with the new language, culture, and environment. She also felt outrage towards those who bullied them for being different.

> There were three girls and they were friends of mine and they didn't speak English. And then there was this white girl and she was telling them things that they didn't understand so when I asked her what she was talking about, she said that they needed to go back to their country, they didn't need to be here, blah, blah, blah…she didn't get to finish her sentence before I got in my feelings you could say and started kind of like beating on the girl. It just made me so angry because I was always taught in my house, you never look down on people because of what they can't do. Even now, if people are talking something not nice about people who can't speak English or don't have their papers, although I speak English and I have my papers, it still upsets me very much even if the people are…especially if the people that are saying it are Hispanics themselves. Like, don't ever consider yourself better then them just because you have something that they don't. That's something that I don't like and I was never taught to think like that.

Halfway through the first quarter of the ninth grade, Linda began to skip school. Although she struggled with the work in her classes, she noted that the central reason for her skipping school was that she simply wanted to be with her friends.

> I was more interested in what my friends were doing. Most of my friends were older than me so it wasn't their first year there. So they'd be like, let's leave school and do this, so we'd go and it wouldn't matter what type of trouble we got in.

Linda also recalled that she was beginning to question her religious upbringing. She decried the lack of freedom in her life, noting that skipping school was an expression of rebellion against her parents. Linda estimated that she skipped over two months of school

during her ninth grade year. In her mind, school was boring and lacked the excitement that she felt when she was skipping school with her friends.

> It was because my parents were very religious, very strict, Catholics. So, it was school, home, church, and back for me. So the only time I wasn't with them was in school so I would kind of take advantage of the situation. Kind of just leave. I'd have my freedom time and do what I felt like doing and then pretended like I was in school the whole day cause I had no type of freedom, no type of outdoor life, nothing.

Linda felt that she gained a reputation among her teachers as an unruly student who lacked motivation to perform schoolwork. On the days when she would show up to class, she perceived that her teachers were indifferent to her being present in the classroom.

> After a while, they kind of looked at me as the girl who never came to class. It came to the point when teachers wouldn't even pass papers to me because they knew that I wasn't going to do them, just write my name on them and turn them in with just my name.

She recalled one administrator and a teacher expressing concern to her about the inordinate amount of school that she was missing during her ninth-grade year. On the days when Linda would come to school, staff would try to talk to her and determine if she was sick or if there was a crisis in the family. Linda's parents were called to the school to discuss their daughter's poor attendance, but Linda grew increasingly defiant. Her relationship with her parents deteriorated to the point where Linda left her parents' house to live with friends. When Linda recalled the stress that she was feeling around her relationship with her parents, her voice cracked and the sadness in her eyes was evident.

> I felt so much was expected of me. I was being talked down to by my parents, my older sister; the church looked at me as the "bad girl" in the family, like it was so much pressure and I wanted to get away from it, all of it.

In 10th grade, Linda showed slight improvement in her attendance. She continued to fail math, but she noted that she was performing well in her government class. A teaching assistant worked individually with Linda, and she recalled that the individualized attention was key to her understanding the material. Although her attendance had improved, she still lost credit in several of her classes due to missed assignments and excessive absences. Linda entered 11th grade with an uneasy feeling. She felt demoralized by her poor school experience and upset that she had become estranged from her parents. After attending the 11th grade for three months, Linda left school for good. She recalled emptying her locker with the intention of never returning to the school.

> I remember getting my things out of my locker one day and saying, 'This is the last day, I'm not coming back.' I told my sister that I wasn't coming back. She tried to convince me to stay but the bell rang and she had to go to class. All she said was, 'I hope you make the right decision.' But I left and I didn't even think about it at the time.

Prior to her departure, Linda had no discussion with the adults at the school regarding her feelings and intention to leave. After she left, the school administrator tried to get her to return, but it was to no avail. Linda had made up her mind and there was no turning back.

> He did a lot to try to get me to come back. He called my house, he called my parents and he would set up, like meetings with my family but of course, they couldn't make me do anything that I didn't want to do at the time.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. Linda stated she believes that there was not much the school could have done differently to change the outcome of her high school experience. She cited the stress associated with her relationship with her parents as the central factor that contributed to her leaving school, but she quickly added that she was solely responsible for her decision to not return to school: "I had enough. I just made the decision on my own. I just left. I couldn't deal with it anymore."

When asked to reflect further on her decision, she mentioned that her negative feelings about school began in elementary school, as she described herself as shy and socially awkward. Throughout middle and high school, she struggled academically, particularly in the area of mathematics. She felt demoralized by her poor school performance, which became an additional source of conflict between Linda and her parents. After years of struggle in her classes, skipping school seemed like the natural progression. She missed a significant amount of school beginning in the ninth grade, which she believes ultimately made it easier for her to leave school for good in the 11th grade.

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. When asked to consider how schools could better support other students who may consider leaving school, she remained silent for a sustained period of time before formulating a response.

> Well, I guess they could look into their interests, see what they like. Maybe take a survey or something of that sort. Just see what the kids are interested in and sponsor it, have time for it. Maybe, somebody doesn't necessarily have to be working at the school, maybe contract somebody to do it. Somebody that the kids can get along with.

Linda recalled participating in an after-school Latin dance club during the 10th grade. She enjoyed her interactions with the other participants as well as the dance instructor. She proudly remembered her participation in a dance exhibition that took place in the school auditorium. She recalled feeling a greater connection to the school community through her participation in the dance club. She also felt that the club motivated her to come to school, as she looked forward to dancing with her friends from the moment that she entered the building in the morning.

Linda also stated that it was important for schools to have counselors and other staff that are able to connect with students. She added that schools should employ bilingual staff to assist students who lack English proficiency. Through her interaction with the counselors at the GED program, Linda stated that she realized the importance of vulnerable youth sharing their feelings with trusted staff and peers. She described school as a "cold place where kids often feel alone and on their own," adding that "finding somebody to connect with the kids, like a mentor" could have a positive impact on keeping students invested in school.

Linda sighed heavily and directed her gaze downward when reflecting on her decision to leave school. She lamented leaving school during the 11th grade, stating that if she could go back in time, she would have opted to remain in school. When asked about

what she would change about her school experience, her eyes filled with tears and she responded in a low voice.

> My attendance of course I should have gone. People always say, 'Dropping out of high school is going to be the worst decision you ever make' and you don't know it until you see everyone who is in your grade graduating and you're at the graduation but the only one not in the cap and gown…My twin sister was on stage and all of our friends and like our girlfriends, whatever but like, I was just there sitting in the audience with my mom, my daughter, and my dad.

When asked what advice she would give to students contemplating leaving school before graduation, she looked directly at the camera and offered her response in a confident tone and unwavering voice.

> My advice would be to find your support buddy, like, even if it's a friend, a counselor, a coach, a fellow student, it doesn't matter. Just find your support and do well together. Don't leave high school. They'll regret it. Trust me, they'll regret it. And you think you're doing bad now, imagine when everybody is graduating except you. How you gonna feel? It's not a good feeling. I'll let you know that right now. So just find that support that you need and do well. That's it.

Participant #5

Background. "Alex" obtained his GED six months after enrolling in the classes at the community-based center, garnering the respect of staff and peers for his hard work and determination. He began to learn English only five years prior to his taking the exam, which made his achievement all the more impressive. Despite his accomplishment in developing English language skills, he seemed self-conscious about speaking English and when given the choice, he opted to use Spanish in the interview. Although he seemed

reserved, Alex responded to questions with no hesitancy. Looking directly into the camera while speaking in an unwavering voice, he conveyed forthrightness combined with sadness when discussing the events in his life.

Alex was born in a small town in Honduras, where he attended first through eighth grade. Encouraged by his uncle who had immigrated from Honduras during the early 1990s and settled in Richmond, Virginia, Alex left his parents and siblings behind to embark on a three-month journey north to the United States. For a 15-year-old adolescent traveling alone, the trip was arduous and at times frightening. He took several buses to cross over from Honduras to Guatemala followed by several more to pass from Guatemala into Mexico. From the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas, he stowed away on a series of freight trains rumbling north to the United States. Alex rode cars filled with cattle and produce and on one occasion, another stowaway who attempted to rob him. After three months of difficult travel, he arrived at the "frontera" where he remained for several days while determining how he was going to cross over the border. With the help of a fellow traveler and under the cover of darkness, he crossed into the United States. Traveling by bus, he made his way through the south to Maryland where he joined his grandmother and other family members.

To pass the time during the journey north from Honduras, Alex dreamed of his new life in the United States. He envisioned attending high school before entering college, which would then lead to a career, perhaps in engineering. While completing his studies, he planned to work with his uncle so that he could support himself while

providing financial help to his family back in Honduras. Alex's dream bore little resemblance to the reality that he faced immediately upon his arrival to the U.S.

Alex joined his grandmother in Maryland on a Friday and by Saturday he was digging ditches in Richmond with his uncle. He then spent the next two years working with his uncle laying pipe from dawn to dusk. The schedule was grueling. From Monday through Friday, he shared a room with several other workers in a cheap motel located close to the job site. On the weekends, he would travel from Richmond to Maryland to be with his family before heading back to Richmond on Sunday night in preparation for another week of laying pipe in the dirt. This was far from the life that Alex envisioned, and he began to question his decision to come to the U.S. He felt out of place in Richmond, as he saw few Latinos except for those he met on the job site. He spoke virtually no English, which heightened his feeling of isolation.

> Era rara la gente, todo el mundo estaba hablando otro idioma y no entendia nada. *[It was strange, the people, everybody was speaking another language and I didn't understand anything.]*

The taxing work schedule began to take its toll on Alex, and he started to question the lifestyle.

> Tenia quince anos y tenia que estar escarbando todo el dia afuera para poder meter pipes on the ground desde 6:30 de la manana que me levantaba hasta las 7:00 de la noche todo el dia, no importa se estaba nevando o lloviendo. *[I was 15 years old and I had to dig outside all day to put pipes on the ground frim 6:30 in the morning from the time I woke up until 7:00 at night, all day. It didn't matter if it was snowing or raining.]*

He continued with the demanding schedule for two years, believing that he had no alternative. He was under the mistaken impression that he would not be allowed to attend school due to his undocumented status. However, after speaking with a coworker, Alex realized that he did have the right to enroll in school. He was excited by the prospect of learning English while working towards a high school diploma, but his enthusiasm was dampened by family members who tried to dissuade him from leaving the job site to enter school.

> Hable con mi familia que si me podia ayudar a meterme a la escuela y me dijeron de que no. Me dijeron no porque no querian sino porque la mayoria de estudiantes que venian do otro pais en entraban en la escuela aca, se metian hacer pandilla, en drogas y se perdian y no hacian nada, pues lo deje asi. *[I spoke with my family to see if they could help me enroll in school and they told me no. They told me no, not because they didn't want me to be in school but because the majority of students that were coming from other countries and enter schools here get involved in gangs and drugs and get lost and don't do anything, so I left it like that.]*

Alex had a strong desire to resume his schooling. He had had a highly positive school experience in his small town in Honduras. His school there was small, about two hundred students, and Alex knew the entire student body. He proudly recalled that he never missed a day of school during his elementary and middle years, and he received excellent grades. He was recognized as one of the best students in the school. Alex recalled having only positive relationships with teachers and peers at the school.

Perceptions regarding school experience. At age seventeen, two years after his arrival in the United States, Alex enrolled in school in Montgomery County. He was placed in a vocational training program where he received instruction in air conditioning

installation, plumbing, and carpentry. The instructors spoke no Spanish, and there was no English instruction as part of the program. After three months, Alex felt disillusioned with the training program. He felt that the vocational training was valuable to prepare him for employment, but his interests extended beyond the world of work. He had a strong desire to learn English and his primary goal was to obtain a regular high school diploma. However, based on his age and taking into consideration the amount of school that he had missed when he first arrived in the U.S., Alex was told by school administrators that it would be next to impossible to obtain a regular diploma. But Alex was not to be deterred. He was determined to achieve his goal.

With the assistance of a Spanish-speaking counselor, Alex pressed for a meeting with the principal of his local high school. During the meeting, Alex was impressed by the principal's kindness and seeming willingness to help Alex pursue his desire to obtain a high school diploma. Alex walked out of the meeting with a plan whereby he would enter high school as a ninth grade student and remain until five months after his twenty-first birthday. In order to graduate, Alex would have to attend summer school for every year that he was enrolled at the high school. The principal admonished him that in order for the plan to come to fruition, Alex could not miss a single day of school, nor could he earn bad grades.

Alex jumped at the chance to attend a regular high school. He took intensive ESOL and "sheltered" content classes. He enjoyed the interaction with his teachers, and he recalled liking his science, history, and social studies classes. He developed particular interest in the history of the American Civil War, an interest that was prompted in part by

his time in Richmond during which he saw various Civil War monuments. When asked about his teachers, he stated that he felt they made a strong effort to help him achieve academic success. He took full advantage of after-school support programs, and he worked individually with a bilingual tutor.

> Habia bastante maestros, la mayoria les caia bien y hablaban conmigo. Trataban de ayudarme. Se quedaban despues de escuela conmigo haciendo la tarea porque era dificil porque estaba in ESOL 2 y tenia clases con alumnos que eran nacidos aqui. Los maestros sabian eso y se quedaban despues conmigo ayudandome, explicandome como hacer las areas. *[There were a lot of teachers, the majority liked me and they talked to me. They tried to help me. They stayed after school with me doing homework with me because it was hard because I was in ESOL 2 and I had classes with students that were born here. The teachers knew that, and they stayed after school with me helping me, explaining to me how to do the assignments.]*

Alex was initially put off by the size of the school and the number of students crowding the hallways but as the school year progressed, he developed a greater comfort level with his surroundings. He made friends easily, adding that his friendships were primarily with other Latino students. Alex was struck by how divided the students seemed, with the African-American students sitting on one side of the lunchroom and the Latinos on the other. It seemed to him that the two groups only came together to fight while white students sat laughing on the sideline.

> Mire a los morenos y hispanos peleando. Era como una guerra, y los blancos riendose porque los morenos y los hispanos estaban peleandose. Yo senti que los blancos pensaban que somos tontos. *[I looked at the blacks and Hispanics fighting. It was like a war and the white people were laughing because the blacks and Hispanics were fighting. I felt like the whites thought that we are stupid.]*

Alex strongly believed that is was crucial for schools to take action to bridge differences between students. He felt some teachers lacked empathy and were indifferent to the conflict.

> Creo que deben de respetar y tratar de ensenar acerca de las diferentes culturas porque sino, vamos a quedar separados. Tenemos que ser un poco metiche y tratar de hablar a todo el mundo. Creo que deberian de mixear a todo el mundo para que no esten en su propio grupo separado. Ya paso la epoca del racism. *[I think that they (school staff) should respect and try to teach about all of the different cultures because if they don't, we will all stay separated. We have to become more outgoing and try to talk with everybody. I think that they should mix everybody so they are not in their own separate group. The era of racism is gone.]*

Although Alex connected with several of his teachers, he perceived certain school staff as being callous and indifferent. On occasion, he felt subjected to discrimination due to his Latino heritage and limited English proficiency.

> Yo senti como racism. Si trataba de hablar a alguien, aveces me ignoraban, y otros decidian a no hablar conmigo porque no hablaba ingles. *[I felt racism. If I tried to talk to somebody, sometimes they ignored me and others decided not to talk to me because I didn't speak English.]*

Alex chose his friends carefully, making sure to avoid a burgeoning gang scene that pitted Latinos against blacks. Drugs and alcohol were easily accessible and used frequently at "skip parties" held at students' homes during the day. Despite the numerous distractions, Alex maintained his focus refusing to lose sight of his goal of a diploma. Although he struggled at times to understand his teachers when they presented academic concepts, he continued to make progress in developing his English language skills.

Impressed by his gumption and determination, several of his teachers recognized Alex's efforts and encouraged him to continue to make strides.

> El Director de ESOL siempre estaba diciendome que siguiera, que yo era uno de los que siempre estaba sobresaliendo en las clase de ESOL. *[The director of ESOL was always telling me to keep going, that I was one that always did the best in the ESOL class.]*

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. The plan was progressing well. Alex completed the ninth and tenth grades with perfect attendance and decent grades. Although he struggled in math, the additional support that he received from his teachers during lunch and after school helped him achieve a passing grade. As per the agreement with the principal, Alex attended summer school at the completion of the ninth and tenth grades.

After completing the summer school session for the tenth grade, Alex walked out of the building excited by the prospect of a week's vacation before the start of his 11th grade year. He had always wanted to go to Ocean City, Maryland, as he had heard from friends that it was a fun destination—hanging out on the beach by day and taking in the dance clubs on the boardwalk at night. On Friday afternoon, after completing his last summer school class, he got into a car with a friend *en route* to Ocean City. They arrived in the evening and took in the sights on the boardwalk. On Saturday, Alex enjoyed a beautiful day at the beach followed by a night at a dance club on the boardwalk. On Sunday afternoon, Alex and his friend began the trip back home. Although he had no driver's license, Alex was behind the wheel when their car was pulled over by the police

on the outskirts of Ocean City. The police took Alex to the station house while allowing his friend (who was a licensed driver) to proceed with the trip. Alex was jailed at the station overnight before being transported to a central lockup facility. The police contacted Immigration and Naturalization Service, which determined that Alex was in the country illegally. He was then jailed for three months in a facility on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He was held incommunicado, as he recalled having no opportunity to contact family. Alex's voice rose in anger as he mentioned the "friend" who made no effort to help him get released nor did the friend try to contact Alex's family to inform them of what had occurred. He essentially abandoned Alex to languish in jail.

After three months, Alex was released from jail. He returned to his home and immediately went to the school to request that he be allowed to continue with his studies and pursuit of a high school diploma. The principal, however, was unyielding. Alex had violated the terms of their agreement. He presented Alex with the option of returning to the vocational training program, but he refused to allow Alex to return to the school to resume study, which would lead to a diploma.

The news was deflating and demoralizing. He felt "stupid" for engaging in risky behavior that led to the derailment of his dream of graduating from high school. While Alex blamed himself for the circumstances that led to his not being allowed to return to the school, he felt frustrated that the decision was made seemingly without giving consideration to his history of hardship and hard work. Given the circumstances, he felt deserving of a second chance.

> Entiendo que parte fue mi culpa por haber perdido esos tres meses de clases. Yo tenia pruebas de que no era un delito criminal pero tan solo fue una infraccion de transito, I mean, creo que tal vez me hubieran dado una segunda oportunidad, me hubieran dicho que tienes que trabajar el doble ahora para poder conseguirlo, pero solo me dijeron que no te vas a graduar. *[I understand that it was partly my fault for losing three months of classes. I have proof that it wasn't a criminal offense but it was only a traffic violation. I mean, I think, maybe they should have given me a second chance, they should have told me that I have to work double amount so that I could get it, but they only told me that you are not going to graduate.]*

Alex perceived that no one from the school seemed to notice that he had disappeared from the school during his period of incarceration. Disillusioned by the entire experience, he opted not to return to the vocational training program, feeling that it would be a huge letdown. Following the advice of his counselor at the high school, Alex enrolled in GED classes at the community-based center.

When asked what he considered to be the primary factors that led to his leaving high school, Alex didn't hesitate before citing his incarceration as the main cause of his not obtaining a diploma. In reflecting further on his experience, Alex lamented going to work with his uncle instead of entering school immediately upon his arrival to the United States. He acknowledged that the two-year period of missed schooling created a significant challenge for him to obtain the required credits to graduate with little margin for error.

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. Alex noted that several of his friends also left high school without a diploma. He cited several causal factors contributing to their early exit, including drug involvement and academic difficulties. Chief among the factors cited by Alex were the challenges associated with

being a recent arrival and acquiring the requisite school credits before aging out of the system. He strongly believed that it was incumbent on schools to be honest with students and give them a truthful appraisal of the challenges they faced in obtaining a diploma and if warranted, advise them about alternative paths.

> Okay, ellos tienen que ser honestos. En las escuelas no te hablan de un GED y nada. Solo te dicen del diploma, que te vas a graduar, o que no te vas a graduar. Tienen que se honestos con los estudiantes. Si un estudiante viene de diecinueve anos y quiere estudiar y ellos estan conciente que no van a obtener los creditos, entonces deben de decirles, no vas a obtener tu diploma. Esto va a ser una situacion diferente. Tu vas a recojer tu GED. *[OK, they have to be honest. In the schools, they don't talk to you about the GED and nothing. They only tell you about the diploma, that you're going to graduate, or not going to graduate. They have to be honest with the students. If a student comes at nineteen years of age and wants to study and they are aware that they are not going to obtain the credits, then they need to tell them, you are not going to get your diploma. It will be a different situation. You're going to get your GED.]*

When asked what advice he would give to other Latino students who were thinking about leaving school, he responded:

> Para mi, que analizen bien su caso, que analizen su credito, que sean realista. Si tu piensas que puedes obtener tus creditos, quedate en la escuela. Si no, que escojan su GED. Lo mas importante es que no se salgan de la escuela. Eso es lo que yo digo cuando los miro a todos en la calle, y ellos dicen, 'I don't want to go to school anymore.' A mi aunque hablo un poquito de ingles me ha ayudado y no te puedes dar por vencido. Eso es lo que yo les digo, sigan adelante y no se den por vencido. *[For me, they need to analyze their case, analyze their credits, to be realistic. If you think you can get your credits, stay in school. If not, go for the GED. The main thing is don't get out of school. That's what I say when I look at them in the street and they say, 'I don't want to go to school anymore.' For me, even though I speak a little English, it helps and you can't give up. That's what I tell them, keep going and don't give up.]*

Participant #6

Background. "Roberto" clasped his hands together tightly and shifted uneasily in his chair. He made fleeting eye contact with the camera, at times looking directly into the lens before directing his gaze downward or to the side. Though he smiled politely when thanked for his participation in the interview, he maintained a mostly serious and at times somber expression on his face when discussing the events of his life. He wore his hair close cropped and his goatee and mustache neatly trimmed. Small teardrop-sized divots pockmarked his face and neck marking the location of tattoos that had once lined his body before their removal by laser surgery. Roberto needed little prompting; he showed no hesitation when responding to the interview questions. His responses, spoken in a quiet yet confident tone of voice, were thoughtful and expansive.

Roberto enrolled in the center's GED program on the advice of a friend. His middle and high school years were marked by academic failure, multiple suspensions, and gang involvement culminating in Roberto walking away from high school in the tenth grade. Roberto wistfully reflected on that period, commenting that he felt far removed from that phase of his life. Indeed, he had made significant changes since that time. Most notably, he had obtained his high school equivalency diploma, started a family and after several years of participating in the GED and counseling programs, he had been hired full-time by the center as an Outreach and Engagement Coordinator to work with gang-involved, vulnerable youth.

Born in Mexico, Roberto arrived in the United States when he was six years old. His father had traveled to the U.S. five years previously, leaving Roberto and his siblings

in the care of their mother. Roberto attended kindergarten in Mexico but had little recollection of the experience. Shortly after Roberto's sixth birthday, his father returned to Mexico to bring his family to the United States. Roberto recalled taking a series of buses from their town outside of Mexico City to the U.S. border before "running through the desert" to cross into the United States. Roberto, his three siblings, and his parents settled in a one-bedroom terrace apartment in Prince Georges' County. Asked why his parents chose to emigrate to the United States, Roberto shared that his family struggled economically in Mexico, and his parents hoped that they could provide a better life for their children in the U.S.

> I think my dad came here when he was real young, probably like 18 so I guess his whole childhood was in Mexico and like not good. The stories he use to tell me, he use to take care of goats, like a lot of animals; goats, horses. He didn't really go to school. He didn't learn to read and write. I guess he wanted something better for us. He wanted to take us here so we'd get educated and speak both languages. Try to find something better than what he had.

Roberto arrived speaking no English, and he recalled feeling both excited and scared by the big change in his life.

> I was excited because it was something new and everybody say, it's the American dream. Something different. You don't have to be struggling like in your country. Basically, you here. It's like you have everything here. It was scary because you had to face new issues. Different color skins. Different languages. Different area. Different everything. The major part of that, I was scared of school.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Roberto entered the first grade in Prince George's County public schools. He remembers feeling frightened and

overwhelmed by the new environment as well as intimidated by his inability to communicate in English. The period was marked by instability and frequent change, as the family moved multiple times during Roberto's elementary school years, resulting in his enrollment in five different schools. Towards the latter part of his fifth grade year, Roberto was suspended after school personnel accused him of selling drugs. Roberto contends that the accusation was false, and he perceived that the charge was prompted by racism. He recalled that a classmate brought sunflower seeds to school, which was mistakenly thought to be marijuana by school staff. The student body was predominantly African-American and Roberto perceived that he was being singled out because he was Latino.

> And they took this kid who had a bag of sunflower seeds, they thought it was weed. And so, they blamed me and I told my dad. My dad showed up to tell the principal and I was like, 'I just don't want to be in the school.' I thought it was racism; I thought they were making stuff up that I had nothing to do with it.

Roberto moved to a new school for the sixth grade, and he recalled a much more positive school experience. He connected with several of his teachers, who he recalled tried to involve him in after school programs. He did well in his ESOL classes, and he was beginning to develop confidence in speaking English. He felt involved in the school community as a patrol captain and a member of the school basketball team. He developed a reputation as one of the best players on the team, which helped to shape his identity at the school.

> I was one of the best players there. I remember the coach was going to hang my jersey in the gym, like the hall of fame on the wall in the gym. We won a couple of championships when I played. They wasn't expecting it. A Mexican kid to play basketball well with all the African-Americans.

With the encouragement of his teachers and parents, Roberto also performed well academically. He recalled strong grades and perfect attendance for his sixth grade year. His parents emphasized the importance of hard work.

> My parents were strict. They woke me up early to practice my times tables. My dad use to go to work early, working construction. He use to wake up at five in the morning and they would make me wake up early to do school work.

Roberto transitioned to middle school, and he characterized the change as the beginning of his difficulties in school, the time when "everything went wrong." The confidence that he developed in elementary school gave way to feelings of fear and isolation. When he first entered middle school, he recalled having feelings similar to those that he had when he entered elementary school as a recent arrival from Mexico. He averted his eyes from the camera before speaking in a low tone of voice.

> When you go to middle school, you have to go through older people, bigger people and they start bullying you, messing around with you. Basically, it's like when I first came from Mexico in first grade. You get to middle school and they start messing around with you, pushing you around, you get tired. Sometimes you don't feel like going to school. I use to get suspended a lot, lot of fights with the teachers and with the students.

Schoolwork took second place behind coping with the physical assaults and verbal attacks. Roberto felt isolated perceiving that he had to shoulder the burden by himself.

There were no adults, including his parents that he felt he could confide in about his difficulties. Instead of seeking help, Roberto decided that he would fight back on his own.

> I was about to get jumped by some African-Americans. I was walking down the stairs and one kid pushed me from the back cause he wanted me to fall down the stairs. But I held myself to the rails and another kid from the front started hitting me in my body. So I fell. When I got up, I punched him in the mouth.

Roberto soon developed a reputation as a tough kid who would not shy away from a fight. His frequent fighting gained him the respect of his peers, and he soon found himself heading up a "crew" of kids who looked to him as the leader. Roberto began to skip school with his friends. When he was in school, his thoughts were consumed with defending himself and the members of his crew.

> The more you tried to focus, the more they kept messing around with you. The hallways. Lunch. People tried to steal your money cause every time, it wasn't….half of the problems were in school but most of the problems were outside of school. They use to hang outside like most of us use to walk and a bunch of kids would get jumped everyday by African-Americans. So like, that hate would keep going. Why they keep messing with us? Why they keep messing with me? I'm trying to do something in school, I'm trying to do my work and they keep messing with me. And that distracted me. OK, I was going to fight everyday and not worry about my education.

Roberto's voice rose in anger when recalling the stress of middle school. He lost interest in his classes and became distrustful of school staff. He walked the hallways filled with rage ready to lash out against students and adults perceived as threatening.

> I remember going to school with no notebooks. I remember drawing on the table and when the teacher use to talk to me, I use to get angry at him. I didn't know what I was talking about or what I was angry about. I had all of my anger inside of me. Sometimes I'd just let it go. But sometimes instead of them helping you, they make it worse. Instead of them helping you, they want to push you around. Here you've been pushed around the whole day and instead of asking you if you need help, they push you around too.

Roberto estimated that he missed more than half of his eighth grade year due to skipping. Either he walked away from school after his first period class, or he stayed away from the building altogether. During the day, Roberto and his friends would congregate in a park or at a friend's house to play video games throughout the day. Roberto perceived that there was little concern from school staff regarding his frequent absences. His distrust of school staff grew after an interaction with the school counselor who he felt was "fake." He recalled:

> She acted like she wanted to help but all she did was try to get kids in trouble. She use to grab the phone and call the parents. She didn't really pull me into her office to talk. She use to just call my mom and dad and tell them all this stuff about me. Stuff I never did. I never smoked weed in high school or middle school. I never smoked no weed at all but she was like, saying 'he got caught smoking weed, he got caught with some females skipping school, drinking.' I was like, 'Why you making this up?

Roberto entered high school with a renewed commitment and sense of purpose prompted by a desire to complete high school so that his mother would be proud. He remembered walking into the high school on the first day determined to do well.

> I always wanted to finish school to make my mom proud, to see me walk across the stage. My mom was sick, she's a diabetic with kidney problems so I wanted her to be proud of something. I didn't want her to just see a paper saying I got

> promoted. I wanted her to stand next to me when I walked across the stage. Once I got to high school, I was excited and I was like, 'I'm going to try and do my best. Do better than middle school.' But it didn't go that way.

Roberto got off to a good start for the ninth grade. He showed interest in several of his classes, and his attendance improved significantly in comparison to middle school. He showed particular interest in his art and math classes after developing a connection with the teachers. He loved to draw, and he recalled that his teacher encouraged him to pursue his interest in art.

> I already knew how to draw but they showed you all the steps and how you can get a career with drawing. And, I got her respect too 'cause she use to like what I use to do. She use to tell me to go to class but sometimes she would get tired of telling me to go to class so she would just let me stay in the class all day.

Roberto recalled that biology was his toughest class. His struggle to understand the content of the course was heightened by his poor relationship with the teacher. He perceived the teacher as overbearing and "pushy," recalling that she irritated him by constantly telling him to do his work and go to class. Roberto received poor grades in the class, which fueled his frustration.

As the ninth grade progressed, Roberto lapsed into the behaviors that marked his time in middle school. Similar to his middle school experience, there was constant conflict between the Latino and African-American students. Roberto stopped focusing on his classes and instead turned his attention to fighting and skipping school. He was seen as a leader among his peers, a reputation developed by his tendency to never back down

from a fight. The crew that he formed in middle school evolved into a bona fide gang complete with a national gang affiliation.

> So it's like a challenge, I wanted to get along with everybody but it's like survival, you have to make your own little crew. It was the same thing as middle school, they have African-Americans going after you and if you don't fight back, they'll keep going stepping all over you. Since I was in middle school, we started a little group and when we went to the high school, it started getting bigger and bigger.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. After his relatively strong start at the beginning of the ninth grade, Roberto began a downward spiral marked by fighting, disengagement and academic failure. His position as the leader cemented his commitment to the gang. School was relegated to the back burner. Roberto recalled losing interest in all of his classes including his favorite art class, as fighting and skipping school consumed his focus. When asked if his involvement with the gang was the main source of distraction in his life, he said with a regretful tone,

> I don't know, I guess that was the main distraction cause instead of me going to class, I was always thinking of if we were going to fight this person or that crew. I was basically only thinking about fighting when I went to school. That's basically what I went for.

Although Roberto transitioned to the tenth grade, there was little change for him. He continued focusing on the gang and the attendant behaviors of fighting and skipping school. His relationships with the adults at the school deteriorated to one of constant conflict. Ironically, he recalled that his most positive relationship with an adult during that time was with an African-American police officer that was stationed at the school.

> He kept pushing me to straighten myself up. He use to say, 'you're going to wind up in jail.' Sometimes, when I use to skip school or leave school, he use to give me money.

Mostly, it was the negative relationships with school personnel that seemed to predominate. Roberto recalled having particularly adverse interactions with the school administrators.

> They use to push you around. They wanted respect but they didn't respect you. They just wanted to step all over you and think that they were the authority. They thought they were going to run everything. I use to see how they treated me and my friends and how they treated other kids at the school.

Amidst the conflict, Roberto perceived that administrators singled him out due to his being Latino and gang involved. He believed that the treatment that he received was harsher and different from the manner in which the administrators addressed other students who were involved in similar activities. He described one administrator as "not liking Spanish people" and "being kind of racist." He felt indifferent towards his teachers stating that they mostly left him alone, but he recalled mostly volatile relationships with the school security staff.

> Sometimes, the security guards don't have no respect. Sometimes, they think they're tougher then the kids and when the kids stand up to them, they think they can call the police. They want to step up to your face and threaten you but when you do that, they get scared. They want to press charges. The way they act, they don't want people to act towards them. They way that they act towards me, I use to step up to them. 'I'm not scared of you. You can do what ever you want. Expel me from school, do whatever but I'm not scared.'

In the second quarter of the tenth grade, Roberto was suspended for fighting with another student. He was taken out of the school in handcuffs and detained for several hours in the police station. He was given the opportunity to return to school on the condition that he write a letter of apology for his actions. He stated that although there were several kids involved in the incident, he was the only student suspended and the only one with an imposed condition. He felt that this was further evidence that he was being treated unjustly. He also believed that school personnel used the incident as a pretext to initiate the process of removing him from the school. He was defiant and steadfast in his refusal to comply with writing the letter of apology.

> I got suspended cause I got in a fight with an African-American kid and he fell and he busted his head open and I almost got expelled but they saw a video tape of the kid punching me. I started chasing him outside. They were gong to expel me automatically without doing an investigation. They thought I was always the bad guy. But then they saw the videotape and saw that the kid came up to me and punched me. That's why I came after him but it wasn't like they offered me help, they always wanted to get rid of me. That's why when I got expelled in the 10th grade, I didn't write no letter to them. They wanted me to write a letter to the court and to the teacher, a letter of apology and to ask if they would accept me back to the school, but I wasn't going to do it, I wasn't going back to school and I was going to go to work. It was a group fight, that's why I got expelled. It was four to five guys and all the other guys stayed in school, except for me and I was the one who admitted to hitting the kid and everybody else didn't admit. They said that they wanted me to write a letter of apology and they wanted me to do all this stuff that all the other kids didn't have to do. I was like, 'We all were in the group, we all got into the fight. We all hit the guy, why only me?' I was like, 'I'm not doing it. You want to kick me out, go ahead and kick me out, I'm not coming back.'

Roberto realized that his lack of compliance with the condition set forth by the school administrators was tantamount to his giving up on high school. While he was concerned

by how his parents would react to his leaving school, he felt that he could no longer cope with life in high school. His decision to leave school was made easier by his having gained experience in the world of work. Under the tutelage of his father, Roberto had gained experience working construction on the weekends. He also acquired a job as a cashier with a dry cleaner in his neighborhood. He felt a greater sense of purpose going to work in comparison to attending school, and that feeling was particularly in evidence on payday.

When Roberto stopped attending high school, he stated that no staff attempted to contact him to discuss the event or to help him explore alternatives. When asked about his counselor, he recalled never talking with her about his classes let alone the event that led to his suspension. He stated that he wasn't sure of her role at the school. Roberto believed that prevailing feeling among the school staff was that he was a "bad kid" who should be removed from the environment. When asked what the school could have done differently to help affect a different outcome, Roberto returned to his belief that he had been singled out and treated unjustly. He acknowledged that his behavior was a major contributing factor to his leaving school, but he believed that he would have completed high school if he had been treated fairly.

> I think when I got expelled, they should have punished everyone the same way. They need to treat us all the same. For me to get expelled while the others stayed in school, for me, it was like they were playing me. My friends were laughing cause I got expelled and couldn't go back to school.

It was Roberto's perception that no adults at the school made an effort to understand the stress in his life caused by the culture of conflict that prevailed between ethnic groups in the school. Although projecting an exterior toughness, Roberto admitted to spending most of the day preoccupied and "scared" because of the constant fighting. When he sat in class or attempted to do homework, he found it almost impossible to focus on the work due to his anxiety.

> I didn't want to wake up and go to school. I had nightmares about going back to school. I was like, I don't want to go back. My mom was like, 'Why you scared to go back?' My mom didn't speak English. She couldn't go ask the school what was going on. 'Why is he scared?' I think they need to get to know the kids a little more.

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. Roberto acknowledged that his perceptions and beliefs regarding what should be done to support students on the verge of early school leaving were influenced partly by his own experience in not obtaining a high school diploma, but also by his recent experience as a gang intervention counselor. He contended that intervening early in the lives of youth who are vulnerable to leaving school is crucial to keeping kids engaged in school. He felt that school staff should make an effort to find out about the challenges that confront many students, which frequently underlie and trigger negative behaviors.

> Try to get to know the kids. Let's say they get in situation with fighting or talking back to the teachers, you probably have to find out a little more about them. 'Cause a lot of kids nowadays, they go through a lot. Sometimes they don't have a dad or mom to be there to tell them what to do, to do the right thing. Some kids go to school because they have to and they (school staff) don't know what's going on in their home. The parents work three and four jobs and they don't spend time

> with the kids. Sometimes they want that love and that's the main reason they join gangs and mess up in school. They ain't got no love at home. They ain't got no food at home. They ain't got no one telling them, 'Do your homework!' or go to sleep early. Or sometimes they got a recent dad or a recent mom. And they go and do the same thing in school, they are abusing them too. They're like, 'whatever.' That's how they become bullies too. Come back and shoot up the school. I think they should talk more and get to know these kids.

Roberto recalled having little connection with his teachers or other school staff, and he emphasized the importance of school personnel maintaining an empathetic perspective when dealing with vulnerable youth. He stressed the importance of helping youth focus on goals and considering how their current actions have implications for the future.

> Talk to them. Not all of them are going through the same situation. Not all of them have a dad and a mom. It depends what situation the youth are in. I think the teachers need to engage with them more. Talk to them about what's out there that can change their lives. Talk to them about their future. Ask them if they want to work construction forever. That's what I thought I was going to do, work construction for the rest of my life. I'd tell them everyday to think about it, without education, you can't do much. If you want to get paid good and you want something better, I think you should finish high school and at least go to college. I notice that people who have a college degree even don't have a job. And you want to quit high school? What are you going to do? What are your goals? You need a degree.

Roberto further emphasized his belief that individual and group counseling was key to helping youth remain in school as well as promoting connections between students and staff.

> Get like a group of kids that you know are at risk of failing and have a talk with them before they leave school. Like meetings to talk about what they are doing wrong and what they could do better. Give them examples of what's good and

> what's bad. If you drop out, talk to them about what's going to happen if they leave. And then, that's when they are going to see that the teachers care about them. They're going to think, 'I guess they do care about me and I'm going to give it a shot and try to do my best.'

Roberto was clearly pleased with his position at the Center. With no high school diploma, he had envisioned working minimum wage jobs in construction or perhaps at the dry cleaner. He proudly gave the interviewer his business card, which prominently displayed his title. He had a desk in an office at the Center where he was developing computer skills while facilitating group and individual counseling sessions. When asked how he became involved in the Center, he recounted:

> I had two tear drops in my face (points under his right eye) and the gang name on my arm, my nickname and a lot of letters on my hand. I had an SUR and a one three right here (points to forearm). They actually paid for all the tattoo removal but I had to come in here for the mental health therapy every week. I couldn't come everyday cause I had to work. The way they found me was I was working in DC waiting for the concrete truck. Some guy pulled up to me and asked me if I go to church and I was like, once in a while and then he asked me, 'Do you want your tattoo removed?' and I was like, 'yea, if it's possible, if it's free.' So he gave me information and I didn't believe him when he said Langley Park 'cause this area here, this was my rival gang neighborhood. So I was like, 'Langley Park? I'm not going to Langley Park.' So he made a phone call to me and it said Montgomery County Youth Department and I was like, it said Montgomery County so I guess he's legit, I guess he's good. So he made an appointment with me and I came over here. Honestly, when I came over here, I had a gun cause I wasn't going into a neighborhood that I don't know and into a building that I don't know and I can't bring my friends cause if I do bring my friends, there going to know that they're going to be a target. So I just came by myself and left the gun in my dad's truck. I didn't have my car. It was my dad's construction truck. I came back up and they did an intake.
>
> From there they started the process for the tattoo removal. They told me that I had to come for mental health therapy and once in a while, they use to invite me to healing circles to hear guest speakers who talked to the kids. They invited me for lots of events. Thanksgiving events. Sometimes when I ain't have no food. Back

> then, I use to struggle a lot. Like, I have two kids now, my wife, but back then, I use to struggle a lot. I didn't have gas money, I didn't have food. They use to give me gift cards for Giant. Sometimes they use to give me food for Thanksgiving. They use to invite me here for Thanksgiving and for me it helped me a lot. It means a lot for them to show me that love. They told me, 'You in the process of changing and we want to invite you to be a part of our celebration.'

His joy at being offered the job was evident on his face. He proudly described his workday, which was spent mostly in the street working with vulnerable youth.

> My job is basically, gang prevention intervention. So I go to schools and the streets, different neighborhoods to try and approach and talk to kids that are at risk for joining the gangs or are already in the gangs. Like I said, I go to the streets, the schools, the malls to try to talk to them to motivate them to do better in school, to do better in life. I use to do it. I use to be in a gang. I use to be doing all the stuff that they want to do. They think it's cool. I use to be tatted up. I had tattoos on my face and my arms. It was really tough to change from one day to another. But if you want to do it, if you want to do something positive, it's got to happen. So that's my job to talk to kids in the gangs. Like on Wednesdays, today, I run a group called "brotherhood." It's like, I have ten kids coming everyday, every Wednesday, and it's almost like an after-school program. We show them leadership skills, teamwork, goal setting, and communication. The kids don't even talk sometimes. They come in here not knowing anybody. They're on probation. They think they're the hard core kids. They don't want to talk to nobody. The purpose of the brotherhood, is at the end of the program to get to know each other and get to talk.
>
> We have group sessions and learn to trust each other. We have a group where they have to grab their hands and they can't use their feet and they have to get up together. Sometimes, we tell them that it takes more than one person to get up when you're on the ground. Sometimes, you think you can do it on your own but you can't. Sometimes, you're going to need someone from your neighborhood to help you out. And sometime they think to themselves, 'Yeah, I don't know why I'm on probation. I don't know why I got kicked out of school, I should have never been kicked out of school. Sometimes, when they get in this program, it gets on their head that somebody else can help them or tell them, 'this is bad' and 'you're going the wrong way.' They come to me after the first or a couple of sessions and they tell me, 'Look man, I got a problem in school or I'm not going to your program cause my mama don't want me to go.'

> We build good relations with them and I feel happy cause I never facilitated no programs at all and this is my second time doing it and they come back. Eight or ten kids keep coming back. They stay for a couple of hours. One of them comes all the way from Laurel. He takes three buses to get here and he comes every Wednesday. For me, it's respect and I tell 'em, 'I'm going to respect y'all and you respect me. I'm going to be real with y'all and I'm not going to read no story from a book. I'm going to do the curriculum and I'm going to put a piece of my life in there cause I'm not here to make up stuff. I'm here for y'all to get motivated.' This topic, we bring it up all the time. 'How difficult was it for your parents to come to the United States and how easy was it for you to mess up and get on probation? How easy was it for you to get on house arrest and how hard was it for your dad to come here for you to have a better future?' And they all answer me, 'Yeah, we're trying to do better now.' They might be lying but at least we get the point across.

Participant #7

Background. "Manuel" was the third born of his parents' three children. He was born in the United States. His mother is from Peru. Manuel's father was born in Argentina and immigrated to the United States in the mid-1980s. While growing up in a small brick house located in a middle class neighborhood, Manuel spoke Spanish and English with his parents and siblings. Shortly after Manuel's thirteenth birthday, his parents divorced. For several years through middle and high school, Manuel and his brothers shuttled back and forth between both households. He recalled that period as a stressful one; the discord between his parents was troubling for Manuel and his brothers. Manuel felt both anger and sadness because of his parent's breakup. Manuel recalled that the difficulties that he was experiencing at home affected his ability to focus on school. Although he struggled through his middle and high school years, Manuel persevered and remained in school until the 12th grade.

Prior to completing the 12th grade, Manuel left school and shortly thereafter he enrolled in the GED program at the center. His attendance was sporadic, and he grew increasingly frustrated as he struggled to master the science and math portions of the GED exam. Although discouraged, he dreamed of passing the exam and then entering community college. At the time of the interview, Manuel was living with his father and working at a neighborhood grocery store. When told of the purpose of the interview, he expressed anger about his high school experience.

While he seemed eager to discuss his high school experience, Manuel appeared at times encumbered in his ability to convey his thoughts. He looked fleetingly at the camera and spoke in a halting manner typically responding to the interview questions with single words, word phrases, or short sentences spoken in a low tone of voice. Towards the latter part of the interview, he became slightly more expansive when discussing the events that led to his leaving school.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Manuel entered kindergarten at his neighborhood school, and he remembered making a lot of friends and liking his teacher. His overall experience in elementary school was positive, though he remembers struggling with writing in his English class. Manuel stated that he transitioned to middle school with ease. He was happy to move on with his friends from elementary school, and he noted that he was not overly challenged by the schoolwork. During the sixth grade, he recalled mostly positive interactions with his teachers, though he remembered "getting into it" with some of the school staff: "They kept bugging me. They kept bugging me for the littlest thing."

Manuel remembered that the schoolwork increased in volume and difficulty in the seventh grade. He struggled with class assignments and recalled being reluctant to ask for help for fear of looking "stupid" in front of his peers. He was particularly resentful of teachers who would call on him with a question during class time. His anger intensified because, he felt that his teachers disrespected him in front of the class.

> I felt out of place. I felt like, like they didn't want me there. I didn't feel wanted. They tried to be smart mouth. Know what I'm sayin'? Show that they're better than you.

Manuel began to skip school. On some days he would congregate with at a friend's empty house, while on other days he would simply stay home and sleep throughout the day. During his seventh grade year, Manuel estimated that he missed over ninety days of school. On days when he would miss school, he recalled that staff would contact his home, and he would pretend to be sick. His parents, who were in the midst of a divorce, had little control over him. When asked to provide the main reason why he skipped so much school, he noted: " 'Cause skipping school was funner than being in school."

Manuel continued skipping through the eighth grade, estimating that he missed the equivalent of one-quarter of the school year. He recalled connecting with his math teacher who he felt showed genuine concern for his well being. The teacher, who later became an assistant principal, would encourage Manuel to come to school by enticing him with rewards: "He use to say, 'If you come to school, I'll buy you food. If you get a good GPA, I'll get you a gift.'" On the days when Manuel would come to school, he

found it difficult to cope with the work. He sat in the back of the class remaining silent still consumed with anxiety over looking "stupid" in front of his peers. He was angered by teachers who he felt were trying to use him as an example of why students should not skip school: "Yea, they'd try to pick on me. They'd say, 'OK you didn't come to school last week so what's the answer to this?'"

Manuel entered high school on the heels of his dismal middle school experience. Surrounded by his friends, he picked up where he left off—skipping school and failing classes. He began drinking heavily and smoking marijuana, spending his days in a park or at a friend's house. He connected with a few of the security guards at the school who he recalled treated him with respect and encouraged him to come to school. He recalled mostly negative interactions with the assistant principal and other administrators who he felt discriminated against the Latino and African American students.

> I was always cool with the security guards. They would catch me skipping they'd be like, 'I'll take you back to class.' They wouldn't take me to the office. It was the assistant principal that didn't like the Spanish people. I guess you could say. They'd always pick on us.

Manuel recounted an incident with an administrator that was particularly upsetting to him involving a secretary in the counseling office who happened to be a native speaker of Spanish. On occasion, Manuel would go to the office at lunch during which time he interacted with the secretary in Spanish. One day, he returned to the counseling office and was told by the secretary that she could no longer speak to Manuel

in Spanish because she had received a reprimand from the principal for speaking Spanish with students.

At the beginning of the second semester of the ninth grade, Manuel was suspended for bringing alcohol and a knife to school. He was not allowed to return to the high school for the remainder of the year and was instead directed to attend an alternative school for students who were court involved or had been suspended from the school system. He entered the alternative school not knowing anybody and feeling uncomfortable in the new environment. After an initial period of adjustment, he made a few friends and connected with teachers and counselors. He liked the small class size, and he noted that the individual and group counseling sessions helped him refocus on school.

The following year, he was allowed to return to the high school due to his demonstrating good behavior at the alternative school. Encouraged by the positive experience in the alternative school, he returned to his high school with a renewed commitment. For the first semester of his tenth grade year, Manuel attended school every day. His grades improved, and he developed a connection with his counselor. For the first time, Manuel began to think about life after high school, and he dreamed of obtaining his diploma and moving on to college. He recalled feeling inspired by his older brother who, after graduating from high school several years earlier, had enrolled at the University of Maryland.

But halfway through the second semester of the tenth grade, Manuel began to skip school again. His attendance was not as poor as it had been in the ninth grade, but he

recalled that he missed an average of one day per week. He also recalled falling back into a pattern of drug and alcohol use. On the days when he did come to school, he was often under the influence of alcohol and marijuana. Manuel struggled with several of his classes, noting that he had particular difficulty with English and algebra. In the following school year he continued either to arrive high to his classes or skip school altogether. Despite his behavior, he was able to gain the required credits to move on to the 12th grade.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. In the eleventh grade, Manuel got a job as a "bagger" at the local Safeway grocery store. The store was located next to his high school, making it convenient for him to pick up shifts following the school day. He enjoyed the work, and appreciated having money in his pocket. Manuel stated that he had no difficulty balancing work and school. He continued to struggle academically but with the help of his teachers, he ultimately passed all of his classes for his senior year. He did not however, obtain a passing grade on the Maryland High School Assessments (HSA), which assesses competency in math, biology, English, and government. In addition, Manuel fell five credits shy of the number of credits required for a diploma.

Manuel turned eighteen two weeks prior to graduation, but he was in no mood to celebrate having just found out that he would not graduate with his classmates. Although he felt dejected, he was reconciled to returning the following year to work on passing the HSAs and fulfilling his credit requirements. But Manuel was denied the opportunity to return to school. Manuel related that he and his mother attended a meeting with the

principal and the assistant principal during which time the principal informed Manuel that he would not be allowed back into the school, ostensibly due to his having "aged out" of the public school system. He suggested that Manuel pursue a GED, or vocational training. Manuel recalls being told by the principal to leave the premises immediately. He felt confused, angry, and disrespected. He also remembers feeling upset by the manner in which his mother was treated. Although she had limited English proficiency, no interpreter was provided in the meeting. His voice rose in anger as he recalled the administrators talking to Manuel as if his mother wasn't present in the room.

> They always use to ignore my mom. They use to treat my mom like she was just another Spanish lady. They wouldn't talk to her with respect.

Although Manuel acknowledged responsibility for not obtaining the needed credits to graduate due to his behavior, he perceived that discrimination on the part of school personnel contributed to his not being allowed to return to the school. He also believed that he developed a reputation as a troublemaker beginning with the incident in the ninth grade, which also contributed to his not finishing high school.

> We had a meeting and then the principal was like, 'There's too much drama with you, we don't want you back in this school.' And then I told him, 'The only incident that I had was in the ninth grade, how was there drama?' He didn't say anything. He didn't reply. He was like, 'We just don't want you in this school.'

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. When asked what the school could have done differently to better support Manuel and help him obtain a diploma, he quickly replied:

> Don't be racist. Don't think you better than someone when we're just the same, we're all equal. They [school personnel] should be friends with the students, not just think they're better than you.

Manuel emphatically stated that he believed it was important for teachers to connect with students to keep them motivated and engaged in school. He contended that if teachers show genuine concern, the students would become more invested in the school community and in doing their schoolwork. Manuel also thought that after-school clubs open to all students could be a strong motivating force. Manuel recalled feeling disappointed and demoralized due to his not being allowed to play on the junior varsity soccer team because of his grades. Manuel also believed that overly rigid school policies help to drive kids out of school. He cited the Loss of Credit policy as an example whereby students lose credit for being late to class. When asked if he could change one thing that the school could have done to improve his experience in high school, he smiled broadly before responding: "Get people that care about kids."

Participant #8

Background. "David" walked away from his high school in the middle of his 12th grade year. Although he stuck it out until his last year of high school, the wheels had been set in motion for his departure far earlier. David's transition was from school to jail. He entered the GED program as a condition of his release from lockup. During the interview, David wore a light jacket over a short sleeve shirt partially obscuring the tattoos that lined his arms. His wire-rimmed glasses and neatly cropped goatee gave him

a studious look that seemed incongruous with the gang insignias that decorated his forearms. He leaned forward over the conference room table looking earnestly into the camera. Although he showed little difficulty expressing his thoughts during the interview, it was noted on occasion that he seemed despondent when discussing his home life and the events leading up to his departure from school.

David was born in the United States to parents of Latino descent. David's mother is from Chile and his father is from Nicaragua. He has a younger sister who attends community college. David grew up speaking Spanish with his parents and both Spanish and English with his sister and friends. He described his neighborhood as both tranquil and volatile.

> It's a nice area to grow up. Um, just a lot of bad things happen sometimes, like a lot of places. It's pretty much like Langley Park, kind of messed up cause you got certain gangs here and other gangs there. Certain drug dealers in one spot, other drug dealers in other spaces or drug dealers right in the same building that you live in. So it's quiet at times but there's also a lot of crime.

Perceptions regarding school experience. David attended kindergarten at his local elementary school. He recalled walking to school with his mother on the first day filled with excitement and nervousness. Entering the building for the first time, he was amazed by the student artwork that adorned the walls. Although he felt overwhelmed by the noise level in the hallway, he soon acclimated to the environment, aided by his kindergarten teacher who he recalled as friendly and kind. David looked back on his elementary school days with fondness. He made friends, and he recalled liking his teachers. He loved playing soccer on the blacktop at recess and working on various

projects in art class. He also remembered struggling to learn to read and write. Although he received individualized attention from a paraeducator, he made limited progress in developing his reading and writing skills. In the third grade, David was found eligible for special education services due to his academic difficulties. He remembered receiving small group and individualized instruction in reading and writing. David described his learning difficulties and his appreciation for the teachers that tried help him.

> For me, the teachers there, they actually enjoyed helping you. They actually enjoyed sitting down with the students, getting to know them to help them out. I have a couple of learning disabilities. I can't really read or write like that or sometimes, say you try to show me something, say you try to teach me something out the book, the textbook, I wouldn't understand it that much but if you show it to me on a piece of paper or on the board, I'll understand it a little better.

David described his transition to middle school as "awkward," because he felt strange in a new environment surrounded by different students and teachers. He was struck by the contrast to his elementary school, as there were many more kids in the lunchroom and far less artwork on the walls. His overall experience in the sixth grade was positive. He continued to receive special education services in a small group setting for reading and writing. His remaining classes were general education courses. He developed a love for his science class because he connected with the teacher and he enjoyed performing various experiments. He also enjoyed his technical education class, as he felt that the teacher understood his unique learning style.

> The teacher, she was wonderful. She was a great teacher. Instead of trying to explain things by the book, she would do it by hand to show us.

David looked forward to going to school in the sixth grade, which was reflected by his almost perfect attendance. He liked his teachers and he had a few close friends. Although his grades were less than perfect, he made progress in developing his reading and writing skills. While his overall experience in the sixth grade was positive, his seventh grade year marked a turning point in his school and home life.

David felt confident about entering the seventh grade, buoyed by his familiarity with the middle school surroundings and a group of new friends that he had begun hanging out with over the summer. His new acquaintances were from his neighborhood, and he was impressed by their bravado and toughness. David described himself during that period as a "follower" who yearned for acceptance. He began to attend skip parties during which time he used drugs and alcohol. The skip parties became more commonplace as the year progressed. Lost in a fog of controlled substances, David stayed away from school for weeks at a time, totaling five months by his estimate.

When asked to reflect on why he missed so much of the seventh grade after having a positive experience the previous year, he quickly responded that it was due to the influence of his new friends and his desire to "fit in" with the new group. He then paused for a few seconds and in a somber tone of voice, he began to describe his home life, which was dominated by emotional and physical abuse inflicted by his alcoholic father.

> I was having problems, a lot of family problems in the household. My father use to get drunk, you know. He'd beat my mom and my sister. Then he'd go to work

> on me. Sometimes, I'd be in the house by myself with my little sister, and my dad would be in the room passed out.

David entered the eighth grade filled with rage. His parents had separated in preparation for divorce. David and his sister dreaded staying with their father on the weekends, as he continued the pattern of drinking followed by emotional and physical beat downs. On the days when David did attend school, he was consumed by anger, which he often expressed through fighting with other students or engaging in verbal abuse with staff. He recalled his counselor trying to reach out and help, but he rejected her offering, believing that showing emotion was a sign of weakness.

> I was taught that men don't show feelings. My dad always use to tell me when I was smaller, when he use to beat on me, 'Men don't show feelings, men don't cry.' That's how I always took it. Men don't show feelings, men don't cry. I ended up having anger problems. At the beginning of the eighth grade year, I had anger problems, cussing out the teachers, cussing out the administrators, cussing out other students, starting fights, causing food fights in the cafeteria.

School was rendered insignificant by the stress of David's home life. He lost interest in his classes and he no longer connected with his teachers. He was consumed with hanging out, using drugs, and fighting with rivals. During the eighth grade, he was suspended ten times for fighting with students and disrespecting teachers. With each fight and resulting suspension, David became increasingly despondent. A teacher recognized that David was in crisis and reached out in an effort to help.

> He pulled me aside to ask me what was happening. I'd tell them everything was OK. They would say, I know you're lying, I can see it in your eyes.

David missed most of his eighth grade year due to skipping, suspensions, and a hospitalization. He became increasingly depressed, as his father continued to abuse him and his sister. David mentioned to several friends that he was thinking of committing suicide. School personnel then discovered that he had suicidal thoughts and David was admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Baltimore.

> I was telling my friends or my so-called friends. "Man, I can't deal with life, this is happening at home and I was thinking about committing suicide. From there, they shipped me off to John's Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. From there, six months went by, I came back and was still in school, still kind of flipping out on people but not as much and actually I was getting my work done. From there, I passed eighth grade.

Although he missed a significant amount of school during the eighth grade, David was able to move onto high school. When asked about obtaining eighth grade credits in light of the amount of missed school, he had a vague recollection of completing schoolwork in the hospital as well as in his home under the tutelage of an instructor who was sent to work with him in accordance with his special education plan. David recalled the transition to high school as "hectic."

> I didn't know nothing about the school. I ain't know nothing about what floor, what room. I didn't know where my homeroom was. I didn't know how to work the locker. I was just…I felt like I was just lost. The school was so big. I didn't know how to get into the school or where was the cafeteria or bathroom. I didn't know where was the guidance counselor or administrator office was at. I didn't know none of that.

In the ninth grade, David continued to receive special education services under the designation of a student with an emotional disability (ED). He received most of his instruction in a small group setting, though he remembered taking physical education, art, and music with the general population. At lunch, he sat with two kids from his neighborhood as well as a few other students from the ED program. He was struck by the grouping of kids, not only by race but also by interest.

> You could see the jocks one side, the cheerleaders on the other side. The Gothic kids on that side. the little nerdy guys and then you'd see the Hispanic and the blacks together. Or you would see one gang on one side and another gang on another side.

David felt a renewed commitment to school. He started the year strong connecting with several of his teachers and making new friends. He particularly liked his history teacher because "he cracked jokes and he made history fun." David also connected with the administrator of the ED program who he described as "kind," "caring," and willing to help when he had a problem.

> When I see her, I make sure I give her a big hug. She always looked out for me even when I did something wrong. Even if I did something wrong, she'd pull me aside. Even if I argued with her, she'd tell me stay in her office. I always respected her for working with me.

Towards the middle of October, David again began to feel overwhelmed by school and the stress of his home life. He was failing most of his classes, which he attributed to his inability to focus in class. When his father came to the home, David bore

the brunt of his alcohol-fueled tirades. David also recalled having a hard time with his mother who was beginning to date other men.

> My mom, she gone through a lot. I couldn't deal with the fact that my mom was dating again. I couldn't deal with the fact that my father, my flesh and blood was messing around. I couldn't deal with my father being around. I always looked up to my father even when he use to get drunk and beat on me…Dealing with both stuff out in the street and then coming to school and dealing with it and then more stuff back home, I kind of got aggravated."

David began to skip school again citing the stress of his home life combined with his desire to hang out with his friends as the main motivation behind his behavior. At times, he felt ambivalent about missing school because he valued his relationships with staff and school friends, but his overriding feeling was that school was secondary to coping with his family problems and hanging out with friends.

> I felt so-so with school. There were certain times when I loved going to school. There were teachers that I liked. There was a girl in my class that I had a crush on and it would make my day to see her. The other side of me didn't want to go to school cause I didn't do my homework or I didn't want to deal with the BS in class or the BS in the hallway or get into a fight.

When asked if he had friends that encouraged him to stay in school, he recalled:

> We were encouraging each other to stay but also saying, 'Screw school, let's go party, let's hang out. There these girls and they want to hang out. Got these girls that want to party, smoke some weed. There's a skipping party.' That's what we'd usually do. And the more that we kept encouraging each other to leave school, the more I kept changing and acting different towards everybody. I even acted different towards my mother.

David estimated that he missed over four months of the ninth grade due to skipping, and he was also suspended for ten days for "tagging" the men's bathroom. David perceived that his teachers and the administrators at the school "gave up" on him because they stopped inquiring about his whereabouts. He recalled that school personnel made a few phone calls to his home, but he did not remember attending meetings or having any other direct contact with staff. During that period, David recalled that the school security guards showed concern for his well-being and when they saw him in the street, they encouraged him to come to school.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. David got off to a bad start for the tenth grade by showing up "high as hell" on the first day of school, marking the beginning of a downward spiral beset by drug use, violence, and disengagement. With skipping and suspensions, David missed even more days of school in the tenth grade than he had in the ninth grade year.

> I got suspended a lot in the tenth grade. I got suspended for violence. I almost stabbed a security guard. They had to call the police, and the police came to my house.

David was sent to an alternative program for 45 days. Upon completing the program, he was allowed to return to the school under the condition that the security personnel frisk him before he entered the building. He was suspended several more times during his tenth grade year mostly due to fighting with other students. The pattern of skipping and suspensions continued into 11th grade. Once again, he was placed in an

alternative setting during the period of suspension only to fall back into the same destructive behaviors upon his return.

David entered 12th grade with little possibility of achieving the required credits for graduation. Although he was aware of his slim prospects for obtaining a diploma, he showed little concern as his focus was directed elsewhere. His father had stopped coming to the home, and his mother had remarried. David didn't particularly like his stepfather, and he harbored bad feelings towards his mother for allowing "a strange man" into their home. David's 12th grade year also signaled his formal entry into a gang, and he recalled the "gang life" becoming his primary focus. Skipping school was an almost daily occurrence with David and his friends congregating in a park or at a home to use drugs and alcohol. When he did attend school, he thought only of fighting rival gang members. Two months into the school year, David got into a fight with another student in the hallway and was placed on a ten-day suspension. According to David, the other student faced no punishment, and David left the building filled with rage by the perceived injustice. Feeling frustrated, angry, and hopeless David decided that he would not return to school. He also perceived that school personnel wanted him out because of his history of bad behavior.

> My mom was trying to tell me that the school was trying to help, that they wanted to see me graduate and I said, 'I don't believe that,' because if they truly wanted to see me graduate, they wouldn't have suspended me so many times or kept pushing me out of school. They could have given me an in-school suspension. They don't really care about us cause we're the ones causing trouble in school and they don't really need that. They want us as robots, that's how I pretty much told my mom. The school wants everybody to be a robot. Go by the rules. That's what I thought.

David's perspective regarding his experience evolved after being away from school for several years during which time he worked minimum wage jobs, spent time in jail, and toiled in GED classes.

> Now that I'm older, I see that the way they were doing it was really the good way. Cause like I said before, there were certain teachers you could find that wanted to help you and had that good heart. They'd try to help the students even if they're going through bad or good times.

When asked what he believed were the main factors that led to his not returning to school, he cited the influence of the "gang life" as the main factor. He recalled that in 12th grade, his interests centered on skipping school and using drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy, and marijuana. He also recalled being chided by fellow gang members for wasting his time in school. Secondary to the influence of the gangs in his life, David also mentioned the pressure he felt from his volatile home life that made it difficult for him to focus on school.

Once David left school, he perceived that no one seemed to notice or care that he was gone. After being suspended for the incident involving the fight, he didn't tell anyone of his intention to not return. He recalled that there was no contact from administrators or other school personnel after the ten-day suspension elapsed. Two months after he left school, David saw a security guard in McDonalds who inquired as to why David wasn't in school; otherwise, he recalled no other contact with school staff.

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. Several years removed from leaving high school, David had clearly spent time reflecting on his experience. He acknowledged that his involvement with gangs and the attendant drug use and fighting contributed heavily to his negative school experience. When asked if the school could have done something differently to improve his experience and keep him engaged, he stated that he would have had stronger motivation to come to school if there had been more opportunity to participate in non-academic, extracurricular activities that were of interest to him. He remembered a teacher who bought him calligraphy pens and nurtured his interest in drawing while he was serving detention. Ironically, he looked forward to the afternoon detention.

> When I had to stay after school due to skipping, one of the teachers noticed that I liked to do calligraphy. I loved doing calligraphy. It's my favorite thing to do. She use to, out of her own pocket, she use to buy me a calligraphy book and pencils and pens. She use to sit right next to me and say, 'If you get such and such grade, this is what you get. Even without my knowing about the grades, I busted my back two times harder just because it was something I wanted. It was something my mom couldn't buy for me. My mom didn't have the money. For real, for real, I'm not trying to say that the teachers should give all the students a gift but a little motivation once in a while would help. Tell the students, 'You're doing great work. I appreciate you and the work that you're doing.'

He added that he felt schools could engage students by basing extracurricular programs on activities that appeal directly to youth as well as helping students develop new interests by introducing fresh and innovative events. He gave an example of an after school club that he felt was particularly engaging for students.

> When I was at [name redacted] high school, I was told that they had a break dance club. I was like, 'Man, that's crazy.' I had never seen no breakdance in schools. And then I went to see the football game between [name redeacted] and [name redacted] high school and they actually had a breakdancing team. There were a lot of kids that were happy to be doing that right after school. I also saw kids into photography. That was another cool club.

David thought further about the question of how schools might better support youth vulnerable to leaving school. From his group of friends and gang associates, he estimated that at least thirty had left without a diploma. He described many of the youth as smart and talented while lamenting their "wasted lives." David commented that his friends left school due to circumstances similar to his own. He emphasized the importance of school personnel developing an empathetic perspective and making an effort to understand what is going on in the lives of students outside of school. He believed that with a heightened understanding of the lives of students, schools could help in offering solutions to address the challenges negatively impacting their school experience. In thinking about factors that impact students' ability to come to school, he gave a hypothetical example of a ninth grade student who became pregnant.

> They could be 14 or 15 year-old Hispanic female, she could be pregnant and drop out of school because she got to help raise her child. She decides to come back, they gonna try to neglect her for that. It's not right. It's not right. She got to get out. She's not allowed back in the school cause she got to take care of her child. She want to do something better with her life so that she can show her kid, when the kid gets older. 'Oh yeah, when I had you, I still went to school and graduated.'

He continued with other "examples" that seemed painfully close to his own situation.

> A Hispanic male is probably having a life and death situation at home. Maybe, his mother, father, sister, grandmother is dying and he decides to run around with the gangs. No one is around to show him the right way to go. When they see that, they go overboard and say, 'Screw school, I'm just going to do it on my own.'

David sighed heavily before stating that he deeply regretted leaving school. It was evident that the subsequent years of drug use and prison life had taken a toll and clearly diminished his options. He expressed his appreciation for the GED and counseling program emphatically stating that his teacher and counselor "had his back" and were willing to help him through every situation. Looking directly into the camera, David wistfully said that he believed that more school staff should adopt a similar approach to helping struggling students.

> What's the point of them becoming an administrator or a teacher if you don't want to help out a student that's going through rough times?

Participant #9

Background. "Leticia" gave birth to her first child when she was in the tenth grade. She left school to care for her baby but returned the following year intent on finishing high school. Sharing child care duties with her mother, she tried in earnest to balance motherhood with her high school studies, but she ultimately left school in 11th grade, feeling overwhelmed by the stressors in her life.

Leticia had made significant changes in her life since leaving high school. She got a job working in the produce section of a Whole Foods grocery store, and she was attending GED classes and counseling sessions at the community-based center. The

challenge of caring for her baby, maintaining a job, and pursuing the GED was intensified after the birth of her second child, which occurred ten months prior to this interview. Leticia and her children live with Leticia's parents in a small garden apartment. The father of the children has apparently shirked his responsibilities, as he has not been seen for months. Leticia expressed appreciation for her mother's support and frustration towards the absentee father.

> My mom's helping me. It makes it kind of difficult cause the kids' dad is never there. I need support to help the kids. I wasn't the only one that made the kids. But it makes it kind of hard cause he's not there to help. He's never there, it's like he's not in the picture.

Leticia seemed moderately shy at the outset of the interview. She smiled nervously while speaking in a low tone of voice, but she seemed to gain confidence as the conversation progressed. After several minutes, she appeared to forget about the video camera, as she began to vocalize with increased strength and clarity in describing the life events that led to her leaving school.

Leticia was born in California, and her parents are from El Salvador. During early childhood, Leticia, along with her three older sisters and parents, moved from California to Maryland. Leticia entered Head Start at her local elementary school where she remained until the fourth grade. The family moved, and she switched schools for her fifth grade year.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Leticia recalled an overall positive elementary school experience. She liked her teachers, and she performed well

academically. However, she recalled getting into trouble during the first grade because she had a tendency to fight with other children. Leticia spoke both Spanish and English at home and she recalled having "speech problems" in both languages. In the third grade, she was found eligible for special education services, and she began to receive speech therapy individually and in a small group setting. Although she received good grades in elementary school, she recalled feeling insecure about speaking in front of others.

> I'd just stay quiet and try to figure it out by myself or sometimes I'd get shy and not ask questions cause I didn't want the other kids to think I was dumb or better than me.

Leticia recalled a relatively easy transition to middle school. She was at first overwhelmed by the volume of students in the hallway when changing classes, but she soon acclimated to the environment. She liked her teachers and found that she was able to handle the schoolwork. She made friends but continued to have conflict with other kids. After returning from the Christmas break, she got into a fight with an eighth grader. She was suspended for five days as a result of the altercation. Leticia recalled the fight as a turning point in her school experience, as she began to hang out with a new group of kids who skipped school and fought frequently.

> After that, my mind changed and I started hanging around with wrong people. Some friends I had they were good, but others were telling me things. I was just hanging around at the wrong time with the wrong people. I didn't think at that time I should talk to somebody like an adult to help me out so I just kept getting in trouble.

Leticia entered the seventh grade with a negative attitude. She lost interest in her classes and began to skip with greater frequency. She fought with her teachers and other students. Schoolwork became secondary to hanging out with her friends.

> My parents were pushing me to go [to school] telling me that you need this, you need your education but I wasn't really focused on going to school. I was the type of girl that wanted to hang out with my friends. I wasn't serious about anything. I just liked to hang. I wasn't that serious. The same thing went on. I stopped going to class. I'd walk the hallways or hang out in the bathroom. I started getting in more trouble.

Leticia shared that she had "anger problems" in middle school, which she attributed to her experience of being subjected to physical and emotional abuse by a babysitter during early childhood. She recalled no interaction with her counselor or teachers regarding her behavior, though she remembered the principal questioning her about her conduct. As the calls home from school staff increased, Leticia's parents became increasingly upset by her behavior. Leticia entered the eighth grade with a renewed focus and determination to do well in school. She worried about being prepared for high school and believed that she needed to make a stronger effort in her last year of middle school. Her attendance wasn't perfect but improved from the seventh grade. Although she maintained her friendships from the seventh grade, the conflicts with teachers and peers diminished.

Leticia entered high school feeling nervous about the new surroundings.

> It was a scary feeling. I mean, I saw more bigger kids. I'm young and I see all these older kids. Different kids. Different teachers. Different classes, and I didn't

> know what it was going to be like. Now some of my friends didn't go to the school and I didn't know who I was going to be with.

After several weeks, Leticia began to feel more comfortable in the new surroundings. She liked most of her classes, and she achieved fairly good grades. At the end of the first quarter, she developed a friendship with a girl who she met in one of her classes. The two became fast friends, and Leticia described her new acquaintance as her "skip partner." Leticia skipped over a month of school during the ninth grade, and her grades plummeted as a result.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. Leticia continued to miss school in the tenth grade. She attended skip parties hosted by friends whose parents were working and oblivious of the presence of unattended teenagers in their homes. One month into the school year, Leticia discovered that she was pregnant. She hid the pregnancy from her parents, until she could no longer conceal her appearance. While her parents were furious, Leticia recalled that her mother was ultimately supportive and tried to counsel her during the stressful time. Towards the latter stage of her pregnancy, she felt that being in school was stressful. Consumed by thoughts that other students were making fun of her, Leticia decided that she would not return to school until after the birth of her baby. The school arranged for a teacher to come to her house throughout the week to help her stay caught up with schoolwork.

After the birth of her daughter, Leticia returned to school for 11th grade. Leticia's mother and a baby sitter shared childcare duties while Leticia attended school. When

asked about how she managed being a new mother and attending high school, she recalled:

> Well that was hard. I didn't have no sleep sometimes. I was tired and stressed out. There were sometimes problems in the house like with my mother and my parents. Like, the stuff that I had done in middle school and they would keep talking to me about that and put me in a negative spot.

Leticia recalled feeling supported by her teachers and counselors who were aware that she had become a young mother. Although she missed school on the days when the baby was sick or the sitter didn't show up, she recalled that her teachers tried to provide her with missed assignments and make arrangement for her to take make-up exams. Despite being faced with difficult circumstances, Leticia felt reasonably comfortable at her high school, which made her imminent departure from the school all the more difficult.

After completing the second semester of tenth grade, school personnel discovered that Leticia's mother had enrolled her daughter as an "out of boundary" student by using the address of a cousin. Once school personnel found out about the deception, Leticia was immediately directed to attend her home school, which was a far less desirable school from her perspective. She recalled entering the school as a total outsider not knowing any of the students or teachers. Feeling stressed out in the new environment, she stopped attending after only two weeks.

> It was hard. To me, it seemed like all the kids were stuck up around there. I was shy. I had trouble meeting people. When I found out I didn't know nobody, I just stopped going.

Leticia perceived the staff as cold and uncaring. Although school personnel were apparently aware that she was a new mother, she recalled that there was no effort to reach out to her. Leticia decided that she would spend the remainder of the school year at home with her baby.

The following school year, Leticia returned to her neighborhood high school with the intention of re-entering 11th grade. She was told that before she could be readmitted, she would have to meet with an administrator and her counselor. In the meeting, she recalled that the counselor and the administrator tried to dissuade her from returning to the school, saying that she would not be able to obtain the required credits for graduation. They encouraged her to pursue a GED, but Leticia expressed her desire to return to high school. She was frustrated by what she perceived as callousness and inflexibility on the part of school staff.

> I had to go for a meeting and they were like, 'It's too late for you to come back, you're not going to graduate.' Then they said, 'OK, you can come back but you can't miss one day. If you miss one day, you're not going to graduate.' And I'm like, 'That's hard. I have a baby. If the baby gets sick or something, I might have to miss a day.'

Leticia felt forced into a corner and felt leaving was her only logical choice.

> I had to just give up at that point. I had enough. I didn't want to go to school no more. I just gave up.

She informed the administrator of her intention not to return to school who then asked her to complete a form listing the reason for her departure: "I just put down that I didn't want

to go." When asked if anyone from the school tried to talk with her about the decision to leave, she recalled: "No, not really. It seemed like nobody cared. They didn't really talk to me about it."

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. Leticia couldn't help but recognize the striking difference between the two high schools that she attended in her 11th grade year. At the first school, she perceived the staff as kind, caring, and willing to help her deal with the challenge of being a teenage mother. Leticia recalled her teachers and counselor showing genuine concern for her, while trying to help Leticia work through the challenge of concomitantly being a young mother and a high school student. By contrast, Leticia perceived that the staff at the second high school was cold-hearted and unsympathetic to her situation. She felt that the staff viewed her as a bad example for the other students. She perceived that the school administrator was forcing her to essentially choose between her baby and her education.

When asked what the school could have done differently to help her remain in school, she paused for a sustained period before responding in a soft voice.

> I guess for more of the teachers to be there for you. More differently. Come talk to you. Meet with you every week to see what's going on to try to help you out. It wasn't like that at that school. That's one thing I compare with [my earlier school], it seemed like the teachers would be there. It's up to the students to get the help if they offer it. At [the later school], they never paid you no mind.

Leticia felt that schools could better engage students by showing kindness and by encouraging the students to stay on task. She believed that it was important for schools to

help students develop interests beyond standard academics. She emphasized after-school clubs promoting different activities as an effective way to engage students.

> Teachers should help the students get enthusiastic about school. Not to make school like a playground but to make it more fun so that they can get interested in school activities. More like after school programs so that they feel welcome there. To keep them interested. Sometimes teachers know how to teach but there are some students that don't understand so they need to be there to help them.

In thinking about her situation of being a young mother and student, Leticia mentioned that it would have made a significant difference in her high school experience had there been on-site child day care at the school. She recalled missing a number of days due to her not having child care, and she also believes that her focus on school would have improved by not having child care worries and by having her baby close by.

Leticia stated that she was determined to get her GED. After working her shift at the Whole Foods, she often traveled by bus to the Center for her GED class before heading home to take care of her children. Although feeling tired and stressed by the demanding schedule, Leticia proudly stated that she was meeting the challenge for her kids' future. She shared that the counseling she had received from the center's staff had been key in helping her find the resolve to cope with her life.

> The program has helped me a lot. You know, it's opened my eyes to what I need. How I need education to do something with my life. They've taught me a lot. You know, to be a different person, to think different things from how I use to think back then. They've taught me to think positive for my self esteem cause I had low self esteem. Think positive, do the right thing, make good choices. Stay away from negative influences.

Participant #10

Background. "Jenny" was friendly and personable. She smiled easily throughout the interview, and she spoke with apparent ease about her life experiences. Her speaking had a hint of the "Nuyorican" accent true to her New York, Puerto Rican upbringing. Jenny wore her hair pulled back in a ponytail, highlighting her almond-shaped, expressive eyes. She seemed to enjoy having an opportunity to express her thoughts about school and the events that led to her departure. Candid and articulate, her words appeared to flow with little difficulty. She described herself as "a very smart girl who made some bad decisions in her life." As the interview progressed, it was apparent that Jenny's self-description was apt and on target.

Jenny was born in Brooklyn, New York to parents of Puerto Rican heritage. She was the third born of her parents' five children. Shorty after Jenny's fifth birthday, her parents divorced, and Jenny's father was awarded custody of the children. Jenny recalled that period as stressful because of her confusion and sadness about her parent's breakup. She completed the second grade in New York before moving to Maryland with her father and siblings. Shortly after her arrival in Maryland, she was placed once again in the second grade for reasons that were not readily apparent to her. After second grade, Jenny entered another school for the third grade because her family temporarily relocated to a different neighborhood. The family moved once again, and Jenny returned to her first placement for the fourth and fifth grades.

Perceptions regarding school experience. Jenny recalled an overall positive experience in elementary school, though she remembered having difficulty making friends.

> I was shy as a kid so I didn't like to approach people and talk to them. I waited for people to approach me. I didn't have that many friends. I had after-school care which was the best part of my day. We did a lot of arts and crafts and sports.

In the third and fourth grades, Jenny recalled liking her teachers, but she also remembered feeling isolated from the other students. She smiled when recalling a teacher that encouraged her to break out of her shell.

> There was one teacher I liked a lot, Ms. Moon, I would come to her class and eat my lunch. She was like the coolest teacher I ever had. I would go to see her and we would talk. I built up a good relationship with her, and she tried to push me to be more open and sociable but it wasn't me. I didn't start to become more sociable until high school.

When Jenny entered the fifth grade, her cousin enrolled in the third grade at the same school. Her presence was a boon to Jenny's experience at the school, as the two became inseparable during lunch and recess. Jenny recalled enjoying elementary school noting that her attendance and grades were "perfect." However, Jenny remembered an awkward transition to middle school.

> It was something new for me. How can I put this? I was like a small person in a big room. I felt like a lot of people were staring at me. I felt like a lot of people were talking about me. I guess that's what happens when you go to middle school. Everyone's older, getting into different things. More kids; way more kids. Different personalities. It was a lot for me to take. I got through it cause I had to.

In the sixth grade, Jenny continued to feel socially awkward, but she related well with a few teachers. She had a particularly good experience in her English class.

> I connected with my English teacher. English was my favorite subject. I got really high scores in English. I would go to her class to eat lunch and catch up on my work. She actually…at that time I was reading on a 12th grade level so she tried to push me into honors English. I wasn't really comfortable with that. I liked the pace at which we were working.

In the seventh grade, Jenny made two close friends. She recalled that her relationship with her new friends opened her up to other friendships. She described the eighth grade as her best time in middle school, as she performed well academically while bonding with new friends. At the end of the school year, she went on a class trip to New York before attending an end-of-year pool party with the eighth grade students and teachers. Jenny mentioned that the school trip and pool party made her feel connected to her peers and part of the school community. She described eighth grade as "the best time of my middle school years."

Jenny entered the ninth grade with equal parts excitement and trepidation. She was excited about moving on to high school with her friends but nervous about rumors that she had heard about rampant bullying.

> All I thought about was 'freshman beat down day' you know all the rumors that you hear when you're a freshman. You know, the seniors beat you up but it wasn't even like that.

Jenny got off to a strong start in the ninth grade. She liked her classes, achieved good grades and barely missed any school. Jenny was also becoming more outgoing as

she continued to make new friends. Halfway through the school year, she began to hang out with new acquaintances, and her yearning for acceptance led to negative behaviors.

> I had never gone to parties before. I started hanging out with this boy that I liked a lot. A couple of my new friends took it to another level. They were drinking a little bit. It wasn't like a everyday habit. The first time I tried it, I didn't really like it. I tried smoking cigarettes. It was just a lot of negative things that were there. And with me being a non-sociable person and not growing up with lots of friends, I liked being accepted by this group.

Jenny estimated that she skipped two weeks of school during the ninth grade, and she missed three weeks during tenth grade due to skipping. Despite the missed days, she managed to complete her schoolwork and achieve good grades in all of her classes. After the family moved to a different neighborhood, Jenny entered a new school for her junior year. She made new friends including a boy who would become her boyfriend. With the new relationship, Jenny lost interest in school.

> At that time, when I met him I was infatuated with him. I wanted it to be just me and him so I put school to the side. My grades went down. I actually stopped going to school for a couple of months when I went to [name of school redacted].

She stopped attending school to spend time with her boyfriend, and she also got a job, which made her feel independent.

> I was home with him. I was also working. I got a job and I was like, 'forget school,' 'cause I was going to work and school at the same time. I was working at Shadow Land Laser Tag. I was like, 'I'm making some money, forget school.' I was like sixteen at the time, that was a lot of money to me, especially growing up in a family where we had lots of financial issues due to the fact that there was so many of us kids and only one parent taking care of us. It was a lot of money to

> me. I enjoyed making the money and being independent. Doing for myself and not having to depend on anyone.

Perceptions regarding the influences that led to early school leaving. In January of her junior year, Jenny discovered that she was pregnant. Much to the consternation of her father, she moved into a crumbling basement apartment with her boyfriend. But encouraged by her teachers, she remained in school until the end of the school year, and then she attended summer school to make up her lost credits.

> When I learned that I was pregnant, actually I went to school and got as many credits as I could. Passed all of my final exams. A lot of people were proud of me. I had an elevator key. They would help me out when I got really big. So, my teachers were understanding if I came to class with some food.

The following September, Jenny gave birth to her daughter. Her school counselor arranged for home instruction, so that Jenny could stay current with the 12th grade assignments. After two months, Jenny returned to school, and she recalled the stress of being a new mother while trying to attend high school.

> When I went back to school, it was hard. Me and my baby father were arguing a lot cause he was home with her during the school day and then when I would come home, he would leave and then come back late at night and I was like, I have school work and I have her on top of that. It's hard for me.

Jenny's anxiety was heightened by the challenge of supporting a baby on a limited income. As the discord grew between Jenny and her boyfriend, she sensed that he was pulling away and divesting responsibility from helping to support the family.

Recognizing that she needed help, Jenny sought support from social service agencies. She was assigned a caseworker who helped her obtain vouchers for day care and food. For emotional support, Jenny leaned on family and friends. When she was in the latter stage of her pregnancy, she recalled walking the hallway and overhearing putdowns and disdainful whispers of other students. Though anxious about returning to school, Jenny's concerns were calmed by staff and friends who provided support without passing judgment.

> I had a science teacher who was very understanding. She was also pregnant at the time and we connected. I liked her. She was really cool and I liked going to her class. I had a lot of support in the school system when it came to counselors and administrators. I also had a lot of friends that supported me.

Jenny felt the weight of caring for her baby while attending school. Although she had moved back in with her father, money was tight because her dad had recently lost his job. With supporting the baby as her primary concern, Jenny began to work at an all night diner. The pace of balancing school and motherhood was exhausting. Working the overnight shift at the diner was the tipping point. Two credits shy of a diploma, Jenny left high school halfway through the second semester. Although she felt immediate regret, she believed that she had no other choice. At seventeen years of age, she felt the weighty responsibility of supporting a family, which took priority over finishing school.

> It was pretty exhausting for me which is why I cut school out of the picture. Even though I should have stayed focused and got my two credits and did what I needed to do-it was a really stupid decision but at the time I was more worried about my family and our financial income. At that time, I did have my counselor who I was really close with. She actually did come to my house telling me, 'You

> only have a certain amount of time left of school, all you have to do is pass these exams, get your credits.' Me and my sister are the only ones working in the house. We are the only ones that can take care of the family until everyone else gets back on their feet. We both were working overnight shifts to keep our household up. We were both the main breadwinners in the family. We were paying bills. We did have Section 8 but we still had to pay a certain amount for light bills, gas, food. It was really exhausting. I rarely had time for my daughter. I would work overnight until five in the morning. Wake up during the day and then go right back to work in the evening.

When asked what she considered to be the main factor that contributed to her decision to leave school, she directed her gaze towards the floor before responding in a somber tone of voice.

> My daughter, my family, the economic situation. How can I explain this? So my decision was basically based on the economic, financial well-being of my family and household. In general, just being able to survive.

Perceptions regarding possible solutions to early school leaving. When asked if she thought the school could have provided additional support or done something differently to help keep her in school, Jenny paused for a sustained period of time before responding.

> Differently? Even though I felt like I had a lot of support from my counselor and teachers, I feel like the school could have had more programs to support young teens with families with certain financial issues that were struggling. They need a special program for teens who not only have that school priority but other main priorities as well like taking care of their family. If they had more programs like that, I probably would have finished school.

Jenny emphatically stated her belief that on-site child care at the school could have had a strong impact on her ability to stay in school.

> I think I would have finished if there was child care. We had something like that at [name of school redacted] but there was certain kinds of criteria that you had to meet in order to get your child in there. You had to be a certain age and at the time, my daughter wasn't old enough so I couldn't do that. But if we had something like that, it would have been excellent. That would have meant way more of an opportunity for me to try and finish school.

When asked to reflect further on what schools could do to support students vulnerable to walking away without a diploma, she responded:

> Well honestly, I think they should set up more clubs just to keep kids more occupied because nowadays, there are so many outside influences that drive kids to do the things that they're doing. I see it all the time. Younger kids who are about ten years old running around cursing, stealing bikes and stuff like that. You know, if they were preoccupied with more hands-on activities, then I feel like things would turn out differently. So I feel like there should be more programs, more supportive teachers. If there were more teachers, I was lucky to have a few, but if there were more teachers who were supportive, I probably would have finished. I respect all my teachers for the things they did for me, my counselor. It would have been helpful to be able to share more of the emotional things that were going on for me. I was struggling and I think that would have helped a lot, mentally and emotionally. If there were more programs like that, I think that would have helped.

Jenny emphasized the importance of students and teachers making a connection that extends beyond the academic instruction in the classroom. She reflected on her own difficult circumstances and those of others that she knew in high school. In a rising voice filled with emotion, she emphasized the importance of teachers getting to know their students and developing an understanding of the challenges that confront their lives. Jenny recalled feeling inspired and motivated by teachers who she felt cared about her personal development as much as they cared about her academic performance.

> The connection that you make with teachers does make a big difference because, I don't know, I looked forward to going to classes with teachers that I had a connection with. Teachers that I knew cared about me and would be there if I needed help, that were cool and connected with all the kids in the class.

Jenny lamented her decision to leave school. She was tired of the late night shifts at the diner, and she dreamed of a better job. She felt stuck being a waitress with a low wage and an arduous schedule, as she believed that she had foreclosed on other employment options by not obtaining her high school diploma. Driven by a desire to provide a brighter future for her daughter, Jenny struggled to meet the demands of being a working mother while attending GED classes. She proudly related her goal of passing the GED and then enrolling in community college in preparation for pursuing a career as a "medical coding and billing assistant." Jenny had several friends who had either left high school or were contemplating leaving.

> My advice to them? Um….you're not going to get anywhere without an education. If I could go back, I would definitely go get my high school diploma. So my advice is stay in school and whatever the problem is, it can be worked out with counselors, family members, administrators, teachers, whatever. All you have to do is open your mouth and talk to them. Let them know what's going on and I'm pretty sure someone will be understanding of the situation and be supportive and try to help.

Themes Across Interviews

Data analysis involves organizing what you have seen, heard, and read in order to make sense of what you have learned (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Peshkin (1997) wrote that when conducting qualitative research, it is vital to consider the ways in which data

might be more complex or nuanced than one might have originally anticipated or perceived. With that in mind, data should be reviewed multiple times, utilizing several approaches to coding throughout the analysis process. In-depth interviewing generates a significant amount of text. The massive array of words, sentences, paragraphs, and pages must be reduced to address the research questions. Returning to key themes before and after summarizing responses to research questions helps to ensure that that the researcher has identified patterns and meaning in the data free of preconceptions and prior biases (Creswell, 2003). Accordingly, the researcher analyzed the interview transcripts so as to identify common factors and themes that surfaced within the context of the research questions that guided this study. Three overarching themes emerged from an analysis of the interviews.

1) Disengagement from the school community

Consistent with research demonstrating that students leave school as a result of long-term disengagement rather than a singular event, the participants in the current study reported multiple factors in their school experience, some of which emerged as early as elementary school, contributing to their leaving school prior to graduation. All ten participants reported missing a significant amount of school due to truancy, suspension, illness, and/or incarceration. One participant noted that he missed two weeks of the fifth grade due to a suspension and five months of the sixth grade due to truancy. Four of the interviewees reported multiple absences due to truancy commencing in the seventh grade. Two participants reported missing a significant amount of school due to incarceration and

another participant noted that he missed two months due to a hospitalization. Seven participants reported multiple suspensions from school commencing in middle school.

Seven out of the ten participants reported academic difficulties throughout their school experience, with five of the interviewees noting that their academic struggles began as early as the fourth grade. Participants reported feeling demoralized by failing grades and lost credits, which contributed to the perception for several interviewees that a high school diploma was unattainable. It was also noted by several participants that their academic struggles were compounded by a lack of continuity in their educational programming due to interrupted (or substandard) education in their home countries or frequent moves and changes of school in the United States. When "Mario" immigrated to the U.S. at age eleven, he was placed in the fourth grade despite never having attended school in his native country. The absence of schooling in his early years resulted in significant gaps in his understanding of basic math and literacy concepts. In addition to learning English, Mario was faced with the arduous task of developing basic math and literacy skills in order to "catch up" with his peers. Mario's late entrance into school was essentially a setup for disengagement from school as the downward spiral of failure began shortly after he entered the fourth grade. Several participants reported that a change in school resulted in their feeling disconnected from the new school community. "Leticia" felt connected to school staff who were supportive of her during her pregnancy and the subsequent birth of her child. However, when she was compelled to attend a different school due to the discovery that she was an "out of boundary" student, she perceived that the staff at her new school was cold and uncaring.

All of the participants in this study were of Latino ethnicity. Five of them entered school with limited English proficiency and reported that the challenges associated with learning English in the midst of acclimating to the school environment were at times overwhelming. It was noted by four participants that they encountered difficulty understanding the spoken English used by their teachers in the classroom. "Oscar" remembered feeling "terrified" on his first day of school, as he spoke virtually no English and there were no Spanish-speaking school personnel to help him acclimate to the school environment. Oscar's disengagement from the school community commenced on his first day. His experience highlights the need for schools to employ culturally and linguistically competent personnel to assist vulnerable students, particularly those newly arrived in the country.

2) Impact of connection between staff and students on the overall school experience

The impact of connection emerged as a significant theme among the participants. The importance of the relationships, both positive and negative, among the participants and school personnel surfaced prominently in the interviews and accords with the findings of previous studies. The positive relationships formed with youth by school staff including teachers, counselors, administrators, custodial workers, and security guards was a key factor in keeping students engaged in school (Immerwahr, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Conversely, school personnel who convey negativity can impact the student's decision to remain in school.

Participants in this study cited their interactions with school personnel as having a significant impact on their school experience. Several mentioned that the connection that they established with school staff was central to their coming to school and feeling a part of the school community. “Linda” recalled feeling socially awkward and alone in elementary school, but gained a sense of connectedness through the kindness and support of the school librarian who became her confidant and “mentor.” “Alex” formed a positive relationship with his ESOL teacher who was a source of constant encouragement and support. He recalled the relationship as making a significant difference in keeping him engaged and motivated, as he received little or no encouragement from family members. “Jenny” recalled that the kindness and support received from her counselors and teachers during her pregnancy and after the birth of her child helped her cope with the stress of balancing motherhood with being a high school student.

Nine out of the ten participants interviewed for this study cited poor interactions with school personnel as having a negative impact on their ability to feel connected to the school environment. Several participants perceived that school staff discriminated against them due to their Latino heritage, while others believed that they were ostracized because of their reputation and history of difficulties in school. Participants perceived that they were treated in a belittling manner in comparison to their white counterparts. Seeming indifference on the part of teachers and counselors were thought by some of the interviewees to be a manifestation of racism. “Rafael” described having an adversarial relationship with the teachers and administrators at his school, who he believed had given up on him and wanted him expelled. “Roberto” felt that the administrators at his school

discriminated against him due to his reputation for being gang involved, and he, too felt that the school staff wanted him banished from the school. Several participants perceived that school personnel were indifferent to the challenges confronting their lives.

Although the participants were faced with significant difficulties impacting their ability to perform academically and remain in school, there was a perception among some that school staff was either unaware or uncaring about the challenges confronting the participants, thus further engendering feelings of disconnectedness. When "Oscar" was homeless and sleeping on couches and floors, he felt that no one at his school seemed to care about his difficulties. Upon speaking with his counselor about his difficult circumstances, Oscar perceived that the counselor thought that he was "making excuses" to justify his excessive absences from school. There was also a perception among several interviewees that school staff seemed not to care or notice that the participants had left school. During Alex's three-month period of incarceration, he noted that no school personnel called his family or made any effort to determine his whereabouts. When Oscar left school in 12th grade, he recalled that no school staff seemed to notice. He simply walked away, and no effort was made by school staff to contact him to discuss his situation. After the birth of her daughter, "Leticia" recalled feeling supported by her teachers who showed empathy and offered emotional and academic support. However, when she was required to attend a different school during 11th grade, Leticia stated that she felt "like an outsider." She perceived that staff were cold and indifferent to her challenge of being a young mother and student.

3). External factors negatively impacting availability for learning

Consistent with prior research, the participants in this study cited myriad complex influences underlying the event of their leaving school without a diploma. A common thread that surfaced was the challenge for the participants to maintain focus on academics while coping with difficulties outside of school. For most of the interviewees, school became secondary to managing the stress of life circumstances. In examining the reasons cited by the participants as influencing the event of their leaving school, a case could be made that any one of a number individual factors cited by the interviewees could have led to their leaving school. Thus, while participants cited various reasons for their premature departure including gang involvement, pregnancy, and volatile home environment, the prevailing sentiment among the interviewees was lost hope; that is, after a prolonged period during which they were confronted with seemingly insurmountable challenges, leaving school seemed to be the only remaining option.

The stress associated with a volatile home environment was cited by several participants as figuring prominently in the occurrence of leaving school. After multiple foster care placements followed by homelessness, Oscar felt that he could no longer focus on academics; school became secondary to his survival. Linda cited the stress of her relationship with her parents including the pressure associated with her not living up to their expectations as weighing heavily on her decision to leave home and ultimately not return to school. Although David's premature exit from high school was marked by gang involvement and drug use, he also cited the years of emotional and physical abuse inflicted by his father as having a negative impact on his ability to focus on academics

and remain in school. Three participants cited the influence of gangs and violence as having a significant impact on their ability to focus on school. Roberto recalled that his primary focus in high school was fighting other students and being involved in the gang. David also recalled "gang life" as becoming his primary focus during 12th grade. Five participants were jailed for various offenses during high school, thus interfering with the continuity of their educational programming. Alex had been attending school daily and receiving strong grades until his incarceration prior to 11th grade, which then derailed his plan to obtain a high school diploma. Several participants cited drug and alcohol use as interfering with their ability to focus on school. David recalled being high most days during high school, which adversely impacted his ability to focus on school. A number of the interviewees cited the stress of violence in schools combined with their preoccupation with the "gang life" as diverting their focus from school.

Two of the three female participants in this study gave birth during high school and the third participant became pregnant shortly after leaving school. Focus on school took second place to coping with teenage motherhood. For Jenny, the stress of motherhood was compounded by economic challenges, since she became the sole provider for her daughter. The importance of finishing high school was superseded by her need to maintain a job and support her family.

Findings as Related to the Research Questions

The following section presents the findings from each individual research question within the context of the overarching themes described above.

1) How do Latino students perceive their experience of leaving high school without a diploma?

The participants expressed a range of emotions regarding their experience of leaving school including anger, defiance, sadness, and regret. For each interviewee, graduating from high school figured prominently in their dreams and future plans. Coming to terms with the reality of not achieving their goal of a high school diploma was painful to accept. Though expressed in a variety of ways, it was clear that each interviewee felt hurt by the experience of leaving school without a diploma. Two individuals expressed sadness that they had disappointed their mothers. Several recalled feeling humiliated and hurt on graduation day, when classmates (and in one case, a sibling) received their diplomas. Although most of the participants expressed optimism about future plans such as obtaining a GED, they expressed disappointment and regret for not finishing high school. Nevertheless, most of the participants were able to step back to some extent from their emotional involvement in order to give thought and rational analysis as to what had gone wrong in their lives.

Most of the participants reported a positive elementary school experience but noted academic and social difficulties commencing in middle school. For many of the interviewees, middle school years were beset with academic failure and frequent absences because of truancy and suspension. The majority of subjects suffered relational trauma during early childhood and the middle school years. Several participants were separated from their parents for a prolonged period of time when the parents immigrated

to the United States. One individual was separated from his immediate family for several years, when he immigrated from his native country to the U.S. A number of interviewees lived in single parent households marked by instability and, in some cases, abuse. Each participant noted that difficulties at home negatively impacted their ability to focus on school.

For most of the interviewees, the middle school years marked the beginning of negative interactions among peers and school staff. Several participants noted that they became involved with gangs, while others cited the middle school years as the period when they missed a significant amount of school because of truancy and suspensions. Some participants reported that they began to use drugs and alcohol during the seventh and eighth grades. When asked about the transition to high school, several participants indicated that it was a natural progression to continue the negative behaviors from middle school into high school; others felt that a new school environment gave them a chance to start over.

When asked to cite particular factors that contributed to the event of their leaving school, several participants struggled to formulate a response. Some were able to focus on a single event such as incarceration or suspension, but most of the interviewees could not identify a single decisive factor. The reasons cited by Linda for leaving school seemed vague and amorphous. She felt demoralized by her poor academic performance, and she also cited the stress of her home life as contributing factors; however, she emphasized that those were not the exclusive reasons why she opted to leave. She noted

that she had reached the end and simply couldn't deal with school anymore. After years of struggle, leaving school seemed like her most viable option.

Oscar offered a similar perspective of disaffection and hopelessness. When he was informed that he would have to repeat 12th grade because of excessive absences, he felt demoralized and deflated. He felt disconnected from the school environment, and he questioned the purpose and worth of school. While many participants felt anger and bitterness towards school personnel, most did not assign blame to school staff for the occurrence of leaving school and instead acknowledged the impact of their own decisions and personal behavior on the event. Nevertheless, there was a prevailing sentiment among some that school staff was indifferent to the challenges confronting the participants. Others perceived indifference and coldness on the part of school staff as a manifestation of discrimination and indication that school personnel wanted the participants expelled from the surroundings.

2) What do Latino students perceive as the influences that contributed to the event of early school leaving?

As noted above, the participants cited an array of influences that contributed to their leaving school prior to graduation, including factors involving their personal and school lives. A number of participants noted that traumatic events including physical abuse, homelessness, and teen pregnancy contributed heavily to their early exit from high school. Several of the participants reported that criminal involvement and incarceration were precursors. Still others cited gang involvement and activities such as drug use and

organized “skip parties” as heavily influencing events leading to their departure from school.

Several noted that school personnel informed them at the last minute that they lacked the sufficient credits to graduate and would “age out” of the system before achieving the necessary credits to graduate. One interviewee, who was arrested in the ninth grade, shared that his parole officer advised him to pursue a GED. Most of the interviewees were suspended on multiple occasions but were afforded little or no opportunity to make up lost credits. One participant achieved the required credits to graduate but was unable to do so because he did not pass state assessments. The difficulties in meeting graduation requirements illuminates a common thread among the participants and their parents, which is a lack of familiarity regarding school procedures and expectations with respect to graduation requirements. This lack of familiarity underscored and illustrates the absence of adult advocates in their lives. The participants related that they received little guidance from school personnel regarding graduation requirements. Their lack of understanding of school rules, procedures, and expectations, combined with a deficiency in programs geared to student orientation, defined the students’ experiences and negatively impacted their decision making. One participant emphasized the importance of school personnel being “honest” with students in informing them of graduation requirements and apprising them of alternative paths if a high school diploma seemed out of reach.

Several participants shared that they believed there was no real point to being in school. They felt little or no connection to the school community; their primary interest

was to get a job. The two interviewees who gave birth during high school noted that their academic development was secondary to caring for their children.

3) What do Latino students perceive as possible solutions to address the phenomenon of early school leaving?

The participants were asked to reflect on their experience of leaving school and consider what the school might have done differently to produce a better outcome. A pervading sentiment among the participants was the feeling that there was an absence of adults that they could talk to about the challenges confronting their lives. Several interviewees stated that they felt misunderstood by school personnel. Participants emphasized that it would have made a significant difference in their school experience had they been able to connect with a teacher, counselor, or other school staff to gain their support and guidance as well as to have an opportunity to discuss the feelings and the challenges confronting their lives. Two participants brought up the idea of providing students with mentors to help youth work through difficult circumstances. One thought that help obtaining child care would have made a difference.

Participants commented that they perceived that school was boring and lacked purpose. Most struggled with the academic demands of high school, and they noted that there were no family members who could help them with their schoolwork. Several interviewees mentioned that they would have benefited from individualized or small group academic support offered after school or during lunch. Participants also emphasized the importance of extracurricular activities and clubs based on student

interest as a means for promoting and preserving student engagement. Several interviewees commented that their involvement in sports and after school clubs was the determining factor in keeping them motivated to attend school. One participant commented that her involvement in a Latin dance club was the only activity that she looked forward to during her school day. Several participants noted that they were precluded from participating in extracurricular activities because they did not meet grade point average requirements. They decried the requirement as being unfair and overly punitive and a barrier to those who wished to become more involved in the school community.

A number of the participants perceived that many of their classes lacked meaning for them, since they had little to do with their stated goal of obtaining employment. Several interviewees commented that classes focusing on the skills required for particular vocations would enhance their level of engagement. The female participants emphasized that child day care provided on-site at the school would have made a significant difference in their school experience. For the participants born in Latin America, there was a strong feeling that schools should do more to support recently arrived students acclimate to the school environment. They emphasized that it would be particularly beneficial for schools to employ bilingual staff who could help students with limited English proficiency adjust to the new surroundings.

Summary of the Chapter

This chapter summarized data collected through the research process. It includes interviews with the ten participants who discussed their experiences and shared their perceptions regarding the factors that contributed to their leaving school prior to graduation. Field notes detailing observations, document review and feedback from program staff were also integrated into the analysis of the interview transcripts. Relevance of the data to each of the research questions was also discussed and will be examined further in Chapter 5. In addition, the researcher will show how the students' experiences and perceptions provide insight for entry points for interventions that will prevent early school leaving and its disastrous consequences for the individual and society as a whole.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present conclusions developed from the findings and discussion presented in Chapter 4 in conjunction with the review of the existing literature. Limitations of the study, introduced in Chapter 1, are reexamined prior to discussion of conclusions and recommendations. Conclusions are categorized based on the overarching themes presented in Chapter 4. A summary of the chapter and a concluding statement are then presented following the recommendation section.

Limitations

The researcher conducted a exploratory study of perceptions and beliefs held by Latino youth regarding their experience of leaving high school prior to graduation. The subjects interviewed for this study were purposefully selected from a community-based GED and counseling program located in Langley Park, Maryland. The study sample consisted of ten individuals who were either born in Latin America or were of Latino descent, all of whom shared the common experience of leaving high school before graduation. Although the researcher has drawn conclusions and made recommendations based on the findings, the scope of this study is limited by sample size and characteristics. The results are exploratory and are designed to guide future research.

Conclusions

This study focused on the lived experience of seven male and three female participants of Latino descent who had the shared experience of leaving high school prior to graduation. The interviewees, ranging in age from 18 to 25, were either current or former participants in a community-based GED and counseling program selected as the study site. Five of the participants were born in Latin America and five were born in the United States to parents of Latin American heritage. One of the study participants left high school in 9th grade, two in 10th, three in 11th, and four in 12th. This study yielded extensive data with respect to the participants' perceptions of school and their experience of leaving without a diploma. Based on the findings, the researcher was led to a number of conclusions, which are presented below. The conclusions are grouped into three major categories based on the overarching themes discussed in Chapter 4, some of which lead to secondary conclusions presented below the primary conclusion.

1) Participants began to feel disengaged from school environment in middle school

With the exception of one participant, all of the study subjects reported a positive elementary school experience either in their home country or the United States. They noted positive interactions with peers and teachers, with several commenting that the elementary school environment was friendlier and more nurturing compared to middle and high school. By contrast, a number of the participants felt that the middle school environment was cold and intimidating. All of the study subjects perceived that

the academic requirements of middle school were far higher relative to the demands of elementary school. The middle school years for most were marked by disappointment brought on by academic failure. More than half of the participants reported frequent absences from middle school because of truancy or suspension. Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver (2007) focused on how risk factors confronting students in high poverty neighborhoods increase from elementary to middle school.

As students enter the middle school years, they face greater danger and temptations such as gang involvement, drug experimentation, and negative peer interaction. Combining developing adolescence with the increasingly complex social and academic demands of middle school create unique conditions that can derail students from the path to high school graduation regardless of whether or not they had a positive elementary school experience. In addition, there is a stronger possibility that students entering middle school in high-poverty neighborhoods face the likelihood of entering chaotic classrooms with limited resources and a high teacher turnover rate. Students who attend these underperforming schools feel devalued and are led to conclude that there is little importance placed on their academic experience.

Students entering the middle school years are also confronted with a range of risk factors that may engender disengagement from school (Wilson & Corbett, 2001). As noted by the participants of this study, violence, bullying, drug involvement, personal strife, and truancy marked their middle school years. The dramatic rise in truancy from elementary to middle school was a strong indicator of the extent of their disengagement. Prior studies have demonstrated that a majority of students who eventually leave high

school without a diploma enter the ninth grade with a pattern of chronic absenteeism that commences in middle school (MacIver, 2010). The high incidence of disconnection from middle school among the study subjects underscores the need for early identification of vulnerable students as well as the implementation of programs and intervention strategies designed to keep middle school students engaged in school.

2) Participants perceived that school environment and interactions with school personnel had a significant impact on their school experience

All of the participants viewed their relationships with school staff as appreciably affecting their perception of school. Several observed that the positive connections formed with teachers, counselors, administrators, and security officers were central to their motivation to attend. Parallel to the participants' feelings regarding positive connections with school staff were prevailing feelings of anger, resentment, and mistrust. Some felt that they were being discriminated against, believing they received significantly harsher treatment from school staff in comparison to their white counterparts, particularly with respect to how school regulations were applied. Others felt ignored and marginalized by school personnel. Most felt misunderstood. Delgado Bernal (2002) posited that the experiences of Latino students are devalued or misunderstood within formal educational settings because their stories are examined within the context of the dominant culture. The values and cultural mores of Latino students may differ significantly from those of mainstream teachers who are predominantly female, Caucasian, monolingual, and middle class (NCES, 2009). The culture of schools and

classrooms tend to reflect White middle-class values and assumptions, and these values may not correspond with those of Latino students.

One example of a cultural practice in schools that is not aligned with the cultural mores of some Latino students and their families is the expectation for parent involvement in schools. Latino families, particularly those that arrived in the United States within the past twenty years often understand their responsibility in supporting their children's education differently than the mainstream culture (Garcia & Guerra, 2004), believing education to be the job of the school. The manner in which Latino parents interrelate with school personnel has been misinterpreted as the parents devaluing education. Language barriers, lack of understanding of school procedures, and a perspective of school staff as authority figures are factors that have contributed to a mainstream perception that Latino parents do not value education. In addition, parents are often challenged by their weighty and inflexible work schedules, childcare issues, and lack of transportation compounding the difficulties for parent involvement in the manner that the dominant culture expects (Pena, 2000).

Given that school can be an alienating and intimidating environment for students and their families, it is incumbent upon school personnel to develop strategies for outreach while establishing kind and caring relationships with students and their families. Successful schools are staffed by teachers who develop positive, caring relationships with their students. Caring teachers are not only "nice" but demonstrate through their actions that they hold students to a high standard, provide them with assistance and support

beyond academic instruction and have genuine concern for their overall well-being (Corbett, Wilson & Williams, 2002).

2a) Participants perceived school discipline policies to be overly punitive and unfair in terms of how the policies were applied to different ethnic groups

Seven out of the ten interviewees in this study were suspended multiple times from school. It was the perception of several that they were more likely to be suspended because of minor infractions such as late arrival to class compared to White or Asian peers. One participant observed "if school staff wanted to see me graduate, they wouldn't have suspended me so many times or kept pushing me out of school." In a 2010 study conducted by the Southern Poverty Law Center, researchers found that Latino students were far more likely to be suspended from school in comparison to their White counterparts. According to the Center for Civil Rights Remedies, current discipline policies show dramatic racial disparities with respect to which students are suspended and pushed out of the classroom.

In certain school districts, the percentage of Latino students who have been suspended is staggering. For example, in Pasadena, Texas an astounding seventy-seven percent of Latino students have been suspended at least once (Holzman, 2012). Students who have been suspended on at least one occasion are three times as likely to drop out of school by the tenth grade relative to students who have never been suspended (Holzman, 2012). With the advent of so-called "zero-tolerance" discipline policies, the percentage of Latino students facing suspension and expulsion has risen dramatically since the 1970s

(Balfanz, Herzog & MacIver, 2007). This current trend in discipline conflicts with the idea that schools should be committed to engaging students and keeping them enrolled in school in order to educate them and close the achievement gap. The disproportionate number of Latino students who are suspended and expelled from school illuminates the need for a reexamination of discipline policies to improve outcomes for Latino students vulnerable to leaving school prior to graduation.

2b) Participants perceived callousness, indifference and discrimination on the part of school staff

While several participants reported interactions with school staff described as "kind" and "caring," others noted negative relationships with school personnel who were characterized as "cold" and "indifferent. " A prevailing sentiment among the participants of this study was that school staff lacked understanding and empathy regarding the challenges confronting their lives. One participant reported getting "pushed around" by school administrators, while another noted that he felt that school staff "didn't really care" about his decision to leave school because "I guess they wanted me out of the school." Several studies have noted that the assumptions school personnel make, both conscious and unconscious, can adversely influence how students perceive themselves and the educational environment (Cummings, 1989; Lee, 1996; Vollmer, 2000). Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2001) examined classrooms where teachers convey a sense of pessimism regarding immigrant students' ability to learn and are predictably unsuccessful in engaging them.

The attitudes and perceptions of school personnel may influence their motivation to engage with Latino students as well as impact their receptiveness to receiving professional development designed to improve their skills in working with the population (Karabenick & Noda, 2004). The attitudes, assumptions and expectations of school personnel can weigh heavily in the school experience. Teachers who genuinely believe that all students can succeed and promote a collaborative environment in the classroom enhance opportunities for success. The importance of the relationships between teachers and students illustrates the need for diversity training and professional development geared towards developing the cultural competence of school personnel. The Latino participants interviewed for this study seemed to regard supportive interactions with school staff as crucial to their decision to stay in school. This dependence on relationships contrasts with the situation of many of their middle- and upper-class peers who seem to take it for granted that they must achieve a high school diploma whether or not they like their teachers or their teachers like them. The formation of positive connections between staff and students may be the most important factor in influencing positive outcomes.

2c) Participants, particularly those newly arrived to the country, perceived the school environment as intimidating, frightening, and unwelcoming

Most interviewees noted difficult transitions to middle and high school. For students newly arrived in the country, the experience of entering a U.S. school was

particularly daunting. One participant, for example, noted that he was "terrified" and "confused" upon entering the school building for the first time.

> I was looking around trying to see if somebody could talk to me in Spanish. It was hard. I was just standing there in one place hoping for someone to come to my aid.

Another described her experience of entering school as "overwhelming" because of the size of the facility and the number of students in the hallways. She recalled feeling "lost" in an environment that she perceived as unwelcoming. Still another participant recalled getting off to a bad start in the ninth grade because of his difficulties in coping with the transition to the new environment.

> I didn't know nothing about the school. I ain't know nothing about what floor, what room. I didn't know where my homeroom was. I didn't know how to work the locker. I was just…I felt like I was just lost. The school was so big. I didn't know how to get into the school or where was the cafeteria or bathroom. I didn't know where was the guidance counselor or administrator office was at. I didn't know none of that.

Newly arrived students are faced with the formidable challenge of learning a different language while negotiating an unfamiliar culture. For those with limited literacy skills in their native language, the task of developing English while attempting to access a new curriculum can be overwhelming. Participants in this study noted that they encountered difficulty understanding the spoken English used in the classroom by their teachers with several recalling that they sat in silence in the back of classrooms for fear of being singled out in front of peers. The challenges associated with school transition are

trying for many and accentuates the need for staff, particularly bilingual personnel, to assist students as they become oriented to the new school environment.

3) Participants cited multiple factors and life circumstances outside of school that contributed to their leaving school without a diploma

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model emphasizes the relationship between individuals and the groups in which they participate. He theorized that multiple factors impact development, including family, culture, community, and institutions. Bronfenbrenner maintained that individuals do not function in isolation; rather, they are affected by the contextual conditions in which development occurs. Participants in this study cited multiple factors, which impacted their personal growth and academic development and influenced the event of early school leaving. While interviewees cited issues within school such as academic difficulties, fighting, suspension, and loss of credit, they also noted a wide array of concerns separate from the school environment including incarceration, gang involvement, substance abuse, and pregnancy as contributing to their leaving school. A number of participants cited difficult home circumstances as negatively impacting their ability to focus on school. Irrespective of whether or not the issues were directly school-related, each participant noted difficult circumstances impacting their lives which contributed heavily to their inability to focus on school. Adverse conditions rendered school secondary to managing stressful life circumstances.

3a) Participants received little guidance from the adults in their lives

When confronted with those circumstances, the participants reported little or no support from the adults in their lives. Thus, participants arrived at the juncture of leaving school without the benefit of counseling to help them work through their difficulties and comprehend the implications of departing school without a diploma. In the absence of guidance from responsible adults, leaving school seemed to many of them to be the only viable option. Ironically, several left on the advice of school staff after being told that they would "age out" before obtaining the requisite credits for graduation. Incredibly, one participant left school in the ninth grade based on a suggestion from his parole officer. The participants and their families lacked familiarity with formal school procedures. While most had a vague notion that graduation was in jeopardy because of excessive absences and lost credits, there was an almost universal lack of awareness of school procedures and rules governing graduation requirements, state mandated exit exams and alternative programs. Thus, the lack of understanding of school procedures and graduation requirements diminished the participants' investment in their academic programming while limiting their ability to pursue alternative options.

The participants and their families, particularly those that had recently immigrated from Latin America, were unaware of or confused by formal school procedures. Seemingly little effort was made by schools to establish ties with families as evidenced by the lack of bilingual personnel who could have helped parents understand graduation requirements and navigate a school system with procedures that are even difficult to comprehend for native speakers of English. One participant recalled that when the school

held a meeting regarding his suspension and possible expulsion, no interpreter was provided for his mother, who understood very little of the high-stakes proceedings. Feeling that the school administrators disrespected his mother, he commented: "They always use to ignore my mom. They use to treat my mom like she was just another Spanish lady." The lack of familiarity with school procedures, rules, and expectations had major implications for the participants and underscores the importance of guidance and advocacy to help students and their families negotiate school procedures that are unfamiliar and often nebulous.

3) Participants perceived an absence of options and alternative paths to the traditional high school diploma.

The participants faced significant challenges in meeting graduation requirements. Obtaining the required credits for graduation proved difficult leading to feelings of disengagement and hopelessness. Several participants were informed that they would "age out" of the system before earning the required credits for graduation. A pervading feeling of hopelessness was accompanied by the belief that school lacked relevancy and had little impact on improving their lives. The participants received little or no information from school personnel regarding alternatives to the traditional diploma path, and the absence of alternatives contributed to a belief that leaving school was their most practical option.

Summary

The factors associated with early school leaving are multidimensional and complex. Previous studies have shown that the decision to leave school prior to graduation is the result of a long-term process involving academic failure and disengagement occurring over a substantial period of time (Barton, 2005). Multiple factors involving the individual, family, school and community impact the event of early school leaving (Hawkins, Catalano & Miller, 1992; Rumberger, 2001). Numerous risk factors that influence early exit from high school—such as low socio-economic status of the family, high absenteeism, low academic achievement, and teen pregnancy—confront all students who are vulnerable to leaving school without a diploma (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). While Latino students encounter the same risk factors as students in other high-risk groups, they are also confronted with challenges particular to the Latino student population involving language acquisition, immigration, and culture.

Consistent with prior studies that have shown the correlation between low attendance and early school leaving, each participant of this study reported missing a significant amount of school because of truancy, suspension, illness, and incarceration. One participant reported missing over one half of the school year during the sixth grade due to suspensions and truancy. Most of the interviewees noted multiple absences due to truancy and suspension commencing in middle school.

Previous research has also demonstrated the relationship between academic struggles and early school leaving (Garcia, Jensen & Scribner, 2009). For the participants

of this study, most cited experiencing academic difficulties commencing in middle school and continuing into high school. Previous studies have also cited limited English proficiency as a factor underlying poor school performance and early school leaving (Shargel, 2004). Many immigrant Latino children, particularly those that arrive to the United States having had limited or interrupted education in their native country, face tremendous challenges in mastering English academic language skills for reading, writing, and comprehension of academic concepts presented orally (Orozco-Suarez et al., 2001). Given that it takes approximately five to seven years for ELLs to develop the cognitive and academic language needed for academic success in the high school classroom, Latino students who immigrate to the United States with limited English language skills are at a profound disadvantage for achieving academic success (Cummings, 1989). Several participants of this study noted that their difficulties in acquiring English negatively impacted their school experience and contributed to academic struggles and feelings of isolation. One individual recalled feeling terrified on the first day of school due to his inability to speak and understand English. Several noted that they struggled to understand the spoken and written English used in the classroom.

Prior studies have also shown that the relationships formed between students and school staff can play a key role in keeping students engaged in school (Immerwahr, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Conversely, school personnel who convey negativity can impact the student's decision to remain in school. Nine out of the ten participants interviewed for this study cited poor interactions with school personnel as having a negative impact on their ability to feel connected to the school environment. Several participants perceived

that school staff discriminated against them due to their Latino heritage, while others believed that they were ostracized because of their reputation and history of difficulties in school.

Recommendations

The researcher proposes the following recommendations targeted towards school personnel, program developers, and policy makers who have a shared interest in supporting youth vulnerable to leaving school without a diploma. In addition, the researcher will offer recommendations for future research on risk factors associated with Latino students vulnerable to early school leaving, intervention strategies designed to support Latino students, and professional development to support teachers in meeting the needs of vulnerable Latino students. The following recommendations are based in part on the responses given by the study participants who were asked to give their perspective regarding what schools should do differently to support students vulnerable to early school leaving. The conclusions drawn by the researcher, which evolved from the interview data and literature review, also led to the recommendations discussed below. These recommendations impact areas of practice and research while intersecting with policy issues affecting students who are susceptible to leaving school. The recommendations are structured into two categories: recommendations for practice and recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Practice

In examining the responses of the ten Latino participants interviewed for this study, the central theme that resonated across the interviews was the significance of the relationships, both positive and negative, formed with school personnel. Those relationships influenced their perception of school and by extension, their level of engagement in their academic programming and the overall school community. The participants felt that teachers, administrators, and counselors who made an effort to get to know them as individuals while developing an understanding of the challenges confronting their lives helped to motivate them to remain in school. Of paramount importance to the participants was the opportunity for ongoing interaction with school personnel who maintained an empathetic, non-judgmental, and supportive perspective. Participants also suggested that schools develop extracurricular activities that are engaging and based on student interest to address the prevailing sentiment that school is boring and lacks purpose. Additional recommendations made by the subjects of this study will be presented below in conjunction with the recommendations of the researcher based on the findings of this study. Accordingly, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **The researcher recommends that Latino students who are vulnerable to leaving high school prior to graduation should be identified and supported beginning in middle school or earlier. Identification of these students should be based on specific indicators of risk, including low academic achievement**

and a history of multiple absences. Students who exhibit the following warning signs should be identified as "vulnerable" to leaving school prior to graduation:

- Excessive unexcused absences in the sixth, seventh, or eighth grades with "excessive" defined as the student missing ten days or more of the school year;
- Failing grades in reading and math in the sixth grade;
- Out of school suspension in the sixth grade.

For students demonstrating one or more of the above warning signals, school support teams should convene to develop appropriate intervention strategies. Strategies could include individual and family counseling, small group or individualized academic support, and assignment of an in-school mentor.

2. **The researcher recommends that school suspension policies be reexamined and revamped given the disproportionate percentage of minority students who are suspended combined with the fact that research has shown that suspension is a precursor to students falling behind academically and eventually leaving school altogether.** School discipline policies should be geared towards supporting the social and emotional development of students while teaching nonviolence and respect for all members of the school community. Discipline should not solely be based on implementing punitive measures; rather, an effort must be made to understand and address underlying behaviors, resolve conflicts, restore relationships, and reintegrate students into the school

community. Expectations and school discipline policies should be clearly articulated to students and their families in Spanish and English.

Non-exclusionary responses and alternatives to suspensions should be explored, including:

- Mediation and conflict resolution;
- Restorative justice measures;
- Counseling;
- Community service;
- Drug and alcohol counseling;
- Written and verbal apologies.

3. **The researcher recommends that every student who meets the "vulnerable student" criteria described above receive a comprehensive support plan developed by a team comprised of teachers, counselors, reading specialists, psychologists, mental health professionals administrators, and the student's parents/caregivers.** Translation services should be provided for non-English speaking parents. As part of the comprehensive support plan, a school staff member should be assigned to serve as a mentor to the student to provide emotional and academic support. In recognition of the multiple spheres of influence impacting development, the following areas should be addressed in conjunction with the support plan:

- Academic support (individualized/small group instruction tailored to address individual need), after-school academic support, intensive English language instruction;
- Instruction focused on helping students meet common core standards, which provide consistent and clear understanding of academic expectations;
- Social/emotional support (individual/family counseling, mentoring, drug and alcohol counseling, etc.);
- Health (vision, dental, mental health, wellness checkups, etc.).

In addition to addressing the academic, social/emotional, and physical well being of the student, the plan should also focus on the student's individual interests with the goal of matching the student with extracurricular activities that may engender motivation and promote engagement in the school community.

4. **The researcher recommends developing orientation programs for Latino students and parents transitioning to high school, particularly for those students recently arrived in the country.** Spanish-speaking personnel should help to orient newly arrived students to their school environment. The school handbook detailing general school information in addition to class schedules should be offered in Spanish and English. Bilingual personnel should explain school procedures, graduation requirements, and the basic workings of the school

system. In addition, incoming students should be matched with bilingual students from upper grades to assist in the orientation process.

5. **The researcher recommends that schools provide alternative programs or form partnerships with community organizations that provide resources for students who leave school or for those that are not able to complete high school within the traditional four-year time period** because of interrupted education, excessive absences, loss of credits, or economic hardship resulting in their having to leave school for work. Students who are also young parents should be assisted in obtaining resources such as childcare to enable them to remain in school. In recognition of the significant number of students who "age out" of high school before obtaining a diploma, the researcher also suggests that schools increase flexibility with respect to the upper age limit for students to remain in school. Bilingual school personnel should clearly explain attendance policies, enrollment procedures, and graduation requirements to students and their families. Bilingual counseling should be provided for students at risk of not obtaining a high school diploma with one focus of the counseling sessions on viable alternatives to the traditional high school diploma path. Alternative programs designed to support vulnerable students should be developed based on the perspective of multiple stakeholders, including parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, human service professionals, potential employers, and perhaps most importantly, the students themselves. Gaining multiple perspectives creates

immediate “buy in” among key stakeholders, thus better ensuring program success. The program should be based in large part on a needs assessment of the affected population. Flexible schedules for working students and on-site child day care for young parents should be provided. Curriculum should be interest based and combine academic instruction, vocational training, and GED preparation. Instruction should be in a small group setting so that trusting relationships can be developed between staff and students. An important component of the program should be formal ongoing counseling that incorporates attention to personal issues along with career counseling and life skills instruction. A strong outreach strategy should be implemented utilizing bilingual staff to enlist the support of parents and other caregivers. The outreach effort should reinforce the idea that parents and other family members are key partners in their children’s education. Students should be provided with individualized and supportive attention to address academic, behavioral, health, and personal concerns as well as vocational/career interests.

6. **The researcher recommends that school systems initiate a substantive training program designed to promote cultural competence and understanding of diverse populations.** The goal of the training program should extend beyond the rhetoric of simply “valuing diversity” or celebrating special holidays or months. Rather, the training should be part of a process of ongoing professional development opportunities to promote cultural competence and

increase communication between school personnel, students, and their families. Given the importance of staff-student relationships in promoting academic success and keeping students engaged in school, it is critical that school personnel develop understanding of the importance of making connections with students, particularly those that are vulnerable to early school leaving. Culturally responsive teachers make connections by integrating students' language and culture in the curriculum, thus conveying the message that they view the students' language and culture as a strength to be celebrated rather than a deficit to be addressed. The training should also address the culture that pervades many schools which places blame on students for academic failure and on parents and other caregivers for not being involved in their children's education. It is incumbent on schools to shift the culture of blame to one of support while reaching out to families so as to involve them in the school community. As part of a substantive training program, multiple stakeholders, including school personnel, students, parents and human service workers should uphold and reward practices that engage students and encourage them to stay in school.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study illustrate the need for future research on several topics related to the issue of Latino students leaving school prior to graduation. The significant number of Latino students who continue to depart high school without a diploma underscores the urgency of additional studies to highlight the condition while testing

intervention strategies designed to support struggling students and keep them engaged in school. The following recommendations for future research are offered as a result of this study:

1. **The researcher recommends replicating or expanding on this study in order to determine the generalizability and relevance of the findings across other Latino student populations.** The investigator recommends that future studies reproduce this study with an increased sample size of subjects of varied ages from Latin American countries different from those represented in the present study. Populations of interest include incarcerated youth, ex-offenders, and those that have left school and are seeking employment. In addition, replication using only female participants is recommended in order to gain a stronger understanding of the impact of gender on the school experience and issues associated with early school leaving. The recommended studies may provide important information to supplement, corroborate, or further contextualize the findings of this study.

2. **The researcher recommends comparing the current study to a new study focusing on the lived experience of immigrant-born Latino youth who left school without a diploma.** Utilizing a study sample consisting exclusively of immigrant youth who left school prior to graduation, the researcher recommends that the study focus on the lived experience of the population with particular examination of the academic, cultural, and linguistic challenges confronting

individuals newly arrived from Latin America. The study would explore the significant challenges encountered by recently arrived immigrant youth who are struggling to learn a new language while negotiating an unfamiliar culture. The study should place particular emphasis on the challenges associated with the English language acquisition process given the high percentage of newly arrived Latino students who have limited English proficiency and leave school without a diploma. The research has important implications for schools, professionals, and practitioners in the design and implementation of culturally responsive and appropriate intervention strategies specific to the newly arrived immigrant student population.

3. **The researcher recommends further research on early warning predictors specific to Latino middle school students vulnerable to early school leaving.** Although there have been a number of studies conducted concentrating on early identification of students at risk of leaving school without a diploma, few if any have focused on the Latino student population. While previous studies on indicators of early school leaving have been based primarily on the administration of surveys of a sample of students, there has been scant research conducted utilizing phenomenological research methods to gain insight regarding the perceptions, beliefs, and experiences of Latino middle school students. Employing phenomenological research methods could lead to rich insight into the underlying complexities and interplay between the students and the social and school factors

at the middle school level, which contribute to future difficulties resulting in premature departure.

4. **The investigator recommends further research on the academic challenges specific to the Latino student population in order to inform policy initiatives and intervention strategies designed to support Latino youth vulnerable to early school leaving.** The findings of this study in addition to the results of prior studies reveal challenges specific to the Latino student population that contribute to early school leaving. The English language acquisition process is particularly difficult for recently arrived Latino students who often arrive in the United States having had limited or interrupted education in their native country. Given that research has shown that it can take up to seven years to develop mastery of English for academic purposes (Cummins, 1998), further investigation is needed to study curricula and accompanying supports for ELLs. Math curricula, which are increasingly language-based, should be examined within the context of the linguistic and academic demands confronting beginning-level ELLs.

5. **The researcher recommends further research on intervention strategies and dropout prevention programs for Latino students vulnerable to early school leaving.** In recognition of the multiple spheres of influence impacting the population, further research is recommended on intervention strategies and alternative programs that address the multidimensional and complex needs of

Latino youth vulnerable to early school leaving. While traditional dropout prevention strategies have focused primarily on promoting the academic achievement of students at risk of leaving school prematurely, few programs have taken on the weighty challenge of addressing the underlying factors associated with early school leaving. Thus, there is a need for additional research on effective intervention strategies and dropout prevention programs which employ a holistic approach to address the multiple influences involving family, community, culture, and environment impacting the lives of Latino youth at risk of early school leaving.

Summary and Final Statement

The final chapter addressed the results of the study, examined within the context of the literature review and theoretical framework that guided this research. Conclusions were presented in addition to recommendations for both research and practice. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth as they tried to make meaning of the factors that led to their leaving high school prior to graduation. The study focused on ten Latino participants who had the shared experience of leaving school. The research produced significant information regarding the perceptions, insights, and opinions of the participants as they attempted to describe and understand their school experience and the events that precipitated their premature departure. The findings of this study illuminate the multiple influences and challenges confronting Latino students vulnerable to early school leaving.

As the study indicates, the factors associated with the high dropout rate of Latino students are complex. Myriad influences, including poverty, low academic achievement, substance abuse, negative peer interactions, difficult family dynamics, substandard schooling, and cultural/linguistic barriers, negatively impacted the participants' ability to focus on school. A pervading feeling of hopelessness made school seem insignificant and secondary to coping with difficult life circumstances. The results of this research illustrate the necessity for developing and applying intervention strategies in the early grades designed to support Latino youth who are vulnerable to leaving school, as well as alternative programs for those who are not on target to obtain a high school diploma. From the perspective of the participants, the connection that is made between school staff and students is the most important characteristic of dropout prevention efforts.

All youth have a basic right to high quality public education in a safe and supportive environment as a foundation for access to higher education, meaningful employment and full participation in society. Participation for many is hindered by rising inequality that is in large part attributed to an economy that rewards those with high skills or credentials and leaves people with low education at a profound disadvantage. Millions of children in the United States begin life in poverty and spend their early years in a culture of poverty. Good schools can play an important role in addressing this disadvantage. The findings of this study underscore the importance of schools creating a healthy environment for learning where students feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe and where there is a mutual respect between teachers, students, and caregivers.

A crucial element of creating a positive school climate is recognition of the multiple challenges confronting the lives of vulnerable students and developing appropriate interventions and responses. While educating students has always been the primary goal of public school in America, the challenges confronting youth and their families have provoked new discussion among educators regarding how to achieve that objective. There is a growing belief that school services must extend beyond academic instruction in order to remove barriers to learning. School personnel must play an active role in creating a positive school climate where students feel supported and able to learn. Teachers and school systems need training backed by political and public support to fulfill these demanding roles. However, at present, in too many schools throughout the United States, substandard school environments, callous school personnel, and exclusionary discipline practices are undermining learning and pushing youth out of school. Over three million students are suspended annually and over one hundred thousand are expelled. These punitive practices increase the likelihood that students will fall behind academically and ultimately leave school without a diploma. Creating a positive school climate involves keeping students engaged and preventing hasty punitive measures. Individual schools, departments of education, and local communities should foster the ethos and expectation that every student will finish school. The belief that each student can succeed must be cultivated in school personnel, and they must be required to act in accord with this expectation.

The participants of this study were confronted with numerous obstacles and barriers. In spite of those challenges, they never gave up hope and in fact demonstrated

courage and resilience in the face of tremendous odds. They remained open to making life changes as evidenced by their participation in the community-based organization and their commitment to obtaining a GED. For most, the services offered by the organization proved transformational with each participant reporting that they were motivated to make life changes through their positive interactions with caring staff. The participants' stories highlight both obstacles and opportunities and underscore the critical importance of a community that supports the healthy development of young people.

An educated electorate is crucial to full participation in our democracy. The recent presidential election demonstrates the impact of Latinos on electoral outcomes, an impact predicted to increase over the 21st century. What influence will these new voters have on education policy? The high rate of Latino students leaving high school without a diploma perpetuates inequality in our society. Addressing the conditions that contribute to early school leaving is an issue of social justice.

In his stirring poem entitled "Harlem," Langston Hughes posed the question: *What happens to a dream deferred?* In each stanza, he uses a simile to highlight the impact of individuals not realizing their goals. A dream not realized becomes too heavy to bear and "sags like a heavy load" or lays dormant until the dream "stinks like rotten meat." Ultimately, according to the final stanza, a deferred dream may "explode." For too many youth in our society, the goal of obtaining a high school diploma and then moving on to higher education or training for employment *is* a dream deferred. In order to prevent the inevitable explosion, it remains crucial that society develop a substantive response to insure that all children have equal opportunity to accomplish their dreams.

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Appendices

Interview Protocol #1 Background

Pseudonym: _____

Date/Time: _____

Setting: _____

Introduction: I really appreciate you taking the time to meet with me today. As I mentioned in our previous conversation, I'm conducting a study of the educational experiences of Latino students in high school. Your story, experiences and perspective about school are very important to my study because I'm trying to understand what aspects of school that you found valuable and what the school could have done differently to improve your experience. I want you to know that this interview is confidential. I am recording our conversation so that I can listen to it later and remember what we talked about. In several weeks, I'll contact you so that I can show you a written version of our conversation so that you can check to see if what I have written is accurate.

Purpose: The purpose of this interview is for me to find out about your background, your family, your friends, the country where you were born, your school experience in your native country and what it was like for you to come to the United States.

1. **Background**. Please tell me as much about yourself as possible. You can include information about your family, friends, neighborhood, job, where you are from originally, when you arrived to the United States, etc.

Possible follow-up questions:

- How old are you?
- Where were you born?
- Where were your parents born?
- When did you come to the United States?
- Do you have siblings? How many? What ages?
- Where do you live now? Tell me about your neighborhood.
- Tell me about your life when you first arrived to the United States; what were some of your first impressions of the country?

2. **School in native country**: Please tell me about your experience in school in _____.

Possible follow-up questions:

- Did you attend school in _____? If so, which grades?
- Tell me about your school experience in _____; how many students were in your classes? Did you go everyday?
- What did you like/dislike about school in your country?
- Was the schoolwork easy or hard for you? Which subjects were difficult? Why was the work hard for you?
- Did you learn to read and write in Spanish?
- If so, do you currently have the opportunity to practice your Spanish-language skills?
- Tell me about your teachers.
- Tell me about your most positive experience in school in _____.
- Tell me about your most negative experience in school in_____.

3. **Decision to come to the United States** Please tell me about why you (and family) came to the US.

- What was the main reason why you (and family) chose to come to the US?
- Was traveling to the US difficult?
- Mode of transportation?
- Where did you live when you first arrived?
- Did you have family and friends already living in the US?
- What were your impressions of the United States when you first arrived; what was it like on the first day?
- What was the most exciting part of being in the US when you first arrived to the country?
- What was the most difficult part of being in the US?

Can you think of anything else that you would like to share?

Interview Protocol #2 The School Experience

Pseudonym: _____

Date/Time: _____

Setting: _____

Introduction: Thanks again for taking the time to meet with me. I want to continue with our conversation about your school experience in the United States. As I mentioned in our previous conversation, I'm conducting a study of the educational experiences of Latino students in high school. Your story, experiences and perspective about school are very important to me because I'm trying to understand what aspects of school that you found valuable and what the school could have done differently to improve your experience. I want you to know that this interview is confidential. I am video taping our conversation so that I can watch and listen to it later and remember what we talked about. In several weeks, I'll contact you so that I can show you a written version of our conversation so that you can check to see if what I have written is accurate.

1. Please tell me about your experience in school in the United States.

Possible follow-up questions:

- How soon did you enroll in school after your arrival to the United States?
- What grade did you enter?
- Try to remember the first day that you entered school; what was the first day like for you?
- Did any teachers, administrators or students help you get used to the surroundings?
- What were your first impressions of the school?
- Please describe your favorite class and teacher; what specifically about the class made it a positive experience? What specifically did you like about your teacher?
- Please describe your worst class and the teacher that you liked the least; why was the class a negative experience for you? What did you not like about the teacher?
- Who helped you decide which classes to take?
- Were there classes that you had interest in taking but could not take? If so, what reason/s were you given for not being allowed to take the class?

- After being enrolled for several months, what were your impressions of school?
- Please describe some of the differences between school in (native country) and school in the United States.

2. Please describe some of the challenges that you faced in school.

Possible follow-up questions:

- Did you make friends easily?
- Who did you sit with at lunch?
- Did you find the other students at school friendly and supportive?
- Did you encounter negative relationships with friends and classmates? If so, describe some of your negative social interactions
- Did all of your friends feel the same way about school as you did? If not, how did their attitudes towards school differ from yours?
- Were your friends supportive of your efforts to succeed in school?
- Were there factors that distracted you from staying focused on school?
- Did you have positive relationships with adults in the school ?
- With whom did you have positive relationships?
- What made them positive?
- Did you have negative relationships with adults in the school?
- With whom did you have negative relationships?
- What made them negative?
- Were there adults in your school that motivated you? Please describe how they motivated you to strive to perform well in school?
- What was your hardest class? What made it hard?
- Was learning English hard for you?
- Did you understand your teachers when they presented information in class?
- Did you understand your assignments?
- Did your teachers seem willing to help you outside of class time?
- Did you get help with homework?
- How might your teachers and other school personnel have provided additional support to you?

3. Please describe the events that led to your leaving school prior to graduation.

Possible follow-up questions:

- When did you decide to not return to school?
- Was it one particular incident or a combination of factors that led to you not returning to school? Please describe.

- What do you consider the most important factor that contributed to you not returning to school?
- Did you tell your teachers or anyone else in the school that you were not going to return or did you just stop coming?
- Did anyone try to talk you out of leaving school? Is so, who? What did they say?
- Was your experience in leaving school influenced by academic difficulties?
- Was your experience in leaving school influenced by social difficulties?
- Did you know others who left school without a diploma? How many? Why do you think they chose to leave school prior to graduation?
- Why did you leave school before obtaining your diploma? Please list all of the reasons.
- Do you think that the school could have done something differently to help you? If so, what?

Interview Protocol #3 Reflection on the School Experience

Pseudonym: _____

Date/Time: _____

Setting: _____

Introduction: Thanks again for taking the time to meet with me. I want to continue with our conversation about your school experience in the United States. As I mentioned in our previous conversation, I'm conducting a study of the educational experiences of Latino students in high school. Your story, experiences and perspective about school are very important to me because I'm trying to understand what aspects of school that you found valuable and what the school could have done differently to improve your experience. I want you to know that this interview is confidential. I am video taping our conversation so that I can watch and listen to it later and remember what we talked about. In several weeks, I'll contact you so that I can show you a written version of our conversation so that you can check to see if what I have written is accurate. Please feel free to respond to the interview questions in Spanish, English or both languages.

1. **Please reflect on your school experience and the events that led to your leaving school. Please discuss what, if anything, the school could have done differently to better support you and help make your experience in school more positive.**
2. **What had the strongest impact on your decision to leave school? (teachers, administrators, other students, life circumstances, rules, policies?) Please explain.**

Possible follow-up questions:

- What should schools do to keep students engaged in school?
- Who should be involved in making changes to schools?
- How might public schools better support Latino students who are vulnerable to leaving school prior to obtaining a diploma?
- What advice would you give to Latino kids in High School who may be thinking about leaving before getting their diploma?
- If you could change one thing about your school experience, what would it be?

- What are some ideas that you may have regarding how to keep kids engaged in school?
- What programs or support systems could schools have in place to motivate, encourage and support kids to remain in school?
- If you could change one (or several) things about school that would help you stay in school and graduate successfully what would it be?

Would you like to add anything else?

Informed Consent Form

Factors associated with Latino student early school leaving

IRB#

Principal Investigator: Jay Shotel, Ed.D. (202) 994-1511

(Date)

Dear_____,

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Michael Barnet who is a doctoral student at the George Washington University in the Department of Special Education and Human Development. This study is part of his dissertation research in bilingual special education. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and your academic standing in the Crossroads Youth Opportunities Center (CYOC) GED Program will not be affected in any way should you choose not to take part in the research or should you choose to withdraw from the study at any time.

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and beliefs of Latino youth regarding the factors that led to their leaving school prior to graduation. You will be one of ten individuals who will participate in the study. Mr. Barnet is interested in your perception of your school experience and the events that led to your leaving school before obtaining a diploma.

Your participation in this study is important since it may help in developing understanding of issues associated with youth leaving high school before graduation. Through your participation in this study, Mr. Barnet hopes to understand your perceptions and beliefs about your experience and the events that led to your leaving school prior to graduation. The information that you provide may help in the process of developing programs and policies to address the issue of early school leaving.

If you choose to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in three one-to-one interviews with Mr. Barnet with each interview lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interviews will take place in a private room at the CYOC or other agreed upon location. You will not be asked to provide any identifying information in the interview such as your name or contact information. The researcher will record the interviews using a digital video recorder. After the interviews are completed, the researcher will view the video in order to transcribe the interviews. The interviewer may also use a portion of the interview for inclusion in an informational video about the experiences of youth who leave school prior to graduation. The participants of this study will not be identified by name at any time in the video or in the dissertation. You may

refuse to answer any of the questions, and you may stop your participation in this study at any time. Once the information obtained from the audio and videotape interviews is documented, transcribed and analyzed, the digital recording will be erased.

Although you will be given an opportunity to share your perspective, you will not benefit directly from your participation in the study. However, the information that you provide may benefit humankind by adding to the field of educational research, which may potentially help the process of development of programs and policies to assist youth vulnerable to early school leaving. While there is a risk of breach of confidentiality, the researcher will make every effort to maintain confidentiality. In addition, there is a risk that you may experience emotional discomfort during the interviews given that you will be asked to reflect on your personal experiences regarding the research topic.

You will receive a $15 dollar gift card for each interview to compensate you for your time and effort.

If you have any questions, you may contact the Principal Investigator listed on the front of this form at (202) 994-1511 or Mr. Michael Barnet at (301) 335-8983. Your records may be reviewed by departments of the university charged with overseeing research safety and compliance. For questions regarding your rights as a participant in human research call the GWU Office of Human Research at 202-994-2715.

By signing this consent form you are indicating that you have read the information provided and that you have decided to participate in the study conducted by Michael Barnet. By signing this form, you give permission for the interviews to be audio and videotaped. You may withdraw from participation in this study at any time after signing this form. After you sign this consent form, Mr. Barnet will provide you with a copy.

If you agree to take part in this study, please sign the consent form below:

_____

Signature (Participant) Date

_____

Signature (Investigator) Date

Audio/Video Release Form

I hereby authorize Michael Barnet to use my video image and/or audio recording in his video for the project entitled, *Dreams Deferred: A qualitative study of Latino youth who left high school prior to obtaining a diploma* in his presentation. I have indicated below the name I wish to appear with my image and or voice. I understand that by signing this form, I am releasing all recordings to him for this expressed purpose. I further certify that I am over the age of 18 years.

Name (Print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please initial: Video only: _____
Audio only: _____
Audio and video: _____

Name to be used with video/audio in presentation

(Please print clearly) _____

Investigator's initials _____

Interview Protocol #1 Background

Pseudonym: _____

Date/Time: _____

Setting: _____

Introduccion: Te agradezco mucho que hayas tomado el tiempo para entrevistarte conmigo hoy. Como te mencione en nuestra conversacion anterior, estoy haciendo un estudio acerca de las experiencias educacionales de estudiantes latinos en la escuela secundaria. Tu historia, experiencias y perspectiva acerca de la escuela son muy importantes para mi estudio porque estoy tratando de entender cuales aspectos de la escuela hayas encontrado valiosos y que cambios podria haber hecho la escuela para mejorar tu experiencia. Quiero que sepas que esta entrevista es confidencial. Estoy grabando nuestra conversacion para poder escucharla mas adelante y recordar de lo que hablamos. Dentro de unas semanas, me voy a poner en contacto contigo para ensenarte una version escrita de nuestra conversacion para que puedas ver si lo que escribi es correcto.

Proposito: El proposito de esta entrevista es de conocer tu origen, tu familia, tus amigos, el pais de donde nacistes, tu experiencia de la escuela en tu pais natal y como fue para ti venir a los Estados Unidos.

1. Origen: Por favor dime todo lo puedas acerca de ti. Tu puedes incluir informacion acerca de tu familia, amigos, vecindad, trabajo, de donde eres originalmente, cuando llegastes a los Estados Unidos, etc.

Possible follow-up questions:

- Cuantos anos tienes?
- Donde naciste?
- De donde son tus padres?
- Cuando vinistes a los Estados Unidos?
- Tienes hermanos? Cuantos? Que edad tienen?
- Donde vives ahora? Hablame acerca de tu vecindario
- Cuentame acerca de tu vida cuando llegaste a los Estados Unidos por primera vez; cuales fueron algunas de tus primeras impresiones del pais.

2. Escuela en tu pais natal: Por favor hablame acerca de tu experiencia en la escuela en _____.

Possible follow-up questions:

- Tu fuistes a la escuela en _____? Si es asi, que grados?
- Cuentame tu experiencia en la escuela en _____; cuantos estudiantes habian en tus clases? Fuistes todos los dias a la escuela?
- Que te gusto/que no te gusto de tu escuela en tu pais?
- Las tareas de la escuela eran facilles o dificiles para ti? Que materias eran dificiles para ti? Por que el trabajo de la escuela era dificil para ti?
- Tu aprendistes a leer y escribir en espanol?
- Si es asi, actualmente tienes la oportunidad de practicar tus habilidades de tu idioma espanol?
- Cuentame acerca de tus profesores.
- Cuentame acerca de tu mejor experiencia positiva en la escuela en _____.
- Cuentame acerca de tu experiencia mas negativa en la escuela en_____.

3. Decision para venir a los Estados Unidos Por favor hablame acerca del por que tu (y tu famila) vinieron a los EEUU.

- Cual fue la razon principal porque tu (y tu familia) escogieron a venir a los EEUU.
- Te fue dificil viajar a los EEUU?
- Cual fue tu modo de transporte?
- Donde vivistes cuando acabastes de llegar?
- Tu tenias familiares y amigos que ya vivian en los EEUU?
- Cuales fueron tus impresiones de los Estados Unidos cuando acabastes de llegar; como fue el primer dia?
- Cual fue la parte mas emocionante de estar en los Estados Unidos cuando llegastes al pais?
- Cual fue la parte mas dificil de estar en los Estados Unidos?

Puedes pensar en algo mas que te gustaria compartir?

Interview Protocol #2 The School Experience

Pseudonym: _____

Date/Time: _____

Setting: _____

Introduccion: Gracias otra vez por tomarte el tiempo de reunirte conmigo . Quiero continuar con nuestra conversacion acerca de la experience de la escuela en los Estados Unidos. Como te mencione en nuestra conversacion anterior, estoy haciendo un estudio de las experiencias educacionales de los estudiantes latinos en la escuela secundaria. Tu historia, experiencias y perspectiva acerca de la escuela son muy importantes para mi porque estoy tratando de entender que aspectos de la escuela encontrastes valioso, y que la escuela viera podido hacer diferente para mejorar tu experiencia. Quiero que sepas que esta entrevista es confidencial. Estoy grabando nuestra conversacion, de esta manera puedo ver y escuchar mas adelante y recordar de lo que hemos hablado. Dentro de varias semanas, me voy a poner en contacto contigo para demostrarte una version escrita, de esta manera podras ver si lo que he escrito es correcto.

1. Por favor hablame acerca de tu experiencia de la escuela en los Estados Unidos.

Possible follow-up questions:

- Cuanto tiempo despues de llegar a EEUU te inscribiste en la escuela?
- A que grado entrastes?
- Trata de recordar el primer dia que ingresastes a la escuela;,como fue el primer dia para ti?
- Algunos de los profesores, administradores o estudiantes te ayudaron a sentirte comodo y acostumbrarte a estar en la escuela? Con los alrededores?
- Cuales fueron tus primeras impressiones de la escuela?
- Por favor describe tu clase favorita y tu professor; precisamente que te gusto de esta clase? que especificamente acerca de tu clase hizo una experiencia positiva? Especificamente que te gusto de tu professor?
- Por favor describe tu peor clase y el profesor que menos te gusto; por que fue la clase una experiencia negativa para ti? Que no te gusto de tu profesor?
- Quien te ayudo a escoger tus clases?

- Habia clases que te llamaban la atencion pero que no pudiste tomar?estabas interesado pero no pudistes tomarla? Si es asi, por que motivos no te permitieron tomar la clase?
- Despues de estar varios meses en la escuela, cuales fueron tus impresiones de la escuela?
- Por favor describe algunas de las diferencias entre la escuela en (tu pais natal) y la escuela en los Estados Unidos.

2. Por favor describe algunos de los desafios y dificultades que tuvistes en la escuela.

Possible follow-up questions:

- Te fue facil hacer amistades?
- Con quien te sentastes durante el almuerzo?
- Los demas estudiantes de la escuela te mostraron amabilidad y apoyo?Encontrastes otros estudiantes en la escuela amigables y te dieron su apoyo?
- Tu encontrastes alguna relacion negativa? Si es asi, describe algunas de tus interacciones sociales negativas.
- Todos tus amigos sienten lo mismo acerca de la escuela como tu lo has sentido? Si no, como las actitudes de ellos hacia la escuela se diferencian a los tuyos?
- Tu grupo de amistades te apoyo en tus esfuerzos por tener exito en la escuela?
- Hubo distracciones que te impidieron concentrarte en la escuela?
- Tuviste relaciones positivas con adultos en la escuela? Con quien (es)? En que sentido fueron positivas?algun encuentro positivo con los adultos en la escuela?
- Con quien tuvistes el encuentro positivo?
- Que lo hicieron postivo?
- Tuviste relacones negativas con adultos en la escuela? Con quien (es)? En que sentido fueron negativas? algun encuentro negativo con los adultos en la escuela?
- Con quien tuvistes el encuentro negativo?
- Que lo hicieron negativo?
- Habia adultos en la escuela quienes te motivaban? Por favor describe como ellos te ayudaron a hacer bien en la escuela.
- Cual fue tu clase mas dificil? Que lo hizo dificil?
- Aprender ingles te fue dificil?
- Le entendistes a los profesores cuando te presentaron la informacion en clase?
- Tu entendistes las tareas o deberes?
- Tus profesores estaban disponibles para ayudarte fuera del horario de la clase?
- Obtuvistes ayuda con las tareas?
- De que manera los profesores y otro personal de la escuela habrian podido ayudarte mas? O darte mas apoyo?

3. Por favor describe los eventos que te llevaron a dejar la escuela antes de la graduacion.

Possible follow-up questions:

- Cuando decidistes a no regresar a la escuela?
- Fue un incidente particular o una combinacion de factores que hicieron que tu no regresaras a la escuela? Por favor describe lo que paso.
- Cual fue el factor mas importante entre los que te motivaron a no regresar a la escuela?
- Le mencionastes a los profesores o alguna otra persona que no ibas a regresar a la escuela o simplemente dejastes de ir a la escuela?
- Alguien hablo contigo para tartar de convencerte a que no dejaras la escuela? Si es asi, quien? Que te dijeron?
- Fue tu decision en dejar la escuela influenciada por las dificultades academicas?
- Fue tu decision en dejar la escuela influenciada por dificultades sociales?
- Conoces otra personas que dejaron la escuela sin obtener el diploma? Cuantos? Por que piensas que ellos dejaron la escuela antes de graduarse?
- Por que dejastes la escuela antes de obtener tu diploma? Por favor haz una lista de todas las razones.
- Que habria podido hacer la escuela de manera diferente para ayudarte?

Interview Protocol #3 Reflection on the School Experience

Pseudonym: _____

Date/Time: _____

Setting: _____

Introduccion: Gracias otra vez por tomarte el tiempo para reunirte conmigo. Deseo continuar con nuestra conversacion acerca de tu experiencia en la escuela aqui en los Estados Unidos. Como te mencione en nuestra conversacion anterior, estoy haciendo un estudio de las experiencias educacionales de estudiantes latinos en la escuela secundaria. Tu historia, experiencias y perspectiva acerca de la escuela son muy importantes para mi porque estoy tratando de entender que aspectos de la escuela tu encontrastes valioso y que viera podido hacer la escuela diferente para mejorar tu experiencia. Quiero que sepas que esta entrevista es confidencial. Estoy grabando nuestra conversacion, de esta manera puedo verla y escucharla mas adelante y recordar de lo que hablamos. Dentro de varias semanas, me voy a poner en contacto contigo, para ensenarte la version escrita de nuestra conversacion y asi podras verificar si lo que he escrito es correcto. Por favor, ten la libertad de responder a las preguntas de la entrevista en Espanol, Ingles o los dos idiomas.

1. **Por favor reflexiona en tu experiencia en la escuela y los eventos que lo condujeron a dejar la escuela. Por favor habla de lo que la escuela viera podido hacer diferente para apoyarte mejor y ayudarte a que la experiencia en la escuela viera sido positiva.**
2. **Cual fue el impacto mas fuerte en tu decision a dejar la escuela? (profesores, administradores, otros estudiantes, circunstancias de la vida, reglas y normas?) Por favor, explica.**

Possible follow-up questions:

- Que piensas que la escuela deba de hacer para que los estudiantes se mantengan interesados?
- Quien deberia de estar involucrado en hacer los cambios en las escuelas?Como deberia las escuelas publicas apoyar mejor a les estudiantes latinos quienes son vulnerables a dejar la escuela antes de obtener el diploma?

- Que consejo le darias a los estudiantes latinos en la escuela secundaria que estan pensando dejar la escuela antes de obtener el diploma?
- Si podrias cambiar algo acerca de tu experiencia en la escuela, que cambiarias?
- Cual serian algunas de las ideas que tienes con respecto a como mantener a los estudiantes interesados en la escuela?
- Que programas o sistemas de apoyo podrian tener las escuelas para motivar, alentar y apoyar a los jovenes para que se queden en la escuela?
- Si podrias cambiar una (o varias) cosas acerca de la escuela para ayudarte a quedarte en la escuela y graduarte con exito, que seria?

Te gustaria agregar algo mas?

Formulario de Consentimiento

Dreams Deferred: A qualitative study of Latino youth who left high school prior to obtaining a diploma

IRB#
Investigadora Principal: Jay Shotel, Ed.D. (202) 994-1511

(Date)

Estimado_____,

Usted ha sido invitado a participar en una investigacion dirigido por Michael Barnet quien es un estudiante de Doctorado en el Departamento de Educacion Especial de la Universidad de George Washington en la Facultad de Educacion y Desarrollo Humano. Esta investigacion es parte de su tesis doctoral en el area de educacion especial bilingue.

El proposito de esta investigacion es de obtener las percepciones y creencias de los jovenes latinos acerca de los factores que lo han llevado a dejar la escuela antes de la graduacion. Usted sera uno de diez personas que participaran en esta investigacion. El senor Barnet esta interesado en su percepcion de su experiencia en la escuela y los eventos que lo llevaron a dejar la escuela antes de obtener un diploma.

Su participacion en esta investigacion es importante ya que puede ayudar en desarrollar el entendimiento de los hechos asociados con la juventud que déjà la escuela secundaria antes de la graduacion. A traves de su participacion en esta investigacion, el senor Barnet espera entender sus percepciones y creencias acerca de su experiencia y eventos que lo condujeron a dejar la escuela antes de la graduacion. La informacion que usted provea pueda ayudar en el proceso de desarrollar programas y normas que dirija el problema en dejar la escuela temprano.

Si usted decide participar en esta investigacion, le preguntaran que participe en tres entrevistas de uno a uno con el senor Barnet. La entrevista sera de 45 minutos aproximadamente. La entrevista se llevara a cabo en un cuarto privado en Crossroads Youth Oportunities Center u otro lugar acordado. No le preguntaran ninguna informacion que lo identifique en la entrevista como su nombre o su informacion de contacto. El investigador grabara las entrevistas usando una video camera digital. La infomacion obtenida durante la entrevista sera transcrita y analizada por el Senor Barnet y los datos seran utilizados para su tesis doctoral. El investigador podra usar una porcion de la entrevista para inclusion en un documentario acerca de las experiencias de jovenes que dejan la escuela antes de la graduacion. Los participantes de esta investigacion no seran identificados por nombre en ningun momento en el video o en la tesis. Usted se puede negar a contestar cualquiera de estas preguntas, y usted puede dejar de participar en esta

investigacion en cualquier momento. Una vez que la informacion obtenida de las entrevistas hayan sido documentada, transcrita y analizada la cinta auditiva y de video sera borrada.

A pesar de que se le dara la oportunidad de compartir su perspectiva, usted no se beneficiara directamente por participar en esta investigacion. De cualquier manera, la informacion que usted provea pueda beneficiar a las personas anadiendo en el area del estudio educacional, por la cual potencialmente ayudara en el proceso de desarrollo de programas y normas para ayudar a los jovenes que son vulnerables a dejar la escuela temprano. Existe el riesgo de rotura de confidencialidad pero el investigador proporcionara todo el esfuerzo para mantener la confidencialidad.

Usted recibira una tarjeta de regalos de $10 dolares por cada entrevista para compensar su tiempo y esfuerzo.

Si usted tiene preguntas, puede contactar la Investigadora Principal escrita en el frente de este formulario al (202)994-1511 o al Senor Barnet al (301)335-8983.

Sus documentos podran ser revisados por los departamentos de la Universidad encargados de supervisar las investigaciones sobre la seguridad y cumplimiento del estudio. Para preguntas acerca de sus derechos como participante en la investigacion humana llame a la Oficina de Investigacion de Seres Humanos en GWU al 202-994-2715.

Firmando este consentimiento usted esta indicando que ha leido la informacion en este formulario y que usted ha decidido participar en la investigacion dirigido por Michael Barnet. Su participacion es este estudion es voluntario. Firmando estas formas, usted da permiso para que las entrevistas sean grabadas en cinta auditiva y por video. Usted podra dejar de participar en este estudio en cualquier momento despues que haya firmado este formulario. Despues de firmar este formuario de consentimiento, el Senor Barnet le dara una copia.

Si usted esta de acuerdo en participar en esta investigacion, por favor firme el formulario:

Firma (Participante) Fecha

Firma (Investigador) Fecha

Utilización Audio/Video

Por el presente autorizo a _____ a utilizar mi imagen videograbada y/o la audiograbación de mi voz en su video para el proyecto titulado *Dreams Deferred: A qualitative study of Latino youth who left high school prior to obtaining a diploma* en su presentación. He indicado abajo el nombre que quiero que aparezca junto con mi imagen y/o voz. Entiendo que al firmar este formulario le estoy transfiriendo todas tales grabaciones para este propósito explícito. Asimismo certifico que tengo más de 18 años de edad.

Nombre (Letra de Molde): _____

Firma: _____

Fecha: _____

Poner sus iniciales: Solo video _____

Solo audio _____

Audio y video: _____

Nombre a usarse en la presentación de audio y/o video (favor de escribir en letra de molde legible): _____

Iniciales de la/del investigador(a): _____