From K-GED: Maine Teenagers Describe Social, Emotional, and Relational Factors and Conditions Involved in their Decisions to Drop Out and Complete with a GED

Cheryl Saliwanchik-Brown

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd

Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/etd/20

This Open-Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine.
FROM K-GED: MAINE TEENAGERS DESCRIBE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND RELATIONAL FACTORS AND CONDITIONS INVOLVED IN THEIR DECISIONS TO DROP OUT AND COMPLETE WITH A GED

By
Cheryl Saliwanchik-Brown
B.S. University of Maine, 1992
M.A. University of Maine, 2000

A THESIS
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education (Individualized Program)
The Graduate School
The University of Maine
August, 2008

Advisory Committee:
Phyllis Brazee, Associate Professor of Education, Advisor
John Maddaus, Associate Professor of Education
William Davis, Professor of Education
Janet Fairman, Assistant Research Professor
Richard Ackerman, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership
Presented as chronological stories, GED candidates identified challenges in their lives that they encountered during school and described how they made choices to leave high school in order to graduate. Many of these youth faced “unthinkable” family situations. Many came from low socio-economic status which created or supported further disabling factors and conditions. GED examiners corroborated survey and narrative data. They stated that economic opportunities in Maine are dwindling, parents are not positive role models or support, and academic achievement is often deterred by bullying and teasing by classmates.

Through the narratives we discover that the GED process serves not only as a second chance for high school completion but also an opportunity to shine in an academic setting. For some, this is a healing process. As these youth voluntarily made a commitment to finishing their education, their self-determination provided an intrinsic sense of accomplishment. Passing each exam boosted their self-esteem and gave them hope for their future.

This study begins to build a base for future research on understanding the increasing rise in teenagers who choose to take the GED exam. Continued research is needed on the effects of reculturing public schools so youth feel safe and accepted; community strategies that alleviate the effects of poverty and social class; and alternative programming or school choice for non-traditional high school students.
DEDICATION

This Dissertation is dedicated to two people whom I know will be marching at my side in spirit and with love. I miss you both.

Dad

Carroll F. Robertson

April 29, 1939 – June 8, 2006

and

“Daughter”

Tasha S. Flood

December 26, 1986 – May 4, 2006
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank several people who made it possible to complete my studies. First, I would like to thank my family: My husband, Rusty, for giving me the time and the support I needed to spend long hours at my computer; Alex, my son, whose 6-year-old wisdom can never be duplicated, and Bailey and Brit, my bright and beautiful daughters, who graduated with GEDs and inspired me to wonder about the lives of teenagers who have “trouble” with the “day-to-day” of high school.

I would like to thank my doctoral committee who worked very closely with me and offered support, wisdom, comfort, and humor and especially my doctoral advisor, Dr. Phyllis Brazee, my guide, who made sure my emotional, relational and spiritual needs were met as we all tugged and pulled and stretched and cut this writing from conception to completion. You were great team and I appreciate the enormous amount of time and care this takes. I was not alone on this venture and for that I am eternally grateful.

And I also want to acknowledge all the participants – those who participated in the survey, those brave and determined youth who took the time to share their stories with me, and those GED examiners who took time out of their busy schedules to talk about the lives of their teen candidates. And I can’t forget the others – the ones who participated in my life as I taught school, volunteered, befriended, and parented – those teens who shared their stories with me over all those years of me being me. You are also part of this study. I am grateful to you all and to the many more I hope to meet.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION ........................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ....................................................................................... iii

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................... xii

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................. xiii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION .............................................................................................. 1

   The Problem ..................................................................................................... 1

   The Purpose of the Study ................................................................................ 3

   Conceptual Framework .................................................................................... 4

   The Research Setting ....................................................................................... 6

   The Sample Population .................................................................................... 7

   Personal Interest ............................................................................................. 7

   The Significance of this Study ....................................................................... 9

   Organization of this Dissertation ................................................................ 10

   Summary .......................................................................................................... 11

   Definitions of Terms Used ............................................................................ 12

2. THE HISTORY OF THE GED .......................................................................... 13

   The Origin of the GED Exam ........................................................................ 14

   Changes in the Exam ...................................................................................... 15

   Maine GED Testing Policy and Score Requirements for Passing ............... 17

   The Changing Significance of the GED .......................................................... 18
Building rapport ................................................................. 42
Semi-structured protocols ................................................. 43
Constructing the narrative .................................................. 44
Interviews with Testing Site Examiners ................................. 46
Recruitment ........................................................................ 46
Structured protocols ........................................................... 46
Researcher as Instrument ..................................................... 47
Methods of Analysis .............................................................. 48
Survey Analysis .................................................................. 48
GED Candidate Interviews .................................................. 49
Narrative analysis ............................................................... 49
Cross-case analysis ............................................................. 51
GED Examiner Interviews .................................................... 51
Interpretation ..................................................................... 52
Methods to Determine Trustworthiness ................................. 53
Purposeful Sampling ............................................................ 54
Pilot Study .......................................................................... 54
Personal Experience ............................................................ 56
Subjectivity ....................................................................... 57
Study Limitations ............................................................... 57
Self-Reporting ..................................................................... 57
Retrospective Interview Method .......................................... 58
Sample Size ...................................................................... 59
5. RESULTS FROM SITE EXAMINERS' INTERVIEWS

Purpose ........................................................................................................... 63
Who They Are and What They Do ............................................................... 64
Characteristics of Teen Candidates at Maine Testing Sites ..................... 67
The Communities ......................................................................................... 68
   Northern Maine ...................................................................................... 68
   Western Maine ...................................................................................... 69
   Central Maine ...................................................................................... 70
   Coastal Maine ...................................................................................... 71
   Southern Maine .................................................................................... 71
Changes and Trends at GED Sites ............................................................... 72
   Teen Population .................................................................................... 72
   Teen Attitudes ...................................................................................... 75
   Community Attitudes toward Education ................................................. 76
Summary ...................................................................................................... 76

6. RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY ................................................................ 80
   Demographics ........................................................................................ 82
   School and Schooling ............................................................................ 83
   Dropping Out ........................................................................................ 83
   Other Programs ..................................................................................... 85
Factors that Motivate Youth to Complete with a GED

Post-Secondary Education

Personal Satisfaction

Finding a Better Job

Summary

10. CONCLUSION

Disconnections

Parental Disconnection

Community and Economic Disconnection

School Disconnections

Lack of relationships with teachers

Adversarial discipline policies

Disconnection from peers

Medication and Hospitalization

The GED as a Means for Reconnection

Criticism of the GED and Researcher Response

Recommendations

Candidates' Recommendations to Other Teens
LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1  Selected Demographic Data on Maine GED Candidates: 2005 .................. 29
Table 7.1  Factors and Conditions from the Narratives............................ 149
Table 10.1 Youth Recommendations to Other Teens.................................... 195
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1  Conceptual Framework: Factors or Conditions That Affect Decisions to Complete with a GED Certificate

Figure 6.1  Gender and Age at Exam

Figure 6.2  Age When First Thought About Dropping Out

Figure 6.3  Grade Stopped Going to School

Figure 6.4  Boys – Other Diploma Programs

Figure 6.5  Girls – Other Diploma Programs

Figure 6.6  Peer Support to Drop Out by Gender of Respondent

Figure 6.7  Parental Support to Drop Out by Gender of Respondent

Figure 6.8  Mothers' Educational Attainment

Figure 6.9  Fathers' Educational Attainment

Figure 6.10 If Given Another Chance Would Participants Drop Out Again?
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

"I felt bad about leaving high school. I was disappointed in myself that I couldn't do it -- but there was no way I was going to be able do it at the high school. I tried. I definitely tried."

~Hannah, age 18

The Problem

A teenager who chooses to drop out of high school will face a future of uncertain economic and educational opportunities. Yet, in the United States, one out of every three students who enters high school as a 9th grader drops out before receiving a diploma (see Barton, 2005). According to the Maine Department of Education,\(^1\) approximately 1,900 students dropped out of Maine’s public and private high schools in 2004, and over 1,900 students dropped out in 2005. As well, the current American Council on Education (ACE) reports approximately 1,800 Maine teens took the GED exam in 2005.

Typically, youth who do not have a high school diploma, or the equivalent, are unable to continue with a college education or even aspire to rise to more lucrative positions within a company for which they may be working. This impediment on upward mobility means they will be non-competitive in a contemporary job market, may be unable to support either themselves or a future family, and are at high risk for being financially supported by state and federal welfare subsidies well into adulthood. Minimum wage job earners often go without medical or dental coverage, which could be devastating to them or their families in the event of an illness or an accident.

The General Educational Development (GED) exam (sometimes referred to, inaccurately, as the "general equivalency diploma") offers all dropouts an opportunity to complete high school. Completion means they will be eligible for better paying jobs and post-secondary educational opportunities. According to the General Educational Development Testing Service (GEDTS, 2004), over 90% of employers in the United States do not distinguish between a diploma and a GED in their hiring practices and approximately 97% of colleges and universities in the United States and Canada honor the GED certificate as valid completion of high school for admission to college. The majority of candidates state the main reason for completing a GED exam is to attend a four-year or a two-year post-secondary institution (GEDTS, 2005).

However, the debate continues about the quality of educational attainment between a diploma-ed and a GED-credentialed teenager. According to the American Council on Education (ACE), 40% of graduating seniors in a traditional high school cannot pass the exam on their first attempt. Therefore, teenage GED passers may look like they have accomplished a feat beyond their high school counterparts. Yet, labor market analysts argue that a high school diploma is still the better choice – the exam only measures basic cognitive skills and that, for most students, high school programs also generate capacity in work ethic and perseverance to task (Boesel, 1998).

Regardless of which is better, in Maine, teenage recipients ages 17 to 19 years old, comprise over half (51.2%) of all GED recipients (GEDTS, 2006). Many adolescents, who are enrolled in and have the potential to complete high school with a diploma, are leaving public education and are completing high school at learning centers around the state. The most current data shows that in three years, Maine has tested over 3,600
teen candidates (comprised from *Who passed the GED? 2003, 2004, 2005*). According to Paul Barton, author of *One-Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*, (Educational Testing Service, 2005), research shows little about the reasons for the “shift” in the award of certificates to high school students. He speculates that a number of factors are involved and that it “would be desirable to get a clear understanding of what is happening” (p.33).

**The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to follow Barton’s directive and to explore what is happening with Maine youth who drop out of high school and choose to complete with a GED certificate. My goal was to understand the environmental context (social and academic) within which these youth made this decision to drop out and complete with a GED. One objective of this study was to understand the factors and conditions that account for the adolescent shift to completing with a GED, and to discover, if any, a collective distinguishing attribute of this population that could be used to help inform high school programming, especially in the area of dropout prevention.

My broad research questions were:

1. How do Maine youth (17-19 years old) who voluntarily choose to complete high school with a GED describe their social, family and peer relationships, and academic experiences from kindergarten to the point of dropping out?
2. What are the factors or conditions that affect the students’ decision to: a) drop out, and b) decide to pursue a GED? and,
3. What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED candidates share?
**Conceptual Framework**

This study was conceptually framed around GED youth and their perception of the context of their environmental and social influences, such as family, community, peers, and schooling (see Figure 1.1) and what or if the conditions of their environment impacted their decisions to drop out of school and/or complete with a GED. Two theorists, sociologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1993) and psychologist, Erik Erikson (1968) maintained that the conditions of environmental surroundings (home, school, community, and the larger society) interact with individual characteristics and traits (personal resources) and inform or confirm one’s identity within the larger social system. Bronfenbrenner (1993) believed environmental influences become an attribute of the developing person; Erikson (1968) hypothesized that adolescents, especially in their later stages, will refuse to comply with conditions they feel threaten their sense of identity. For instance, a school environment that feels oppressive, lacks intellectual stimuli, or causes them to feel incompetent may force this student to rebel.

Both Bronfenbrenner and Erikson’s theories framed the early development of this study for the purpose of exploring the context of GED candidates’ narratives as they related the environmental, social, and academic paths they navigated before coming to the decision to complete with a GED. The environmental factors and conditions shown in boxes in the framework in Figure 1.1 are from decades of well-documented research on high school dropouts and not on the characteristics of those youth who continue on to complete high school with a GED. The findings in this study further indicate that these factors and conditions do indeed affect the decision to drop out and are supported by dropout literature; however, the findings also indicate that the decision to obtain GED is
Figure 1.1. Conceptual Framework: Factors or Conditions That Affect Decisions to Complete with a GED Certificate

**Affiliation**
- friendships
- adult relationships
- age of peers
- sense of Belonging
- peer value on education

**Family and Community**
- value placed on education
- sibling patterns of schooling
- SES
- cultural beliefs, including teen culture
- parental educational attainment

**Personal Resources**
- mental and physical health
- stress and coping mechanisms
- emerging identity/philosophy
- locus of control
- sense of competence
- sense of self-esteem/ self-efficacy

**IDENTITY**

**SCHOOL**
- academic failure
- courses offered (little interest and/or relatedness)
- sense of autonomy
- climate and atmosphere
- physical condition of the school
- school configurations
- no relationships w/teachers
- extra-curricular activities
- in adequate mentoring programs
- lack of alternative/ preventative drop out programs
- no connections w/guidance counselors
- Vocational/technical programs
- High stakes testing

**Learning styles**
- sensory
- independent
- skills centered
- experiential

**Teaching styles**
- traditional
- performance based
- ability grouping
- mass testing

**Reason to complete with a GED**
- A high school diploma
- Relief from stress
- Economic benefits
- Sense of accomplishment
- Family expectations
- Move on to post-secondary
- Affect on future goal expectations
- Relevance to “real” life

**Decision to Drop Out**
internally constructed and may also be affected by lack of human relationships, which is also prevalent in these findings. The process of obtaining a GED often involves an internal commitment to purposely “heal” that part of the psyche that yearns for relationships, stability, and a positive personal identity. For example, some youth stated they did not make a “voluntary” decision to drop out and complete with a GED, rather, they wanted to graduate from their high schools; however, their environmental context created an intolerable situation from which a sense of belonging, recovery of self-esteem, and emotional healing began with completing the GED battery.

The collected cry from youth in most research on at-risk adolescents is that “no one cares.” This cry is reiterated again in this research. Therefore, this conceptual framework is explored further from a feminist relational approach to understanding this educational phenomenon. Introduced in Chapter 10 is the relatively new concept of relational-cultural theory on human development. Jordan and Hartling (2002) pioneers in the field, state, “Growth occurs in connection, that people yearn for connection, and growth-fostering relationships are created through mutual empathy and mutual empowerment” (p.1).

The Research Setting

The research setting was Maine. I am a resident, which made it logistically feasible to conduct interviews and gather data, but also Maine is multifaceted in social diversity and school experiences. Maine provided opportunities to look at adolescents’ environments, social and school experiences in communities that varied widely in SES, geography, culture, and school configurations. For example, a GED candidate in northern Maine may have lived in a small farming community and could, theoretically, attend a
public high school with an enrollment of less than 120 students while a student from southern or central Maine may have been enrolled in a high school with a population of 1,200 in a district that is generally recognized as urban. GED testing site examiners offered other considerations in candidates’ experiences: work availability, parental educational attainment, availability of, or access to, recreational and community activities, as well as community expectations. Since these variations often hold very different experiences for high school students, it was important to consider this regional diversity.

The Sample Population

Using primarily qualitative research methods, I first surveyed and then interviewed school-age GED candidates. Further, after having spoken with several Maine Adult Education and Learning Center directors, I decided it was important to interview them as well. Their perceptions of the trends and characteristics of the teens they had seen come through their facilities over the last five to ten years was valuable data. They are also the last adults from which these teens would find academic success. Their input supported findings from the teen interviewees. The results of these surveys and interviews describe a myriad of social, emotional, family, cultural, and school conditions and situations that Maine adolescents experienced prior to making a decision to drop out of their public high school and complete their formal education with a GED certificate.

Personal Interest

Within the population of teen GED test-takers, there are also subgroups, namely: youth who are homeschoolers and who need a high school credential to attend post-secondary institutions; youth who have been expelled from school; youth who are testing in juvenile detention centers; or a population of teens who are enrolled in a Job Corps
GED program. Another subgroup of school-age youth voluntarily chooses to leave high school and complete with a GED certificate. The latter are the population who piqued my curiosity. I wondered, what are their backgrounds, their values, their future goals? And further, why did they choose to drop out of Maine schools and seek a diploma through the GED exam?

Opportunities to talk openly and honestly with a large number of at-risk Maine teenagers have been available to me for over a decade. As a public school teacher, a volunteer, a researcher, and a mother, I have taught, mentored, interviewed, and lived with teenagers. Those who made their way to me, or I to them, were from a range of diverse and varied family configurations, socioeconomic status, ability levels, and belief systems. Some were from well-to-do families; some were living in group homes with no family to speak of. Many teens spoke of a sense of disengagement from school, regardless of their background or personal experiences. As a mother, my own experience with the GED played a central role in my research – my two daughters also left public high school and completed with a GED certificate.

The high school students I speak of (in whatever capacity I happened to be with them – teacher, mentor, mother) did not reject education, but rather, they rejected school. Like the youth who participated in this study, many felt alienated by peers and believed they didn’t “fit in.” Many had made no connections with adults in their schools, and several had had expectations of graduating with their class and believed they would someday attend their traditional ceremonies of completion. Yet, the aspiration to someday march at graduation was not enough to keep them in high school. Many simply abandoned ship and took a different route, a GED certificate. Notable in this decision is the voluntary as-
pect of GED completion. These youth commit to working toward this certification by themselves – bypassing traditional methods of seat time, credit accumulation, and conforming to academic and social standards set by a system to which they felt they didn’t belong.

It was these students that fascinated me. Most were very bright; they should have done well in high school. Some, especially those youth who were highly mobile, had almost no chance of obtaining a diploma in a regular high school setting; credits, attendance, and lack of interventions or any transition plans were obstacles to be overcome. Yet, these students recognized that they needed to complete high school to reach their goals and plans.

**The Significance of this Study**

Most literature on the GED recipient focuses on the impact the GED certificate plays in the American economy and labor market. However, even though the GED is a primary source for providing dropouts increased opportunities to become successful and productive citizens, the process of obtaining their GEDs and their personal stories are largely unknown (Golden, Kist, Trehan & Padak, 2005). Barton (2005) agrees; the reasons that school-age youth seek a GED as opposed to a diploma have not yet “been pinned down” (p.33).

These students’ stories, in combination with adult perceptions of trends and cultural influences they see at the GED testing sites, will add to our understanding of this population of school-age GED candidates. Seidman (1998) asserts that understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives constitute education, “is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues…” (p.9). Using qualitative research as a primary method
of understanding this educational event highlights the voices of those in the margins—those who describe finding themselves “in the wrong crowd,” as “loners,” or as “misfits” in school settings.

This study identifies challenges and barriers that Maine students perceive have hindered their growth toward academic success or their ability to want to stay in a public high school setting. I would hope that administrators, teachers, and counselors draw on these findings to help them consider programs, identify or circumvent problems, or reculture the school environment to support future teenagers at-risk of public school failure. This study will also begin to build a base for future research on the increasingly significant experience and increase in teenagers choosing to take a GED rather than complete a traditional high school program.

**Organization of this Dissertation**

This text is organized so that the reader can first develop an understanding of what the GED is, from first, an historical lens, and secondly, from the literature on GED recipients from labor market and economic analysts. Chapter 3, Literature Review, examines the dropout phenomenon, known factors and conditions associated with this phenomenon and the GED literature. Chapter 4 is the traditional Methodology chapter. This chapter will explain the methods used in data collection and analysis. Results from the three-stages of data collection are presented in Chapters 5 through 7; namely, the survey, the GED examiners’ interviews, and the candidates’ narratives. Chapter 8 looks at the factors and conditions that impacted interviewees’ decision to drop out of high school. Chapter 9 presents an analysis of the factors and conditions that impacted youths’ decisions to complete with a GED, and Chapter 10 provides the final interpretation: the im-
applications, recommendations for school personnel and for further research, and final thoughts about the research findings.

**Summary**

Maine high school students are increasingly opting for the GED as a means to high school graduation. The purpose of this study was to use youth voice to describe the environmental context from which they made a choice to drop out of high school and complete with a GED certificate. My broad research questions were:

1. How do Maine youth (17-19 years old) who voluntarily choose to complete high school with a GED describe their social, family and peer relationships, and academic experiences from kindergarten to the point of dropping out?

2. What are the factors or conditions that affect the students' decision to: a) drop out, and b) decide to pursue a GED? and,

3. What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED candidates share?

Using a multi-stage data collection method, I surveyed GED candidates statewide, interviewed candidates who voluntarily submitted contact information, and further interviewed GED testing site examiners for their perception of the factors and conditions that affect these candidates in their communities.

The conceptual framework was based on researched factors and conditions found in dropout literature that often culminate in youth's decision to drop out. Further, Bronfenbrenner and Erikson's theories of social and identity development are included in an effort to find connections to social context as part of the GED candidates' decision to drop out and complete with a GED.
Finally, the significance of this study will be to provide information to policy makers and school personnel who implement programs and work with youth to support their efforts to complete school. This study will also add to the current and limited literature on GED recipients.

**Definitions of Terms Used**

The following are definitions of terms used in this paper:

- **at-risk**: those students who have “a strong likelihood for dropping out of school.”

- **dropout**: An individual who leaves school without completing a state or school administrative unit approved secondary program.

- **GED certificate**: recognition of passing the GED exam.

- **GED recipient**: a student who has passed the GED exam and has received a certificate of completion, used interchangeably with passer.

- **GED candidate** or **candidate**: a student who has taken at least one of the five exams, regardless of the final result, also used interchangeably with test-taker.

- **Alternative education program**: A separate, district funded and often off-site, public educational program for at-risk middle and high school students.

- **Adult education program**: A voluntary attendance program whereby youth and adults can pursue courses or tutoring to obtain high school completion status. Operational times, such as night/evening courses, vary within each program.

---


3 SOURCE: www.maine.gov/education

4 Definitions on GED participants are from the American Council on Education, 2006.
Chapter 2

THE HISTORY OF THE GED

"The growing popularity of the GED is a symptom [not a consequence] of the traditional high school’s failure to meet the needs of students who find high school alienating or incompatible...or irrelevant to their futures."

~Entwistle, Alexander & Olson, 2004

Many school-age youth are taking advantage of the GED exam to change their dropout status. The percentage of school-age youth in the U.S. receiving GED certificates has increased from 35% in 1990 to 47% in 2005 (American Council on Education, 2006). Teenage recipients are increasingly becoming the largest percentage of GED test takers (Barton, 2005).

Like the students it serves, the GED sits in the margins of education, and though it is probably this country’s first high-stakes, standardized exam, it is often perceived as a “second chance” for students who drop out of high school. Administered by the ACE, it is not controlled by the U.S. Department of Education or any legislative or government body. It often skirts educational radar. This “good enough” diploma is now becoming more a viable option and preferred by students who find contemporary educational schooling a poor fit; yet, as an educational phenomenon and the subject of economic concern, one question that should be answered in this text is, what exactly is the GED?

This exam, accepted as a legitimate means to high school completion in both the US and Canada, is aligned with high school knowledge level expectations and is field tested with traditional high school seniors around the country. It is determined that the student who receives a GED certificate has passed a level of cognitive proficiency that
qualifies him or her as having completed courses in Mathematics, English, History, Science and Writing at or above the level of a diploma-ed high school senior. Today, the exam is offered (with certain conditions) to anyone 16 years old and over who has not completed a high school diploma program.

The Origin of the GED Exam

There is some discrepancy in the literature as to the original creators of the GED exam (sometimes called, inaccurately, the General Equivalency Diploma). Originally, the GED exam was developed as an instrument to allow returning servicemen and women who had enlisted in the armed forces during WWII to complete high school. It is agreed, however, that the GED originated in 1942 and was first administered by the U.S. Armed Forces Institute. Returning from war to an increasingly industrialized nation, young veterans found getting civilian jobs, as well as continuing with a college education, often depended on, as it does today, a high school diploma.

As the war ended, Cornelius P. Turner, credited by some as developing the test, became a member of the American Council on Education as head of its Commission on Accreditation of Service Experiences and lobbied state legislatures for the tests. He held a belief, much like John Dewey, that people are educated by informal, as well as formal, experiences. Turner rationalized that a high school equivalency would also benefit those in the civilian population who had also not completed their high school education. By 1959, every state had accepted the GED as an equivalent high school diploma, and for the first time in its history non-veteran adults taking the exam exceeded the number of veterans (Toby & Armor, 1992).
Changes in the Exam

Toby and Armor (1992) cite the original definition of the goals and objectives of the first GED exams as:

[The] GED tests are designed to measure attainment of some of the major goals of secondary school programs...They are not intended to measure factual recall so much as intellectual power: competence using major generalizations, concepts and ideas, and the ability to comprehend exactly, evaluate critically and think clearly...they are more likely to depend on first-hand experience, self-directed reading, and informal contacts with other people than upon close examination of texts (p.88).

Still overseen by the American Council on Education, the GED’s mission remains the same: to provide high school certification to those who have not completed a traditional diploma program. However, until 1977, it focused on content knowledge and used a traditional, multiple-choice answer and assessment instrument. In an effort to evolve with secondary education requirements and academic skills and knowledge that typically might be required of the four-year high school graduate, the GED exam has since undergone three major test revisions.

The test underwent its first revision in the late 1970s and a new version was issued in 1978. This new exam emphasized conceptual knowledge and introduced authentic reading materials, such as schedules and newspaper articles that adult test takers would find more relevant to their experiences.

In 1983, the ACE, again aware of a shift “from an industrialized to an information society – one characterized by a commonplace use of technology, global awareness, and
participatory democracy," anticipated that the exam would need more changes. Therefore, it called upon the expertise of professional adult educators who worked for five years on a new version which was revised into what would be the 1988 series. The committee made the following changes:

- Addition of a direct writing sample (essay)
- An increased emphasis on critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- An increased reflection of the diverse roles adults play in society
- Greater emphasis on understanding the sources of societal change
- An increase in contextual settings relevant to adults

Another, significant, change made during the 1988 revision was that of dropping the age requirement that GED recipients be at least 20 years old and have parental permission to take the test (Barton, 2005). This revision now allowed 16 to 19 year old dropouts an avenue to complete their secondary education and enter the workforce as a high school graduate. Dropping the age requirement saw a steady increase in teen recipients. By 1990, 35.8% (or over 157,000) certificates were awarded to teenagers ages 16-19. Ten years later, that number increased by 7% to over 223,000, and in 2004 almost half (47%) of all GED recipients were teenagers (ACE, 2005). In 1990, 8.4% of Maine’s GED recipients were 17 to 19 years old; by the year 2000, that rate had increased to 12% (Barton, 2005). Currently, approximately half (52.8%) of all Maine recipients are 17-19 years old (ACE, 2006).

5 SOURCE: American Council on Education. Website: http://www.acenet.edu/cell/ged/history-Acfn. All references to the changes in the GED come from this source.
6 The literature does not say when or why this occurred. Speculation might be that a rising number of home-schoolers who needed an equivalency diploma for work or college might have precipitated the change, or it may have been a rising number of school age dropouts.
Finally, the most recent revisions to the GED were made in 2002 (see Appendix B). Students who take the current exam answer more business communications items and have more history, civics, and government, as well as more analysis of current events, than in previous exams. The science component, integrated with the National Science Education Content Standards (NSECS) focuses on environmental and health topics, and on science topics relevant to everyday life. Changes to the literature section require students to think critically about the roles of gender, ethnicity, age and diversity in literature (though the past version already contained many items that considered these issues), an emphasis on analysis and synthesis of literature, and the reading and comprehending of non-fiction material. The mathematics section now requires calculator usage, and includes basic data analysis and some statistics.

**Maine GED Testing Policy and Score Requirements for Passing**

The Maine GED Testing policy is not unlike other states; however, it is important to understand the protocols and the requirements that the students in this study followed in order to understand the process of taking a GED exam in Maine. First, youth initiate contact and are then advised of the testing site’s application procedures and testing schedules. They must commit to and pass a series of pre-tests before they are given the opportunity to take the actual exam. For many (especially those who chose to leave high school at an earlier age) this means committing to tutorials and one-on-one instruction at district Learning Centers and Adult Education Programs in their localities.

While many states allow 16-year-olds to sit for the GED battery, the minimum age for testing in Maine is 18 years old, with special provisions for 17-year-olds; i.e., they must have been out of school for at least one year or are determined to have an “im-

---

7 The source for this information is the Maine Department of Education.
mediate need,” such as an opportunity for employment which requires completion of high school (a letter from the potential employer is required), or acceptance into a college or university for federal loans. Pregnant or incarcerated teens may take the exam earlier than the required age of 18. Local testing centers may also impose additional requirements concerning age waivers, initial testing, and retesting as per local school board policies. In Maine, receiving a GED certificate requires passing all five exams (Math, English, Science, Social Studies and Writing) with a standard score of 410 on each test, and an overall average score of 450 for all five tests.

**The Changing Significance of the GED**

The Educational Testing Service’s (2005) report, *One-Third of a Nation: Rising Dropout Rates and Declining Opportunities*, claims that at least 33% of all high school students in the U.S. are dropping out of their traditional high school programs. The GED, as a “second chance” option, may be playing an increasingly significant role in American education and in American society. With over 500,000 GED (out of an attempted 800,000) certificates issued per year, much of the current research is focused on how this credential works in the labor market and the relationship between the GED and economic outcomes, i.e., employment success, financial stability, returning to the work force, and/or completing a post-secondary education (Entwistle, Alexander and Olson, 2004; Tyler, 2003). There is some concern that the high school dropout, and/or the GED recipient will not be able to keep up with current or future economic conditions or standards of living.
Summary

A fairly recent development in American education, the General Education Development (GED) certificate was created to provide a high school diploma to U.S. servicemen and women who had enlisted before they graduated from high school. The test expanded to include the civilian population in 1959 and now certifies over 500,000 citizens per year. Maine GED candidates can sit for the exam only after they pass a battery of pre-exams. The minimum age requirement for testing is 18; however, 17 year olds can test under certain conditions. There is some concern that the GED recipient will be unable to keep up with economic conditions in the work force; the changing significance of the GED creates a field of research by labor market analysts and economists to understand the role this certificate will play in a future economic market.
Chapter 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

While recipients of GED diplomas resemble high school graduates in the basic cognitive skills that the tests measure, they tend to be unlike graduates in other ways that the tests do not measure...

—David Boesel, The Street Value of the GED Diploma, 1998

In this age of accountability and No Child Left Behind, the U.S. media has also made infamous the label, “The Dropout Nation” (TIME, April 17, 2006). With one out of three students leaving high school before they graduate, it is not surprising that a great deal of research addresses characteristics and traits as well as the progression of dropping out that is attributed to students’ decisions to leave high school. Predicting which students will drop out is tricky, although there are several “at-risk” identifiers. Many may be identified as at-risk of failure in the public schools by their socio-economic status, consistent failure of courses and classes, or high rate of absenteeism, but also, as others indicate, all students have the potential to be at-risk of public school failure at any time (Davis, 2004). This chapter explores the factors and conditions under which students may drop out of school, subgroups of dropouts, and some of the researched characteristics associated with GED recipients.

Researchers state that most students begin elementary school enthusiastically and some with great promise, but by the time many of these students reach high school they are academically defeated and find that school has become meaningless. Three out of four students in Gallagher’s (2002) study reported that they liked elementary school and
that they did very well. States one male student, “I was doing really good then, making A’s and B’s on my report cards… and it was mostly one-on-one, and it wasn’t so big.” One female student respondent from the same study reported that her elementary education was “the time I was the happiest, like, everybody was still okay, and I always had a large amount of friends” (p. 42).

Much of the literature that explores the dropout event states that the process is rarely spontaneous, but rather an interaction of student attributes and personal resources in combination with the conditions or qualities of their home environments (Alexander, Entwistle & Horsey, 1997; Davis, 2004; Keogh, 2000). Other literature addresses how school, teacher practice, and more recently standardized testing, affects high school students’ decisions to stay or leave school.

Subgroups of At-Risk Youth

Historically, students at-risk of dropping out were those whose families or cultures did not blend into the predominantly white, upper, or middle-class culture for whom schools were designed (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). Other research on dropouts seems to group those at-risk for dropping out as falling under, typically, three key categorical events:

1) A culmination of a longitudinal process. A large amount of literature finds that dropping out of high school, for some students, is a culmination of a longitudinal “process” rather than a spontaneous decision (Alexander, et al, 1997; Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Barrington & Hendricks, 1989; Garnier, Stein, & Jacobs, 1997). Researchers who conducted longitudinal studies (Alexander, et al., 1997; Garnier, et al., 1997) find that disengagement from school is an outcome of the interactions between many broad socio-

2) A temporary event. Other research finds that some students drop out due to temporary or situational events. Students may be trying to cope with a parental break-up, a relocation or a family move, or another distressing family situation (Kennedy & Morton, 1999). Golden and Kist (2005) conducted focus groups with college students who held GED certificates. One student in this study explained that she encountered a temporary "rough time" at home while in high school. When a teacher made a condescending remark about homework, this student recalls a "spiral out of control" that ended in dropping out of school (2005, p.313), and

3) As an effect of school and school situations. Some students who finish with a GED may have had expectations of completing high school; however, it was their school experiences that completely changed their attitudes and motivation to complete (Kaplan, D.S., Peck, B.M, & Kaplan, H.B. 1997)). Alienated students may feel that their school environment isn’t safe for them. They might be threatened either physically, or emotionally, or both (Davis, 2004; Kennedy & Morton, 1999). An example of this type of student may be one who is being bullied, may feel social alienation from peers, or one who may have anxiety about attending a large high school (Gallagher, 2002). Systemic barriers students face, such as ineffective instructional practice or lack of adequate programs
(Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990), as well as increased attention to standardized testing and high school exit exams, may create another subset of students at risk.

**Unrecognized or Quiet Dropouts**

Another population of student dropouts who are essentially unrecognized by dropout prevention programs are students who have affluent family backgrounds, and/or the student who has little to no disciplinary or attendance concerns up until the age of 17 or 18 years. Toby and Armor (1992) assert that dropout prevention programs do not target this potential dropout because they do not fit the student “type” (i.e., poor academic performance, or disciplinary or behavioral issues). They believe these students wouldn’t respond to such programs anyway. Within this group, one might find a small percentage of dropouts who are high ability students, or intellectually or artistically gifted. These students may find high school as unable to help them develop their interests or their talents (Toby & Armor, 1992). Janosz, and colleagues, (2000) identify these students as the “quiet dropouts” (p. 176). They find that these students may also be more involved with school activities with little to no disciplinary problems. State the researchers, “They generally go unnoticed until they choose to leave school” (p.176). It may be safe to speculate that students in this category would be the most likely to finish high school with either an adult education high school diploma, or a GED.

Davis (2004) points out that labeling students for risk events, however, is a precarious practice; in effect, all students can be at risk “for different reasons at different times in their lives” (p.5). It is how students and schools understand and respond to risk events that will make a difference in the outcome. Kennedy (1999) reiterates, “Each dropout is a unique individual with a unique set of circumstances” (p. 69).
Student and Teacher Perceptions

Perceptions of teachers and students represented in dropout literature often shows a disconnect between what teachers perceive are characteristics of students who drop out and student perceptions of themselves, as students, and about the way they are schooled. Some students perceive that teachers only care about the “smart” students and/or that the school has given up on them (Urdan, 2004). Students’ perceptions that teachers do not care about them, is a prevalent theme in qualitative research with dropouts, and generally one that they state very strongly (Kennedy, 1999; Golden, 2005). In response to these perceptions, they engage in self-handicapping activities, such as “fooling around,” cheating, truancy, procrastination, and excuse-making, among others (Urdan, 2004). These behaviors and adults’ subsequent reactions contribute to feelings of alienation from school (Lan & Lanthier, 2003).

Obasohan and Kortering (1999) surveyed 63 high school teachers and 58 student dropouts on their perceptions of why students drop out of school. They found that teachers and youth had very different perceptions of expectancies and values of education. Teachers did not believe that student dropouts valued an education, or that the students perceived learning was important. Also, the overall belief held by teachers in this school was that students were “pulled out” because of student and family related factors that were out of the teacher’s control. Students responded that they perceived the school context “pushed” them out, and that this was, as well, out of the students’ control (Davis, 2004).

Obason and Kortering (1999) found that 7% of the teachers surveyed believed that student dropouts felt that learning was important, while 100% of the students sur-
veyed responded that learning was important to them. A similar difference is noted when students were asked if it was important that they graduate. Six percent of the teachers believed students felt graduation was important, yet 97% of the student respondents indicated graduation was important to them. Gallagher (2002) reports similar findings. She writes that her interviewees “expressed a longing for a diploma” but were unwilling to stay in school (p. 52). Clearly, what students believed and experienced in school and what teachers believed were students’ attitudes regarding school, were largely unrelated.

Perceptions of teacher-student relationships in a student-led research project in Boston (Boston Plan for Excellence, 2004) found that students of different racial groups had different perceptions of teacher treatment. In this study, 79% of the White student respondents believed that “all/most” of their teachers answer their questions in class, while 60% of the Hispanic students and 65% of the Black students felt this was the case. When asked how comfortable students felt talking to their teachers, 37% of the Black and Hispanic respondents answered they were comfortable talking to “all/most” of their teachers, compared to 45% of White students, and 50% of the Asian respondents.

Golden, Kist, Trehan & Padak, (2005) interviewed college students who had dropped out of high school and received their GED certificate. These students revealed that their perceptions of school and the treatment they had received in the school setting from teachers were unsatisfactory and sometimes traumatizing. States one student:

They didn’t know what to do with a kid like me, who was falling through the cracks, who really wasn’t a problem for anybody…They simply got frustrated, and, you know, I didn’t know how to help myself. And the only thing I could do was to run away at the time (p. 314).
How students perceive school may reveal other underlying issues in the student dropout phenomena. This study hopes to add to these data as Maine GED candidates talk about their perceptions about their school environments and their experiences with adults in their school settings.

The Effects of Standardization

Many educational professionals wonder whether the current milieu of testing and standards is creating a “push out” rather than a “drop out” effect (Smith, 2003). Several reports speculate that high school aged students who are dropping out and going into GED programs are leaving because of more intense academic pressure and fear of failure (Barton, 2005; Smith, 2003; Viadero, 2001). One reason this may happen is that high-stakes testing, including high school exit exams, cannot discriminate between a student’s strengths, intelligence, or comprehensive recall (Levine, 2003). Students who have difficulty with multiple-choice or timed test taking are failing because of the nature of the exams. The discriminatory nature of these exams also fails to test students who have strengths in subject areas other than linguistic or mathematical-spatial. For example, students who show strengths in art or music are not “counted” in the current climate of academia.

Secondly, highly scrutinized school accountability can pressure teachers to only teach facts and test-taking strategies, rather than promote thinking, meaningful understanding, and autonomous learning in their classrooms (Bracey, 2003; Midgley, Kaplan & Middleton, 2001). A consequence of standardization is more focus on scores and less focus on mastering skills and in-depth understanding (Ames, 1992). Bracey (2003) states, “These tests totally prevent curiosity or creativity or thoughtfulness. If you think while
taking a test, you’re in trouble. Thinking slows you down and you won’t get to all of the questions” (p.15).

Performance-based structures are also susceptible to competitive evaluation with accomplishment being derived from doing better than others – failure being a sign of inability or low ability (Midgely, et al., 2001). Ames (1992) writes that a student who believes that she/he lacks ability, will also believe that he/she lacks self-worth. Standardized testing and high stakes exams may also be taking time away from building relationships and providing a climate that perpetuates the safety to make a mistake. States Noddings (1992), “The emphasis on revision of the standard curriculum, far from contributing to school reform, may actually have induced greater alienation and unhappiness in students” (p.3).

Smith (2003) believes that high stakes exit exams may force the GED to function as a “safety valve” against student failure. He points to Texas where the introduction of the high school exit exam increased the number of students taking the GED. Smith writes, “As high stakes testing gains popularity in many states, schools and districts should closely monitor, and be held accountable by states for the number of students pushed into GED programs” (p.406). USA Today (2003) also reports that states that use exit exams may push more students to seek GEDs. The article cites recent research that shows an average 8% drop in graduation rates from 1987 to 1999 in six large states that have implemented high-stakes exit exams.⁸

---

⁸ Since no data or the methodology for this research were made available, I could not comment on the reliability or the validity of this statement. It is included only to show that public debate has begun on high-stakes testing and the future of marginal students who are on the brink of making a decision to stay or leave their high schools.
Many believe that it is the marginal students who falter in a standardized system. Twenty years ago, McDill, Natriello and Pallas predicted negative outcomes for students who struggle when schools move toward a uniform set of core courses. They asserted that standards that required higher levels of achievement would “lead to more student failure without apparent remedies” (1986, p. 118). Gallagher (2002) reiterates that students, who do not find real-life connections between mandatory coursework and eventual career paths, may withdraw from school (p.52).

Dr. Alba Ortiz, Professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Arizona (Chamberlain, 2004), expressed concern that students with learning disabilities who are not mastering the curricula at the approved levels will have a more difficult time staying in school. She states, “You increase the likelihood that students are going to drop out of school unless you have a well-developed system of accommodations and modifications...it’s going to be clear to them that they’re not going to be able to meet requirements to graduate from high school (p.101).

**What is Currently Known about GED Recipients**

In 2004, approximately 48 percent (47.8%) of all American GED recipients were 16 to 19 years of age; 44% of these were only one or two years out of high school (ACE, 2006). In Maine, over half (52%) of all GED recipients were school-age youth (ACE, 2006). Clearly, high school students are opting for this route, yet literature that addresses environmental conditions and social characteristics of school-age GED recipients is scarce. Even though the GED is a primary source for providing dropouts increased educational opportunities, the process of and reasons for obtaining a GED are largely unknown.
(Golden, Kist, Trehan & Padak, 2005). Barton (2005) agrees: the reasons for the shifts in GED certificates to school-age youth have not yet “been pinned down” (p.33).

**Selected Demographics**

The ACE surveys candidates prior to taking their exam. This survey offers some data on recipient characteristics such as age, gender, race and ethnicity, and grade completed in a public high school. Table 3.1 below, represents selected data on Maine’s GED candidates from this survey. As not all candidates choose to answer the questionnaire, the numbers of respondents (shown in italics) varies.

**Table 3.1. Selected Demographic Data on Maine GED Candidates: 2005**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Average Age</th>
<th>% Known Gender</th>
<th>Highest % race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Known Grade Completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(n=3934)</td>
<td>(n=2222)</td>
<td>(n=3768)</td>
<td>(n=3639)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Mean Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11th</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 3.1 shows that the average age of all GED candidates in Maine is 22 years of age, approximately sixty percent (58.8%) who reported are male, and less than half are (42%) female. Ninety percent (90%) of recipients in Maine are white. The known mean grade completed in Maine according to these data is the sophomore year in high school.

The ACE survey also provides variables from which examinees can indicate their reasons for taking the exam. Not shown on this table, the largest percentage of Maine test takers (58.9%) took the exam to pursue further education. The second most popular reason (55.6%) was for “personal satisfaction” while approximately 42 percent (41.7%) stated they were taking the exam to find “a better job.”

---

9 Numbers from 2005 GED Statistical Report is not disaggregated by age.
10 Respondents may list multiple reasons for taking the GED. Findings are not disaggregated by age.
GED Recipients as “Temporary Dropouts”

Entwisle, Alexander and Olson (2004) distinguish GED recipients as “temporary” dropouts – those who pass an adult education program or a GED exam by 22 years old. Their research describes characteristics of temporary dropouts as having greater academic motivation, a higher family SES, a more positive future outlook, and more years of school prior to dropping out. Seventy percent of the temporary dropouts they studied had expectations at age 14 they would at least complete a high school education.

Golden, et al., (2005) find that GED recipients who go on to college believe they will be more successful there than they were in high school. Many of the students in their study reported little to no supports in high school, feeling “ignored” with a “sense of being passed along through the system” (Golden, et al., 2005, p. 313). Others had stories about negative experiences with teachers and guidance counselors, and systemic barriers and instructional practice that led to their decisions to complete with a GED.

Difficulties in Pinpointing Characteristics of GED Recipients

While research on the dropout phenomena is abundant, the lack of accurate counts of students who leave school also makes it difficult to pinpoint characteristics and situations that might be “typical” of the school-aged GED candidate. Indeed, the current ACE statistical report declares that GED recipients represent a “[m]osaic of America” (ACE, 2006, p.3) and that no single characteristic is typical.

The inclusion of General Educational Development (GED) recipients as high school completers in state, federal and U.S. Census 2000 data (from Barton, 2005; Smith, 2003) also conceal critical statistics. This inclusion masks the increase in the number of GED certificates awarded, as well as the decline in diplomas awarded for completing four
years of high school (Barton, 2005, p.7). According to Smith (2003), in 2001, 19% of all high school credentials awarded nationally were GED certificates. Tyler (2003) states that one out of seven diplomas is actually a GED credential, while the American Council on Education (ACE) reports that younger GED test takers comprised almost half (47%) of all GED recipients in 2004 (ACE, 2006).

Benefits of Acquiring a GED Certificate

Economists Agodini and Dynarski, (2000) and educational professionals (Barton, 2005; Murnane & Tyler, 2000; Tyler, 2003; Viadero, 2001) believe that acquiring a GED offers more advantages to youth than to remain uncredentialed. Their evidence shows that students who leave school early will benefit from acquiring their GED. However, these same sources determined that students who have higher cognitive skills (as evidenced by academic achievement scores) and have been in a high school program for a longer amount of time are showing no more economic benefits, relatively, from obtaining a GED than high school completers. As a matter of fact, Carniero and Heckman (2003) believe GED recipients show less financial gain because they exhibit higher cognitive skills, yet, typically they do not acquire the capital nor exhibit the social mobility of their diploma-ed counterparts. They write, “Inadvertently, the GED has become a test that separates bright but nonpersistent and undisciplined dropouts from other dropouts” (p.141). Many economists point out that longitudinal findings on separate student populations also show that obtaining a GED is not the labor-market equivalent of a regular high school graduate because, they claim, a student with a high school diploma is more apt to attend a 4-year college or university (Murnane & Tyler, 2000).
The difference between the subgroups of students and their impact on the labor market was also the subject of a longitudinal study by researchers Entwisle, et al., (2004). These teams of researchers cite several other studies in which the GED recipient was more likely to have had more years of high school, to have had past expectations of completing high school, to have higher cognitive skills, and to come from a higher socioeconomic status (SES) than high school dropouts who never complete (p. 1184). Barton (2005) cites the U.S. Department of Education study, *Educational and Labor Market Performance of GED Recipients*, which characterized GED recipients in general:

In some respects, GED recipients resemble high school graduates; in others, they resemble dropouts; in still some other ways, they fall between the two. Given these mixed findings, the common practice of counting GED recipients as high school graduates should be reconsidered (Barton, 2005 from Boesel, 1998, p.31).

Advocates of the GED say this “second chance” option for students is a good one, while critics say that the GED option is *too* attractive to students, and is, by its nature, pulling teens out of public schools (Barton, 2005; Tyler, 2003). Entwisle, et al., (2004) declare that the students should not be solely accountable for becoming disenfranchised with high school. They assert, “The growing popularity of the GED is a symptom [not a consequence] of the traditional high school’s failure to meet the needs of students who find high school alienating or incompatible...or irrelevant to their futures” (p. 1197).

**Gaps in the GED Literature**

Literature on high school dropouts, their decision-making process, and some of the reasons they choose to leave school is widely available and has been for the last 25
years. There is some research emerging on whether standardized testing is pushing students to seek a GED. The American Council on Education publishes an annual statistical report from survey results of GED candidates. However, all candidates do not complete this voluntary survey and the quantitative nature of the GEDTS survey does not capture the social, emotional, or perceptual understanding of their school experience that youth can offer as part of the understanding of this educational phenomenon. Little literature exists that describes the characteristics of teen GED recipients and the emerging trend in choosing the GED over a high school diploma among school-age recipients. Of this gap, Barton (2005) states:

There are very substantial shifts in the award of GED certificates to high school-age youth. … There may be multiple reasons for this increase in high school age youth going into GED programs. It would be desirable to get a clear understanding of what is happening” (Educational Testing Service, 2005, p.33).

This study adds to the existing literature on the characteristics of teen GED recipients, and hopefully, through their stories, help examiners, counselors, teachers and school personnel understand the social, emotional variables and conditions under which high school students in Maine make their decisions to complete with a GED certificate.

Summary

Students drop out of high school for a variety of reasons; indeed, any student could be at-risk at any time in their school career. However, research categorizes, typically, three sub-groups of students at risk: 1) Those students who are targeted for dropout risk (some at an early age) because of family conditions, socio-economic status (SES), or a history of academic failure. For these students, dropping out of high school is a culmi-
nation of their overall school experience; 2) Those students who experience a distressing event in their homes or schools, possibly one that can be remedied with short-term intervention; and/or 3) Those students who find school alienating – they may be underserved, bullied, harassed by peers or sometimes teachers, they may unchallenged, or are intellectually gifted or talented, and find that school is not serving their interests or abilities.

Other systemic and perceptual barriers arise that also can contribute to the level of risk a student may encounter, such as performance-based curricula and high stakes testing. How students perceive school or schooling and how teachers perceive at-risk youth can sometimes be a determining factor in a youth’s decision to leave school. Obason and Kottering (1999) found significant discrepancies in perceptions of school and schooling in their teacher-student survey.

Social and personal characteristics of teen GED recipients are still unclear. However, through the GEDTS survey, some demographic information can be determined. In the latest released survey (2006) 60% of Maine teen recipients are male, 90% are white, and the average recipient grade level completed is the sophomore year in high school. Sixty percent (60%) of Maine recipients took the exam to pursue further education; over half (56%) of the recipients report "personal satisfaction" as a reason to complete their exam.

Most agree that eliminating the GED as an option for dropouts to continue their education or increase their potential earnings, would generally cause more harm than good. Those who would make the decision to leave school anyway would suffer more economic and social hardship than if they didn’t have access to another form of completion (Barton, 2005; Tyler, 2003).
Characteristics determined by economists and labor market analysts focus on how the GED recipient will fare in the workforce and not on cultural, social, emotional or background characteristics of the teen recipient. Paul Barton, of the Educational Testing Service (2005), calls for research that addresses the “shift” to GED certificates. Through first person narratives and adult perspectives, this study adds to existing literature on what we currently know about teens who complete with a GED, trends, school, and social impacts on decision-making for Maine school-age candidates.
Chapter 4

METHODOLOGY

“For too long we have allowed psychometrics to rule our research and thus to de-contextualize individuals. In depersonalizing the most personal of social events, education, we have lost our way. Now it is time to return to a discourse on the personal, on what it means to be alive.”

~Janesick, from Handbook of Qualitative Research, 2004

My methods of data collection are also interconnected to my analysis and my interpretation of the results. I will detail my methodology in a “linear” format, primarily because it would be difficult at best to describe each decision as it affects and is affected by the decisions preceding or sometimes following those listed below. But I would advise the reader that each of components is part of an “intermingled” process (Cresswell, 1998, p.20) and does not necessarily stand alone.

I chose a primarily qualitative, multi-stage design to answer my three core research questions:

1) How do Maine students who voluntarily choose to complete high school with a GED describe their family and peer relationships, and academic experiences from kindergarten to the point of dropping out?

2) What factors or conditions motivated these students to: a) decide to drop out, and b) decide to pursue a GED? And,

3) What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED candidates share?
My multi-stage design consisted of, first, a 10-item, statewide survey. The purpose of the survey was twofold. It provided information that helped shape the answer to my third research question, and secondly, it provided access to my sample population. Using a semi-structured protocol, I conducted one-on-one interviews with ten volunteer GED candidates. The final stage of this design consisted of 20-minute telephone interviews with nine selected GED testing site examiners from the five broadly labeled geographic regions of Maine. (I will discuss these steps at length in the following Data Collection section.)

Research Rationale

Qualitative Methodology

I believe that qualitative research offers a deeper understanding and a more holistic look at human and social phenomena. States Margaret Wheatley, "When we study the individual parts or try to understand the system through its quantities, we get lost in a work we can never fully measure nor appreciate" (p.129). I decided to use a narrative approach because in attempting to understand the factors and conditions that affect a sub-population of Maine high school students, it is necessary to be able to follow the complexities of the lived experience down the paths that the participants took – as individuals, as public school students, and as adolescents in a contemporary world. I believe this approach was also dynamic; it allowed me to change, adapt, ask questions, and seek answers to questions that cannot be measured quantitatively.

A narrative approach engages voice in educational phenomena provides an in-depth and broader understanding of cultural, social, and school experiences. I wanted to understand this educational event by listening to those immersed in the event, to hear
their voices, and to portray these experiences as closely as possible to the participant’s understanding of these experiences (Cresswell, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Seidman, 1998).

This study focuses on GED candidates recalling their school and home life and triangulates this retrospection with perspectives of selected adults who work with these youth and who have witnessed trends and changes in not only their teen population, but also in their communities. Through narration, this study captures what students remember most about their past experiences and the details that served to create their perception of the reasons they chose to leave public schooling. This “reality” is considered by qualitative researchers to be a legitimate vehicle for understanding phenomena in educational settings (Janesick, 1994; Maxwell, 2005, Merriam, 2002).

My decision to conduct a primarily qualitative dissertation is also due to my own ontological and philosophical position of reality being largely subjective. I believe the “voices” in this study, both collective and individual, will help stake-holders in education understand why school-age adolescents make decisions to drop out of high school yet still complete high school through the GED. Michelle Fine (2003) writes that hearing the voices of students who are “institutionally marginal” is a “special source of knowledge” about schooling and conditions and situations that affect schooling.

Qualitative Models

Two qualitative dissertations that use a narrative approach serve as literary models for my study: Niobe Way's (1998), *Everyday Courage: The Lives and Stories of Urban Teenagers* and Rosa Kennedy's, *A study of four student pushouts from the perspec-

---

tive of four sociological theories (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1993). Way, a developmental psychologist, interviewed urban high school students over a period of three years in an effort to understand "how they perceive themselves, their relationships with parents and peers, their futures, their school, and the larger society, and how these perceptions change or stay the same as they go through adolescence" (1998, p. 3). Way stresses that her study was to learn about the lives of teens from working class poor families by listening to their descriptions of their experiences and the meaning they make from those experiences. I was also intent on collecting descriptions of the environmental context in which these youth experienced this educational event.

Kennedy (1999) studied four student dropouts while she was employed at the Center for Alternative Learning (CAL) in Tennessee. Her interviews asked students to reconstruct their educational life history in order to understand students' choices concerning in-school behavior. From a sociological perspective, Kennedy finds that "students bring their meaning perspective as developed by their family experiences and the wider social context as well" (Kennedy, 1998, p. 60).

While these qualitative studies employed different methods (they were more ethnographical in construct), these two studies confirmed my narrative approach. Both researchers used an interview approach to capture youths' experiences, social-emotional relationships, and their school and family situations. The stories they collected contributed to the understanding of the realities of these students. It was also my intention to also capture the voice and "stories" of youth at risk. By using their stories and doing mul-

---

12 Rosa L. Kennedy is co-author of the book entitled *A school for healing: Alternative strategies for teaching at-risk kids* (1999) and is the source of reference. This publication arose from her dissertation, the study itself, was not available to me.

13 The source does not give the specific time spent with students - it merely states "years."
tiple readings to look for information that addressed my research questions, my qualita-
tive rationale was to obtain a more in-depth perception of these adolescents' lives, rela-
tionships, and the social context in which they participated as school-age GED candi-
dates.

Data Collection Methods

The Survey

Questionnaires. The questionnaire instrument was purposefully designed to be
quick and simple (see Appendix C) for user friendliness. Short fill in the blank, or multi-
ple choice responses were formulated that would indirectly address selected social factors
and conditions. Using my conceptual framework, questions were framed around envi-
rional context as they applied to Bronfenbrenner’s and Erikson’s theories of social
context and individual development. The survey asked one or two questions that might
reflect on socioeconomic status, school factors and conditions, and family and peer sup-
port. Other questions addressed the demographics of this sample population. The survey
began to answer my third research question, “What factors and conditions do GED can-
didates share?”

The questionnaires were distributed by contacting Adult Education and Learning
Centers around Maine. I selected five or six different testing sites in five specific regions
in Maine (defined broadly as northern, southern, central, coastal and western) that served
numerous towns and townships. I then contacted each site examiner, both through tele-
phone calls and email to discuss the study and ask if they were comfortable participating
in and administering the questionnaire.
Each site that agreed to participate was mailed a packet of questionnaires, blank white envelopes, survey consent letters, and a self-addressed, manila envelope with return postage and instructions for administering the survey. The site examiner determined how many questionnaires they might need depending on their estimation of their population of teenagers at their sites. These packets, along with a letter to the site examiners, were mailed to 32 testing sites located within the selected geographic regions. The students were asked to place their completed questionnaire in an envelope, seal it, and return the envelope to the site examiner. Each site examiner kept the survey for 4-5 weeks before mailing them back. The site examiner placed the sealed white envelopes in a larger, self-addressed and stamped manila envelope, which was then mailed back to me. This stage was conducted in the months of March, April and May, 2007. In an effort to generate more data, packets were also mailed again in September to previously participating sites and to some sites that had not participated previously. Sixty-six (66) useable questionnaires were returned (see Limitations for further discussion.)

**Contact sheet.** Attached to each questionnaire was a contact sheet which invited survey respondents to participate in a follow-up, compensated interview. GED candidates chose to either complete or not complete the contact sheet depending on their interest in being interviewed. The questionnaires were coded by region so that I could match testing site and region to each respondent.

**Interviews with GED Candidates**

**Recruitment.** The ten survey participants were selected to interview by using the contact information sheets attached to the questionnaire. Initially, interviewees were selected by the following criteria: 1) 17-19 years old (parental consent was also required for
17-year-olds); 2) an indication from the questionnaire that he/she voluntarily dropped out of high school; 3) a selection of individuals from each of the five geographic locations; and 4) a balanced representation of gender. However, as the study progressed, interviewees, and especially males, proved to be "elusive." Two volunteers did not show up for their scheduled interview, several did not return phone calls or emails, and many of those who volunteered had changed their addresses or phone numbers before they could be contacted. Because of this, one criterion, "a balanced representation of gender" was not achieved. The narratives in this study are from seven female participants and three male participants.

**Building rapport.** The first contact with the interviewees was by telephone. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the interview and my intent to uphold confidentiality. I asked each interviewee to also provide a time and a location in which they felt comfortable talking to me. (Note: Two interviewees could not meet for a one-on-one interview. One was in college in New Hampshire, and the other was eight months pregnant with no transportation. In these instances, my methods changed to include audio-taped, telephone interviews.)

Good qualitative research demands that interviewees are comfortable with the researcher and the setting and that they are shown consideration for their schedules and comfort level (Glesne, 1999). Therefore, the research methodology included meeting each interview participant at the place and during the time he/she indicated was best for him or her. This first step in establishing a personal connection established rapport and trust with the interviewees was important in collecting authentic data (Seidman, 1998) that gave further credibility to the trustworthiness of this study. Also, I believe that study
participants who were helping me to complete my doctoral degree, and who took time from their lives to interview (all interviewees were compensated $20), was an act of goodwill on their part. My part was to be accommodating and meet them at their comfort level.

**Semi-structured protocols.** Semi-structured protocols were designed (see Appendix D) to collect data that was primarily to answer my first research question: How do Maine students who voluntarily choose to complete high school with a GED describe their family and peer relationships, and academic experiences from kindergarten to the point of dropping out? The protocols were constructed to collect data that focused on interactions between social and environmental influence over a period of time. Erikson’s theory sees development as a set of stages through the life span, while Bronfenbrenner theorized that overlapping systems (such as those of family, school, and community) affect individual development (Kaplan, 2000.) Questions from the interviews helped determine how much or how little each framework applied to this research.

This instrument provided an arena for each perspective (Cresswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005) and allowed candidates to tell their individual stories. Maxwell states, “Unstructured approaches...allow you to focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ from others, and are particularly useful in revealing the processes that led to specific outcomes” (2005, p.80). I could listen to each participant and respond with follow-up probes should the response indicate a causal event or a trigger related to dropping out and completing with a GED. Other responses that prompted further investigation were sometimes indicated by verbal or non-verbal cues, such as descriptions of negative or distressing situations like abuse, poverty, divorce, or relocation. Persistent negative
conditions in school, such as alienation, lack of teacher-student relationships or adult intervention when necessary, were also cues to revisit the event with the candidate. Cues for me to follow a storyline in each interviewee response were also triggered by having an in-depth knowledge of factors and conditions found in dropout literature, experience as a public school teacher, or by reading facial or non-verbal gestures signaling a distressing emotional event – such as looking at the ground, a sigh, or hesitating through a particular experience.

A semi-structured approach allowed me the flexibility to engage participants in individual discussions of their perceived environmental influences (community, school, and family) and emotional motivations and identity (self-competence in school, self-esteem, and personal resources) that impacted their perception of this educational event and helped answer the research questions, “What factors or conditions motivated these students to: a) decide to drop out, and b) decide to pursue a GED?”

**Constructing the narrative.** I taped and transcribed all the interviews, first verbatim, and secondly “re-transcribed” (Esterberg, 2002) as a chronological narrative. The method of re-transcribing data allowed me to “fit” a piece of the story into the narrative from the transcriptions yet left the voice of the GED candidates intact. This technique was important in presenting a clearer and more logical picture of their conditions and situations. Within the chronological narratives, I, as third-person narrator, added descriptions of facial expressions or verbal cues, and further de-identified names of Maine towns, teachers, or schools that would compromise the confidentiality of the interviewee. When necessary, I interspersed the narratives with the actual interview question and response using the Kennedy (1999) model to help my readers understand the nature of the
question from which the response emerged and also to show that the interpretation of the response as first person narrative was authentic.

In transcription of the interviews, I listened to each tape again and began the process of noting conditions that emerged in the narratives, such as, bullying or ineffective parenting, and also began to develop ideas about each candidates' environmental contexts and these relationships to his or her decision to drop out of high school. The transcriptions were further "retranscribed" into a chronological "story" with a beginning, middle, and an end. This required that I condense some data without losing the data that were relevant to my study and without imposing a subjective reading on the material. I read and re-read each transcription, often referring back to the tapes, and made decisions based on my own interpretation about data that could be "culled" and data that must be included in the final resulting narrative. I culled data that I determined were redundant statements, or I that defined as extraneous or tangential. For example, while it was important to my interviewee to tell me that her sister was adopted and lived in California or that her brother-in-law had Buddha tattooed on his neck, these pieces of their stories were not crucial to their dropout experience and were therefore left out of the final narrative.

Some decisions to cull pieces of the narratives were often not as easily made. For example, Jessica, who experienced a traumatic and sudden loss of a 13-year-old boyfriend, could relate the incident with clarity and intricate detail, even though it happened for her seven years prior to the interview. These details of her experience, I felt, were important to leave in the narratives because it stressed the authenticity of what Jessica perceived as, and was later categorized as, the single event that was the trigger in her school interruption. Added to the interview transcriptions from my field notes (and if available)
were their language, colloquialisms and slang, verbal pauses, sighs, laughter, and facial expressions. These individual personality traits or non-verbal responses helped me interpret verbal meaning based on American cultural linguistic norms and gave some insight into the “unsaid” pieces of the interviews.

Prior to presenting the narrative (see Chapter 7), each interviewee is described physical characteristics and mannerisms. Cresswell (1998) calls this “verisimilitude”, a literary term for “being there.” The technique of involving the reader in the story is purposeful. A primary goal of the project is that school administrators and educators find value in the study and use youth voice to help inform programming to help at-risk youth graduate from Maine schools. In the final narrative, each interviewee was also assigned a pseudonym. All transcripts were stored in an electronic file on my laptop.

**Interviews with Testing Site Examiners**

**Recruitment.** GED Testing Site examiners were recruited in a variety of ways. Some examiners had participated in a state conference for the Maine Adult Education Association and the 2007 Summit on Dropout Prevention where preliminary data were presented and they asked to be included in the study. Some were contacted by telephone from my own database, while some had offered to participate in an interview during the first stage of the study when their sites were contacted for survey administration. The nine site examiners who volunteered to be interviewed had been in their field or at their sites for five or more years. One or two site examiners who had students participate in the first stages of the study were selected from each of the five regions.

**Structured protocols.** The protocols (see Appendix E) were developed so that each interviewee could respond consistently according to her/his perception of the culture
of their community, demographics, the school, and any changes and trends in teen attendance and attitude they have witnessed at their particular testing site. This structured approach allowed me to compare data across settings to compose a broad understanding from an adult perspective of the environmental and school culture which candidates at their sites may have experienced (Maxwell, 2005, p.80). Protocols were developed to help answer my second and third research question, “What are the factors and conditions that affect the students’ decisions to decide to pursue a GED?” And, “What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED candidates share?” This third stage of the research was also used to triangulate data for validity and authenticity. The twenty minute telephone interviews were arranged at their convenience. The interviews were not audio-taped; rather, electronic notes were taken during the phone conversations.

Researcher as Instrument

Woven into this study is my perspective. My own experience, as a person who has worked in the field and as a researcher who has collected qualitative data from teens for several years, served as an instrument. I believe this experience gives me a keen insight into teen culture in Maine. Also, a Maine native, I have experienced regional or geographic diversity within the state. It is easy for me to appreciate how the different components and challenges in the communities and families from which these GED candidates emerge combine to affect their schooling. This awareness of the Maine setting allowed me to continuously build my study using my own experience. I also relied on my experience to monitor interview questions, explore responses and relationships, make connections, and to be consciously aware of my own subjective assumptions.
I also made it a practice to consult the chair of my committee and individual committee members as data were collected or if I encountered "snags" or unanticipated data. This method of on-going peer conversations was crucial. It let me either proceed with my methodology, or advised me in which direction to follow.

**Methods of Analysis**

**Survey Analysis**

All completed questionnaires were entered into an electronic software program (SPSS) on my personal laptop. Using SPSS software was instrumental in many ways: 1) it helped with organization, 2) keeping the responses in an electronic system gave me easy access to each questionnaire, 3) I was able to check descriptive statistics or frequencies on an on-going basis, and 4) it provided ease in creating graphs, tables, and charts, and in comparing variables across data sets.

Using this computer software I checked frequency distributions of each response and obtained some basic descriptive statistics as the questionnaires were entered. The variables I entered into the database (for example, gender, age, parental educational attainment) allowed me to look at my sample population and formulate a broad "picture" of selected demographic descriptions of this population as they were entered. Data were also dissaggregated and data sets (such as, gender and age, gender and age at exam, age first thought about dropping out, and parental educational attainment, among others) were compared as part of an ongoing process. Frequency distributions were also compiled on opinion statements, such as, if given the chance, would you make the same decision again? These data either confirmed, supported, or contradicted findings from the interviews regarding school or environmental influences.
When it was determined that all questionnaires had been submitted (return mailings had stopped and the deadline for returning questionnaires had been reached), I used the software to create a visual representation in the form of graphs and charts. I then compared data to explore “internal” generalization within the sample population (Maxwell, 2005, p.115) as well as create a visual representation of the patterns and relationships and frequencies of factors related to this educational event. The findings helped to explore my third research question, “What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED recipients share?” The survey provided another avenue of investigation from which I continually questioned, explored responses and noted observations in my effort to interpret and understand this educational phenomenon. The survey data was then connected to dropout literature, the results of the interviews and built into the interpretation of data in Chapter 10.

GED Candidates' Interviews

Narrative analysis. As is expected of good qualitative research, the analysis process was on-going. This process began with listening to interviewee as they reconstructed their schooling in the context of their social environments. As each interviewee first told their story, I used a journal to note factors and conditions they described in their lives and that I recognized from the dropout literature. I noted key conditions the interviewees self-identified as a “turning point” (Kennedy, 1999) that they believed was a crucial event in their decision to drop out and complete with a GED. As I transcribed each interview, I also further noted descriptions of factors and conditions in their narrative and began to note emerging patterns and make connections between narratives as well as to the dropout literature. In transcription, and in retranscribing this event as a
chronological narrative, I also focused on findings that answered or began to answer my research questions, and further noted these as pertinent and significant to the dropout and GED event.

Each narrative was read and re-read several times. Often the taped interviews were consulted. This continuous immersion in the data formed a baseline for discussion and continuing to recognize how certain patterns were beginning to form and make connections across cases. Using each narrative, I then constructed a matrix (see Figure 3.1) to examine the dropout event (research question 2.a) by listing each interviewee name as a column heading and then listed in rows those factors or conditions that were mentioned by at least three or more interviewees. Together with my contextual framework (see Chapter 1) I further categorized similar factors and conditions under three broad headings or the context in which the similarities in the narratives were typically found: Family, School or Individual. I then took each narrative and marked an X on the matrix if this a factor or condition emerged in their story. This table was then used as a visual guide for looking at consistent patterns and connecting themes for a cross-case analysis and in further analysis in Chapters 8.

Each narrative was also read and re-read for factors and conditions that the interviewee explained was instrumental in his or her decision to complete with a GED. Often these were described as “reasons” and were also noted and explored. I noted common patterns that emerged across narratives (Chapter 9) and I further interpreted how these patterns indicated a broader theme that also crossed cases and was interconnected with environmental context.
Cross-case analysis. Using the matrix, I then compared common factors and conditions and began to analyze for similar patterns across cases. I focused on my research questions, "What factors or conditions motivated these students to decide to drop out?" And, "What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED candidates share?" Using the matrix, I noted "turning points" in each narrative (Kennedy, 1999) that might indicate how these decisions were made or under what conditions decisions to drop out were made. In all cases, candidates' narratives provided data that could be corroborated with factors and conditions from the dropout literature. I then categorized interviewees as falling into one or three dropout categories based on their experiences (see Chapter 8.) In three cases the dropout event was a culmination of longitudinal conditions. In other cases, I teased out an explicit or an insightful verbal cue from participants — a direct admission of their perception of situational or temporary trigger that caused them to drop out of school. For example, Jessica, Hannah, and Beth have very different stories, yet state in their narratives, "If [event] hadn't happened — I would have graduated." Emerging from the narratives I then noted and further investigated broader themes of disenfranchisement that emerged and began to build an overarching theme from patterns that wove through the narratives: abandonment, alienation, lack of school and administrative interventions, among others.

GED Examiner Interviews

Using the pre-written questions as a field note instrument, I took electronic and hand-written notes as I interviewed the GED examiners. The structured interviews were primarily descriptive. I compared community factors and conditions and used to the interviewee responses to describe each region that participated in the survey (see Chapter
7). I used the GED examiners' perspective to create a more holistic understanding of the experience of Maine youth who access their sites to graduate with a GED and noted conditions that would answer my third research question, "What factors and conditions do GED candidates share?" I compared these descriptions of environment and trends in youth clientele to descriptions in the narratives and to the survey data.

I also compared these short descriptions to other data on Maine community attributes, such as, parental educational attainment and/or SES and noted connections throughout the data sets. As poverty emerged as social condition in GED candidates' environmental descriptions and also in the GED examiners' descriptions, I reviewed literature on poverty and developed links to conditions or factors that also contributed to the educational event of dropping out and completing with a GED.

Interpretation

Wolcott (1994) defines interpretation as a way to decide "what he or she makes of it all" (p. 38). Finally, I reexamined survey data and GED examiner interview data and looked for connections and corroboration to draw an overarching theme of "disconnect" as part of the final study interpretation in Chapter 10. In the final interpretation, I compared story lines that shaped this experience (Clandinnin & Connelly, 2000), incorporated my survey data, interview data from site examiners, relevant literature, and personal experience. This notion that "decisions" were not necessarily "made" but were based on the human need to connect with other humans was also touched upon for further research and I explored a more feminist concept of Relational-Cultural theory as another lens from which further studies might be conceptualized.
Methods to Determine Trustworthiness

I shy away from the terms validity and reliability in qualitative research, as do many; however, I am amenable to the term “trustworthy.” The integrity of my research depends on how I represent myself as a researcher and further how I present my findings. Winter (2000) writes that some questions of validity lie within the “purposes and appropriateness of the process involved” (p.7). He cites others who claim that validity is a matter of “how representative the description is and how justifiable are the findings” (p.8).

As I presented data, or re-transcribed my participant’s stories, I continually asked myself, does this design capture the core of my research questions? Can I, or my readers, “believe” that the presented here are “true”? Have I been aware of my own biases and was I careful to present data in an objective manner? Does what the GED candidates say have some connections to not only each other’s stories, but also to known literature? Do the findings capture the social context from which the GED candidates develop?

Reliability, Merriam (2002) explains, asks the researcher to determine if the study is dependable (p. 27) and also, do the results make sense? In quantitative studies, reliability means that the study can be transported to other samples with almost or near the same results. I believe that the methods employed in this study can be replicated in other settings, but the findings will necessarily vary with other populations.

Knowing the pitfalls of conducting a study that is not “believable,” I took several measures to ensure that my study is trustworthy (Merriam, 2002). Among those were purposeful sampling, piloting questions, personal and professional experience, peer re-view (explained previously), bracketing my own biases (see Subjectivity below), keeping
an “audit trail,” triangulation, and including descriptive data from which “readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situation matches the research context” (Merriam, 2002, p.31).

**Purposeful Sampling**

Since my research objectives are to explore the experiences of 17 to 19-year-old Maine GED candidates, the bulk of my data are the student narratives. The first decision I made to assure these data were legitimate was to purposely access a representation of the population studied. The GED testing centers provided a feasible environment to survey students, as well as a point of access to the sample population I wished to study. By purposefully choosing my sample, I met the specific criteria relevant to my research questions. This ensured that the narratives reflected the experience and the population I wished to describe.

**Pilot Study**

As part of my doctoral coursework, I had the opportunity to pilot the survey questionnaire and the candidate interview protocols. Five participants participated in the pilot study. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22, who had voluntarily dropped out of high school, and who had already completed and passed their GED exams. The objective of the pilot study was to clarify survey and interview questions, note difficulties in reconstructing past experiences, time the length of the interviews and the questionnaire, and revise the instruments as necessary.

For the most part, the pilot participants found the questionnaire to be self-explanatory. However, one question required respondents to indicate “parental educational attainment.” From their responses, I quickly realized that this is educational jargon
and that none of the five participants knew what this meant. The question was then revised to: What is the highest level of school your parent(s) or guardian finished? The questionnaire took less than a minute for each participant to complete.

When I interviewed these GED recipients, I discovered that the participants in this pilot did not always recall experiences at specific grade levels or ages, but rather grouped their experiences by significant events that had occurred. For instance, their recollections might be grouped as “kindergarten through 3rd grade,” or “middle school.” As they described their experiences, they recalled either a change in their family (such as a divorce or a move), or a change in school methodology (such as multiple teachers), or that teachers (in general) became “meaner” at a certain point in their education.

Pertinent to my pilot study was the quality of response from the participants if I probed further. Using an unstructured approach, I was able to get the participants to reveal specifics of a meaningful event, even if they had grouped it into a single episode in their lives. My semi-structured protocols allowed me to ask for more detail – which these participants were able to provide.

At the end of the interview I asked the participants in my pilot study to envision and describe for me a school system that may have “worked” for them. Interestingly, none could imagine an educational system other than the one they had experienced. Revising my question, I finally asked them, “If you had a child who was going into the school system, what would you do the same and what would you do differently?” With these probes, I was able to get an “Ah ha!” response, and each could provide recommendations they thought would have supported them in school. The pilot interviews took between 45 minutes to one hour to complete.
Personal Experience

My research experience and work with teens also helped to ensure interviewee responses were valid. My background as a high school teacher, a mentor, and a mother of teens, as well as a graduate research assistant allowed me many opportunities to interview teens both informally and formally. I was confident I could write protocols that were geared to my sample population and that I could talk to teens comfortably.

My experience in working with at-risk adolescents from being a volunteer at a homeless shelter, a “mentor” and surrogate mom for Good Samaritan, a teacher, a researcher and a parent has also given me a unique insight into teen culture. I understand and respect that teen culture has its own language, appearance and behavior. This helped in building rapport with many of the interviewees. Seidman (1998) defines rapport as “getting along with each other, a harmony with, conformity to, [and] an affinity for one another” (p. 80). I know that when teen interviewees feel comfortable, trust and confidence in me, as researcher, will minimize risks that I will collect data that are “untrue” (Glesne, 1999). Also, having had over 15 years of experience working and living with teens, I am sensitive to such things as how I dress and how I portray myself to them. Because I am an adult (and an adult pursuing an advanced degree), the power differential in a one-on-one interview is acute. For instance, I don’t interview teens in a business suit; I wear jeans and a t-shirt. Whenever possible, I asked them to help me set up my taping equipment (looking for an outlet, positioning the recorder, making a test recording), deliberately not being ready when they arrived. While we’re working together to get ready for the interview, I talk to them informally. I might say something like, How was your day? Or, I’ve never been here before, do you like living here? This insight into how teens
perceive adults thus avoided situations in which students answered what they thought I wanted to hear or tried to portray themselves and their situations in a socially acceptable way that may be different from their actual reality (Gallagher, 2002; Kortering, et al., 1999).

**Subjectivity**

As a high school teacher, a mentor, and a mother, I’ve been on the inside and in the periphery of the educational system. My daughters’ decisions to not complete a traditional diploma program were mostly influenced by a school climate that they perceived as punitive, a meaningless curricula, and irrelevant-to-their-lives requirements to graduate. Subjectively, I have taken a position that schools are responsible for the high incidence of dropping out and completing with a GED certificate. I am aware that the personal investment I made in supporting my children in their decision can misconstrue or bias my findings if I do not consciously suppose that I lean toward this “reason” for students to drop out and complete with a GED. This awareness of my bias helped me “check and balance” my research as I worked through the many stages of this study. For example, as an interviewer, I tried not to “lead” students to an answer that confirmed my assumptions, and as an interpreter of data, in my findings I tried to reflect an objective analysis. My personal ideology is to present all truths, including my own, and let the reader decide.

**Study Limitations**

**Self-Reporting**

The survey method has “built-in” limitations in that it relies on self-reporting to answer questions or respond to statements. While this method is widely used to collect
statistics on targeted populations, because it relies on “truth” as the respondents know it, there is some degree of error. For teen populations, I believe this is especially true. While most questions on my questionnaire asked them to respond to information about themselves, as participants in this educational event, one question applied to their parental educational attainment. Since many were not in contact with their fathers, and many did not know their mother’s level of education, I allowed them to respond as such. However, one interviewee who reported that his father was in the military, also responded on the questionnaire that his father had received a graduate level degree. These kinds of discrepancies are difficult to adjust for. I believe some of this “uncertainty” on this part of the questionnaire can be compensated for by comparing their responses to those on the Maine census data. Compared to the Maine 2000 census data, these data show similar findings. This will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Retrospective Interview Method

Using a retrospective method to reconstruct social, familial and school experiences presents a limitation in that adolescents may not be able to fully recall their experience or the critical events in their lives that precipitated their decision to drop out of high school. However, I would argue that “perfect” recall is not necessarily the goal of my research. Students who have been through the educational system will recall those events that have meaning for them. Kennedy (1999) identifies this recall as their “meaning perspective.” This meaning perspective is the “truth” on which they have shaped their decision to drop out of school and complete with a GED. Using a semi-structured approach helped minimize this limitation in that I helped them recall events in detail if they indicated that these events were a significant part of their lives while in school.
Sample Size

Using the GED testing sites to access this population helped to recruit youth who were participants in this educational event. However, the relatively small survey sample size (n=66) and interviews (n=10) limits my findings from which to draw substantive conclusions. While measures were taken to ensure a larger return, such as separate mailings, conference presentations, phone calls and emails, many of the GED candidates were not willing to fill out the short questionnaire and there were no benefits to these participants other than to help with the study.

Another limitation at this stage was the administration of the survey. Several different individuals misunderstood directions, or assigned the administration of the questionnaire to other staff at the site who I hadn’t spoken to. As a result, some sites returned questionnaires that had been completed by older candidates and not teens. Many had home-schooled youth fill out the questionnaire. These questionnaires I couldn’t use were stored, but not entered into the database, and were disposed of upon completion of data input.

A smaller sample of male interviewees presented a limitation in gender representation in the GED candidates’ interviews (7 females, 3 males). However, males returned questionnaires and contact information equal to that of female returns. I purposely tried to access more males for a balanced representation, yet males either did not return phone calls or emails, had left their place of contact or had had cell phones disconnected. While this was also true of some females, more females proved to be amenable to interviewing. I might speculate that this finding reflects gender orientation: young males may not be willing to disclose personal feelings but do not feel threatened answering an anonymous
questionnaire, while young females felt that an interview about their personal lives and feelings would not make them uncomfortable. I was hoping that a monetary incentive might override this limitation, but this was not the case.

**Geographic Limitations**

Preferring to focus on Maine GED candidates, this study, while replicable, cannot make broad generalizations about all teen GED candidates. It explored only Maine teenagers understanding of this nationwide phenomenon; therefore, these findings do not claim to be valid for more urban GED candidates or for GED candidates whose geographic, educational, social, or familial context is significantly more diverse than those youth who volunteered to be participants in the survey or the interviews.

**Summary**

I believe the design I created is most appropriate for my study. Increasingly, qualitative research (see Gallagher, 2002; Golden, Kist, Trehan & Padak, 2005; Kortering & Braziel, 1999) helps educational professionals understand educational events and phenomena. Therefore, utilizing the perspective of students who have experienced completing school with a GED certificate will be a contribution to the field. This study used a narrative approach to highlight youth voice. Empowering these teen candidates' to express their feelings and perceptions of their process toward a GED will help educational professionals better understand the challenges teens face as active participants in their educational process. Qualitative data can help inform policy and affect change in organizations and administrations that are open to listen to the voices of the population they serve; narratives provide data that explores, illustrates, and informs us of experiences to which we must be sensitive.
Ontologically, my position is that reality is subjective – we perceive our experiences through the lens of our backgrounds, histories, and self-identity. I hold that to fully understand an event, participants’ social, emotional, and relational experience should be directly involved in that research. The phenomenon of dropping out of high school and pursuing a GED certificate is unique to a subset of our educational population and only through their “eyes” can we better understand the context, the feelings, and what it means to experience this event.

Research methods included: 1) a survey, 2) GED candidate interviews, and 3) GED examiner interviews. This multi-stage design included instruments that would help answer the research questions and provide “rich” data. Using a questionnaire, semi-structured protocols, and a structured protocol instruments allowed perspectives to emerge that shed light on factors and conditions connected to social context – family, community, and schools. Methods of data collection provided multiple and “intermingled” techniques from which to draw conclusions, make connections and relationships, and compare across data sets.

Analysis was as a single narrative with the creation of a matrix, and moved to cross-case analysis to look for the prevalence of factors and conditions in the dropout and the GED event across narratives. This method aided in organizing the data findings around themes for each research question.

Measures were taken to ensure that the study was trustworthy: reviewing and including research-based methodology, triangulation, conducting a pilot study to make revisions to instruments, understanding and disclosing to the reader the researcher's subjective position, peer consultation and review, and building into the study design opportuni-
ties to apply intuition and experience, a vital part of the qualitative process. While this study will not be quantifiably “reliable” in that replicability will not produce the same results, the methodology can be easily replicated with other populations.

There are some limitations in conducting a study that uses a retrospective interview method, foremost being that recall is not the most accurate gauge of experience. Also, this study is restricted to only one geographic location, namely, Maine. Even though efforts were made to access a larger sample population from diverse geographic locations within Maine, these findings cannot (nor do I claim them to) be generalized to pertain to all school-age youth who voluntarily choose to drop out of high school and complete with a GED. However, this design is most appropriate to discover answers to my research questions. This qualitative research does not purport to label, to validate theory or to “measure” experience, but rather to empower and bring forth the voices of youth – as individuals, as public school students, and as adolescents who share a lived experience.
Chapter 5

RESULTS FROM SITE EXAMINERS’ INTERVIEWS

“The people that live here think that the mills are going to come back. Over 55% of elementary school students are on the free and reduced lunch program. The community struggles between the haves and have-nots.”

~Southern Maine testing site examiner

Nine GED testing site examiners whose students participated in the survey or both the survey and a one-on-one interview, were interviewed. Testing site examiners were selected by two criteria: (1) number of years of experience and (2) geographical region, previously defined as northern, southern, western, coastal, and central Maine, in the study setting. Each participant had over five years of experience in his/her community (some over ten years) and as much experience working with teens who take their GED directly upon exiting high school.

Purpose

The purpose of interviewing examiners was to provide an adult perspective on the phenomenon of teens completing with a GED. The examiners were familiar with the expectations of the local high schools as well as the social, cultural, and academic context in which most of their clientele grew up. They could speak to issues of employment, recreation, attitudes, and trends of youth as GED test-takers, as well as to changes in their communities, families, and parenting practices. Their experience adds to the larger contextual picture from which to understand the candidates’ experiences. This information helped to support survey data and narratives from candidates’ interviews and provided a means to ensure that the study was trustworthy.
Using a primarily structured telephone interview protocol, the testing site examiners were asked to: 1) Describe their communities, i.e., demographics, schools, job opportunities, etc. 2) Explain any trends or changes in their teen populations since the time they had been an examiner at their testing site, for instance, more teens? Fewer teens? Younger or older recipients? 3) Discuss perceived changes in teen attributes or attitudes or changes in challenges in working with teens; and 4) Describe the culture or community attitudes toward school or schooling. Did they believe the values that their community espouses have any impact upon a teen’s decision to drop out of high school and graduate with a GED? In closing the interview, examiners were further asked if they would like to add anything, and especially as it pertains to their specific community.

Who They Are and What They Do

Testing site examiners are hired by a school district and are instructors at a learning center or an adult education center. Historically, these centers educated adults (over 21 years of age) who needed classes to complete a high school diploma, or they provided tutoring services in which an adult could complete their GED certificate. Increasingly, the site examiners say, they are serving teenagers in the same capacity.

The directors, or examiners, often oversee a staff of part-time instructors. Many who work with the teens hold a Maine Adult Education teaching certificate and many teach adult education classes in the evening. Most also tutor students individually and prepare them for their GED exam. Even though a specific school district typically funds the testing sites, the learning centers are not restricted to enrolling clientele who are solely from that district. Staff may tutor or test teens from any part of Maine or, out-of-state youth, or adolescents who are too young to take the exam in Maine. For example,
one site examiner said that the staff has tutored younger teens, usually 16 years old, who could then go to Vermont\textsuperscript{14} to take a GED exam where the age requirement is more flexible. Having various sites in which to test provides more opportunities for youth who drop out of school.

At some sites, teens also have a choice as to how to complete their high school careers – either by high school diploma or through the GED process. At these sites, personnel act as academic counselors. Together, the youth and the advisor weigh the advantages and disadvantages of completing either with a diploma or a GED. Some of the decision is based on academic history, credits and/or willingness to commit to a long-term program (in the event that the teen chooses a high school diploma program). "If students have enough credits to graduate within a reasonable period of time," states one site examiner, "most kids will go high school diploma – if they are lacking in credit they may go the GED route." The GED pre-exam results may be used as indicators that preclude discussions on the appropriate route to graduation teens might take. A high score on their pre-exams presumably shows that they have the cognitive abilities to pass the final exam with little tutorial or instruction. In this instance, they might then be advised to take their GED, and not to "waste time" in a lengthier diploma program. These students might also be advised to attend college right away, if they indicate that this is a goal.

However, the diploma program, which is structured more like a traditional school program, with courses as opposed to pre-exams, poses financial complications for adult education sites. One site examiner in southern Maine explained that she often receives an overflow of students from a large school district in which there is no alternative education program. It is this site’s responsibility to tutor and award diplomas; yet it is the sponsor-

\textsuperscript{14} Vermont is the only state in New England that allows 16-year-olds to take their GED exam.
ing school district that receives the per-pupil funding, and not the adult education center. Schools without alternative programs create an overload of students to teach and, in effect, create an "alternative education type" program at the adult education site. Indeed, one GED testing site declined to participate in this study because their past high rate of teen GED recipients resulted in their sponsoring school district deciding to create an alternative off-site program for their at-risk youth. The emerging issue of serving at-risk teens at the learning centers was also noted in a recent report by the Maine Alternative Education Program Committee, released in December, 2007. This report reiterates the GED examiners' position:

The Committee was concerned that many students aged 16-20 find themselves enrolled in adult education classes. This may be appropriate for some but does not provide the social supports needed by others. Concerns were mentioned regarding the practice of using adult education programs as a school's alternative education program but not funding the programs commensurately. (Final Report of the Maine Alternative Education Programs Committee, 2007)

Examiners indicate that another responsibility is tracking and reporting completion rates. Because GED candidates are allowed to take one battery at a time (rather than sit for an eight-hour exam), completion rates are recorded based on the number of GED candidates who start a battery, finish all five exams, and pass with their certificate. Learning sites report anywhere from a 50% to an 85% completion rate for GED candidates. Finishing the full battery (if GED candidates opted to take each battery separately) they further stated, can take anywhere from six weeks to one year.
Characteristics of Teen Candidates at Maine Testing Sites

When asked to describe some attributes of populations of teenagers the centers typically tutor, the responses ranged from the academically gifted, "the strata who were 'bored' with school," to youth with no aspirations other than to get a "better job." States one examiner in southern Maine, "We get two totally different populations - the crème of the crop, school was holding them back - to the people that really do need school." At this mostly urban site, she continues, "Most [teens] are working part-time, so a lot of motivation is in advancement in a job or a better job, though about 75% tell us that they are doing it to go on to school."

Site examiners work with teens who typically describe wanting to be in school, but are having a "hard time being in school." This description was stated in one form or another by all the site examiners and included those students who felt alienated in schools by their peers, some who "just need to get out of a situation," and some who didn't "fit in" to their high school's college expectations. States one examiner, "They left because of the social scene at high school. They can't handle the day to day in a public high school - they didn't fit in." Some of the students who don't "fit in" are also very bright, agrees another examiner; peers ostracized these students because they "looked a certain way, or were ear-marked a certain way." Another faults the school system, "The high school wants to think of itself as a college prep high school." She says the high school is "missing the boat"; while guidance counselors focus mainly on kids going to college, many others are being alienated. Other youth also tell examiners that they are uncomfortable with the staff at the school, not their peers.
All of the site examiners believe the majority of their teen population is from a low socioeconomic status (SES) and many come to them from alarming and dysfunctional family conditions. States one interviewee, “Kids are living in situations that are unthinkable – poverty and broken homes and they seem to do a lot of moving around.” Many say that familial substance abuse is an issue; others agree that, socially, some teens live an adult life. One site examiner knows that many of the 17 and 18-year-olds who access her site are working to support their parents. Many sites report that single moms are accessing their services with their ages ranging from 16 to 30 years old. States one examiner, “Pregnant teens feel ostracized [from school]. One girl commented to me about a teacher who told her she didn’t belong in school.”

Many of the GED candidates have aspirations to go to a local community college. Contrary to some research which tags GED recipients as lacking in perseverance and unable to commit to a four-year program (Barton, 2001; Heckman & Kreuger, 2003), the examiners say choosing to enroll in a community college is not because of their inability to commit to a four year program, but primarily because community colleges are less expensive and more cost effective for these teens than the state university system.

The Communities

Northern Maine

One northern Maine GED test examiner describes the community in which he tests youth as an “upper-class rural ghetto.” He believes many positive experiences happen in this community, but that there is still a “strata of our society that is unmotivated because of limited job opportunities.” Northern Maine has never had a history of large industry and historically has been an agrarian society. Unfortunately, states this examiner,
farming hasn't been a factor in a secure job opportunity for the last 10-15 years because the large and productive farming families having disappeared. This examiner remembers when there were at least “one hundred [farming] families in the area, now there are maybe ten.” A lifetime resident, he is convinced that the agricultural life was once a model for youth. The hard work to which farmers must commit show youth a work ethic that, he believes, seems to be lacking in their more contemporary culture. Many of the teen candidates he works with do, however, hold jobs in food service (mostly fast-food restaurants) and other available part-time jobs. Many candidates, he says, are also motivated to commute to the University of Maine at Presque Isle, which, although being over an hour away, is the closest higher education institution to this community.

**Western Maine**

Western Maine sites cover the foothills and ski resorts of Maine and include Farmington, which is the home of another University of Maine campus. In this region, there is also a large hospital that contributes to employment. But, like northern Maine, many of the youth who enroll at the testing sites come from communities that are typically rural and isolated. One examiner states, “There are no big businesses and not really any job opportunities for youth or their families. There used to be a lot of family owned farms and manufacturing but,” she states, “those are either defunct or have left the area.”

Carrabasett Valley in western Maine includes a large ski resort and a tourist destination in the winter and summer. Tourism provides most of the employment opportunities here, but, like many areas in Maine, it is seasonal and adults hold most of the jobs. Many of the youth in this area are waitresses, clerks at fast-food restaurants, or are part-time staff at the ski resort. In this community, businesses close for the whole month of
April in an effort to prepare for the following summer months. When this happens, students who have left the learning centers to earn money, typically return to their exams. For many, family owned-businesses are the sole source of income.

Another western Maine site is located approximately one hour from Portland. This bedroom community is also changing. According to the site examiner in this location there are no real businesses and no real jobs for teens. She states that the local grocer is "kind about hiring kids" and there are some good size restaurants, but the economy is in a slump and one must travel or commute to Portland for any kind of recreational or job opportunities. For low-income kids with no transportation this situation becomes a barrier to further education or job mobility.

Central Maine

In central Maine, the economic and social situations are much the same as in the rest of the state. One site examiner describes how the mills have left and with it financial security for a lot of families. Employers of youth with no high school diploma typically pay minimum wage and candidates at this site realize they cannot financially support themselves on this income. She describes that, traditionally, parents of teen candidates are also, "Probably not in white collar professional jobs." She believes that families in this area are also struggling with drugs and substance abuse.

Another community in central Maine is also the host of a local private college. This college is exclusive, she states, and high school students are aware that getting accepted to this school is not easily accomplished. Even if they succeeded academically, the yearly cost is much higher than students from this area can manage. This again is a visible reminder of the haves and have-nots in this community.
Coastal Maine

Rurality is common in coastal Maine as well. Site examiners describe their communities as, "Not economically well-developed with a high percentage of adults that haven’t completed high school." There is a devaluation of education in this community and "a lot of it has to do with parents. There is a strata of kids who have support and resources that know they are going to college...but some of the kids we can’t help, they have no aspirations." As far as jobs after high school go, states this examiner, "There isn’t much. They can work in hospitals as a CNA or CRNA. A lot of boys go into family owned fishing and lobstering businesses where kids own their lobster boats, and parents are supporting those decisions even as the fishing industry is in semi-crisis."

Southern Maine

The majority of teens who participated in this study (28) were from southern Maine where they were provided educational services through a teen outreach provider. This examiner believes that because the school system also supports and encourages at-risk youth to participate in their alternative education program, the numbers of teens from the sponsoring school district has decreased over the course of her tenure at this site. However, a large percentage of teens seeking GEDs are still coming from a neighboring high school, where there is no alternative program.

Another site in southern Maine states that this community has the highest unemployment rate in their county. She describes the economic devastation of industry leaving the area. "The people that live here think that the mills are going to come back. Over 55% of elementary school students are on the free and reduced lunch program. The community struggles between the have and have-nots." She relates that many people from the
Boston area are moving into this southern Maine community, building large homes, and commuting to Boston to work. Watching wealthy home-owners move into their community is having a somewhat negative impact on the native residents because the discrepancy between the income levels is sorely apparent. Many native community members are recipients of Section 8 housing subsidies and, she states, many of their adult ed students get evicted for lack of adequate income to pay the increasingly high apartment rental costs in their area.

Along with the migration from Boston, though not necessarily directly related, she believes the community is also experiencing, “some big city drug issues” and the highest teen pregnancy rate in Maine. Another challenge for youth in this area is no public transportation, though the city has started to run a bus to the “shore” during the summer months so that teens can access hourly seasonal work. These demographics, she says, have school districts looking at Ruby Paynes’ (2005) work on poverty and the mental health issues that are playing out in the school system. On a positive note, the district is also trying to finance a building to offer child care for teen parents so that they may continue with their schooling. States the GED examiner about the school system, “They are finally starting to be pro-active about some of the issues.”

**Changes and Trends at GED Sites**

**Teen Population**

Many of the GED examiners believed that the number of teens they serve hasn’t changed in the last five years. Some are reporting fewer teens because of the implementation of alternative education programs either in their or in a neighboring school district. All of the sites are reporting that they are getting calls by younger youth, some as young
as 14, who have dropped out of school. Since these facilities cannot serve those younger than 16 years old (though some admit they allow 15 and 16 year olds to take classes) data on those younger than 16 who may be accessing the sites for graduation, cannot be counted on federal reports, therefore it is difficult to know how many younger adolescents are being served statewide or nationally. One site examiner says that the entire adult ed program is now much younger, with ages ranging from 17 to 25 years old.

Academic ability among the teen population is wide-ranging. Many examiners report that they are now serving teen candidates who are “quite smart.” One site examiner says that more kids are testing out of GED tutoring program because of high scores on their pre-exams. The students who test out, they say, don’t spend a lot of time at the centers. Examiners report that they really don’t get a chance to “know” this population because of the brief amount of time spent there. Other sites, however, are seeing negative changes in academic ability. A western Maine site examiner states:

Some of the kids we pick up will not be able to complete the GED. They didn’t qualify for Special Ed, but they have learning disabilities and the pace and structure of the GED exam doesn’t work for them. They need a traditional setting and will stay in a high school diploma program if they want diplomas.

Agrees another, “A lot of folks coming from the high school can’t test because they don’t have the skills they need.” One site examiner says GED examiners spend the most time prepping youth for the math exam even though they [students] “haven’t been out of school that long.” One site tests more teens whose high school credits are overly abundant in “music and art classes.” Since current educational pressure is on math and literacy, speculation is that students who excel in the arts have needs that are being excluded
in high school academia. One interviewee also serves as the president of the Maine Adult Education Association (MAEA). She states that GED writing scores are much lower nationally and statewide. This examiner believes that the writing prompts are problematic for students in that the students often don’t understand the expectations or the context of the question.

Other trends that examiners have noticed, besides an increase in younger youth, is an increase in youth openly discussing drugs. Says one examiner, “Two to three years ago you would never hear them talk about this. Now, they don’t care who hears them.” This is reiterated by a northern Maine examiner who states that illegal prescription drug use is more pervasive now than it was. Drug abuse creates huge issues with a lot of kids, including contributing to lack of job retention and school interruption. He believes the substance abuse issues are affecting more girls now, and that their education disruption is, now more commonly attributed to drug use, where in the past disruption was due to pregnancy.

Some sites report that the dynamic of the population has changed. There are more goal-oriented teens who have specific reasons for completing. They believe that more emphasis is now placed on the need to complete high school for further education and that this is directly related to job opportunities disappearing. Many come to the centers after they have looked for a job for a while. Many times GED recipients, states one examiner, move out of the area where they will have more opportunities: “Where once there was a feeling that youth didn’t want to leave the area, more young people are more willing to go somewhere else; there is more transience and more knowledge about the world – probably through the internet.”
Teen Attitudes

When asked about any noticeable changes in the attitudes of the more contemporary teen, one western Maine examiner believes she sees a difference in attitude between genders. She says that the “girls usually come with a plan – I’m going to ‘do this so I can...’.” She continues, “They are more goal-oriented. They perceive getting their GED as a step toward a future direction, while plans for the boys are more the exception than the rule.” For them to go on, they need to “do it for themselves” with a possibility that they might want to do something later. She also finds that the boys are more argumentative, but, she states, part of this seems to be due to a lack of maturity.

One examiner noticed a change in the “blame game.” In the past there was, typically, a feeling of resentment toward high school – teens felt that they didn’t get what they needed and that that was the school’s fault. Researchers Obason and Kottering (1998) also found that perceptions of teens were typically that the school had “forced” them out. The teens this examiner serves now are getting over blaming anybody for anything. For them, high school was just not a good fit. She reiterates earlier sentiments: many GED candidates believe they didn’t fit in socially, there was too much peer pressure, they were afraid in school, they were being bullied, they were being harassed, or they felt they weren’t part of the school culture. She states they are “kids with different styles.” Others agree. Teen attitude is different; many teens are clearly worried about making it in the world. Says one examiner, “We salvage a lot of kids, but it takes so many resources to keep them here.”
Community Attitudes toward Education

Responses were mixed when GED examiners were asked about the general attitude toward education in their communities. Many responded to this question as to their perception of the attitude toward continuing education through a GED rather than a high school diploma. In these instances, most examiners believed that the GED is becoming less and less of a stigma in their communities and that it is a “valued” means to a diploma. Others believe that their community’s attitude is that the GED is a “good enough diploma” and that there is still a stigma attached to it.

Other examiners trust that their communities support education in any form; however, claims the examiner at the northern Maine site, a lack of highly paid professional jobs sometimes forces parents to move from the region if they want their children to have more opportunities. Many stated that their communities value education because residents didn’t go very far with education. In these instances, the low rate of college attainment creates a feeling that parents want more for their children than they had. Regardless of endorsement (or lack thereof) for educational mobility all examiners acknowledged that community attitude toward education was not a key factor in youth decisions to complete with a GED. Examiners point out that personal circumstances are the central motivators for teens to get their GEDs.

Summary

The site examiners offered another lens into teen characteristics and social conditions and situations from which their school-age population develops attitudes and motivation to complete high school with a GED. Site examiners describe a range of academic ability, attitudes, and conditions within which teens make a decision to leave their high
school, community opportunities, and familial and school situations that disrupt schooling. Most of the sites agree that the majority of their students are from the lower socio-economic strata. Many find that their communities are experiencing an economic recession, if not a depression. With farms and industry leaving the area, opportunities for jobs that can sustain even a modest lifestyle are unavailable to teens and their parents. While one site described their local high school as “starting” to become pro-active and looking at poverty rates and teen pregnancy, other sites did not describe their communities as such.

Examiners believe their teen population is younger yet, at least in the case of girls, is somewhat more goal-oriented than in the past. They believe teens who come to their centers understand the value of education, and they understand that they will not be able to participate in further schooling or job advancement without a high school certificate. However, examiners still struggle with those students who are not ready for an exam, citing poor writing and math skills as the most common deficits in academic preparation.

One common factor that emerged in the interviews was the social “fitness” of teens to their public high schools. Although teens are no longer “blaming” their high schools as much as they once did, many see students who have left simply because they don’t “fit in.” Academically sound, examiners say this subgroup of students have left school because of bullying and harassment by peers, overzealous expectations by high school staff that all students will go to college, and those unique students whose aptitudes are in the arts (as evidenced by an abundance of credits in music and art courses) rather than math and English.
Another, more discouraging, trend some examiners mentioned is the emergence of serious substance abuse issues in their population. One examiner is surprised by how openly teens at her site discuss their illegal drug use without worry about repercussions or consequences. One examiner believes substance abuse has replaced pregnancy as the main reason female education is disrupted. What GED examiners are seeing as more open drug use, the Maine Office of Substance Abuse also corroborates as an increase in consistent drug use. A recent report states that the teen population is the fastest rising population for opiate addiction in Maine (2006). The most significant increase in drug abuse treatment is with 18-24 year old females. In 2006, as many as 570 cases of females treated for opiate addiction were reported, whereas six years earlier, in 2000, 108 cases were reported in Maine. This amounts to a staggering 427% increase in six years.

Overall, examiners affirm the teen interviewees' narratives. In Chapter 7 the teen volunteers discussed dysfunctional family situations, which often included references to poverty, frequent moving, and familial substance, and sometimes physical and sexual abuse. They discussed freely their own drug use and how they became involved in the drug culture.

As examiners corroborated the candidates' narratives (see Chapter 7), it became evident that examiners' claims that learning and adult education centers have increased responsibility (especially in those areas that don’t have any alternative high school program) to teach at-risk teens are increasingly accurate. However, this places adult educators in a precarious position. Not wanting to turn youth away, an influx of teens for many sites means more work, larger classes and younger students, with no extra compensation. While there will always be a need to continue to provide alternative means to high school
completion, such as the GED, for the adult educator, more programs for at-risk teens are recommended. Increased opportunities for learning should be afforded those teens who also are lacking in cognitive ability or academic skills. Most agree that learning centers are not prepared to be contemporary versions of “throwaway” programs for youth and that youth who access these sites often need more social and emotional support than simply test-taking skills.
Chapter 6

RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY

“And I still noticed that my mom was poor. And my mom had a really bad habit of making us feel that and understand that and shedding her worry about being poor and not having enough on others – so that it stressed everybody out.”

~Kyle, age 19

The ten candidates who volunteered to interview for this study were selected from the participants who answered questionnaires and returned contact information. Twenty-one different GED testing cites in southern, northern, central, coastal and western Maine returned approximately 105 completed questionnaires out of approximately 300 that were mailed to GED testing sites. From this mailing, 66 questionnaires matched the criteria for inclusion in this study (i.e., must have indicated on the survey that dropping out was a voluntary decision and that the respondents were between the ages of 17-19). While current GED data collected by the GEDTS (2006) approximates that 1,800 teens in Maine per year are candidates for the exam, the relatively small sample size might be best explained by identifying those subsets of teen GED candidates (discussed earlier in Chapter 4) who were not included in this study but who are counted by the GED Testing Service: namely, homeschoolers, incarcerated youth, youth who were expelled from high school, and youth who participate in GED programs through private organizations, such as Job Corps. Further, these questionnaires were only available to participating sites for 4-6 weeks during the months of March through April, 2007 and, in an attempt to collect more

\[15\] Data are from those candidates who voluntarily participate in the GEDTS survey. Not all candidates are represented in these counts.
data, another 50 questionnaires were mailed in October 2007 with approximately 15 questionnaires returned from that final mailing. Also, Maine does not publish the number of teenage GED candidates or recipients.

Using available data, it might be roughly estimated that an average of 150 teen candidates are taking GED exams per month in the state of Maine, but without adequate data it is difficult to know which candidates are from which sites and, for the purposes of this study, which candidates are voluntarily dropping out of school. I believe what is important to remember about this survey is that these data represent the youth from which the interviewees were chosen and is in no way meant to generalize about all GED candidates in Maine (see Limitations, Chapter 4). However, these data will help provide an “internal” rather than an external generalization about the population sample. States Maxwell (2005), “Internal generalizability refers to the generalizability within the group studied, while external generalizability refers to its generalizability beyond the group studied” (p.115).

Data gathered from this 10-item survey included approximate geographic locality, gender, age, when decisions were made about leaving school, other programs of study, involvement in extra-curricular activities, parental educational attainment, and peer and parental support (see Appendix D – Survey Instrument).

The survey results are presented under four subheadings: Demographics, School and Schooling, Parents and Peers, and Recommendations to Others. Much of these data have been disaggregated by gender and age. Chapter 10 will further connect these data to the GED site examiners’ and youth perceptions’ on the event of dropping out and com-
pleting with a GED. The survey begins to answer my third research question: What characteristics do GED candidates share?

**Demographics**

Southern Maine respondents comprise the majority of the survey, (38%) Northern Maine participants comprised the least amount of survey respondents, with approximately 3% of the total respondents coming from this area. Approximately 27% of the respondents came from central Maine sites, and coastal and western Maine participants were more evenly distributed, with 14% from coastal Maine, and 18% from western Maine sites. Of the total, approximately, 50% were male (34) and 50% (32) were female. Students' ages ranged from 17 to 19 years old.

Figure 6.1 below, shows selected demographics of the sample population. The plurality of GED candidates (n=28) were 18 years old. This was expected. According to data collected by the GEDTS (2003, 2004, 2005) 18-year-olds comprise the majority of the teen GED population both in state and national figures. Maine regulations state that 18 is the “minimum” age at which candidates can test for the exam. However, while many GED site examiners explained to me that rarely (and one administer claimed that it is against state law) do they test 17-year-olds, in this sample, almost one-third of the respondents (19) were 17 years old. Indeed, more 17-year-old males (12) returned questionnaires than the 19-year-old males (8). Using data below, it was calculated that the average age of the male survey participants in this survey was 17.8 years; the average age of females participating in the survey was 18.1 years.
Dropping Out

Much of the data pertain to student perceptions of school and self in relation to school. When candidates were asked when they *first* thought about dropping out of high school, reported ages ranged from 13 to 18 years of age. Figure 6.2, below, suggests that many of these candidates were already thinking about leaving school prior to the “legal” dropout age of 16. Approximately 35% of GED candidates believed they would not graduate from high school as early as 13, 14 and 15 years old. The majority of GED candidates (32%) were 16 years old when they first had thoughts about dropping out (it might be speculated that students are aware that the legal dropout age in Maine is 16 years old). Twenty-four percent (24%) of the GED candidates first thought they would not graduate at 17, and approximately 9% of the GED candidates first thought about dropping out at 18 years old.
These data were disaggregated further by exploring the gender differences. Within gender, the majority of the males (38%) first thought about dropping out of high school at age 16; the majority of the females (31%), first thought about dropping out at age 15. However, fewer girls than boys are thinking about dropping out before age 15. Approximately 17% of the male respondents believed their first thought about dropping out occurred earlier, at age 14, and even 13 years old, compared to approximately 6% of the female respondents. At age 18, more females (16%) are thinking about dropping out than are males (3%).

Respondents were also asked at what grade level they stopped going to high school. Figure 6.3 shows that smaller percentage of the candidates dropped out as first year students (17%) in high school. Approximately 23% left school as sophomores, 29% responded they left as juniors, and approximately 32% of the respondents indicated they left as seniors in high school.
When asked if anyone at the school “talked” to them regarding their decision to drop out, the responses were equally distributed. Approximately 50% of the candidates had some conversation with any school personnel prior to leaving high school, with the other half indicating that they left their high schools without any discussion with any school personnel. This was true of both genders – males and females were approximately equally divided in their discussion with school personnel prior to dropping out.

Other Programs

In many cases in Maine, youth have alternative schooling options available to obtain a traditional high school diploma. Since all the youth were well within the age limit to continue with a high school program, I was curious to discover if they were leaving school without pursuing other alternatives first. Figures 6.4 and 6.5, below show gender differences in GED candidates’ responses to the question, “Did you try any other program(s) before dropping out of high school?” Candidates were asked to
circle the choices provided to show which of the diploma programs they had tried, if any, prior to dropping out of high school. The findings show that the largest percentage of both males (37%) and females (29%) did not try another program before they left their high schools. However, over twice as many females (28%) as males (12%) tried to graduate through an adult education or night school program, with more boys (15%) enrolling in alternative education programs than girls (9%). These findings revealed that a larger percentage of females (22%) than males (12%) had tried “more than one” option before dropping out. Nine percent (9%) of both genders reported that they had enrolled in “other” programs, and though they were not required to specify, one respondent indicated by writing in as “other” as being enrolled in Job Corp. More boys claimed to have tried online and home-schooling options (15%), with no girls responding that they had tried these options. Approximately 3% of the girls stated they tried a private school prior to dropping out.

**Figure 6.4 Boys - Other Diploma Programs**
Figure 6.5 Girls - Other Diploma Programs

Percentage of Girls Who Tried Other Diploma Programs

- None: 29%
- Home-school: 28%
- Alt Ed: 9%
- Adult/Night School: 9%
- On-line Program: 3%
- Private School: 0%
- Other: 0%
- More than one: 22%

Peers and Parents

Levels of Support for Dropping Out

Peers. Candidates were asked to indicate the level of support they believed they had from their peers and from their parent(s) for their decision to drop out. The level of Peer Support was measured on a scale of “Yes, a lot”, “Yes, some” and “No.” When the data were disaggregated by gender, the results show the populations as divided by response to the question. Figure 6.6 (below) shows that of the candidates who answered they had had “a lot of peer support”, 40% were males compared to 60% of the females. Those who answered that they had “Yes, some” support within their peer group, 55% were boys and 45% were girls. Of the population who believed they had “no support” from their peers, 53% were male and 47% were female.
Parents. Overall, respondents indicated that parental support for dropping out was almost evenly distributed by “Yes, Some” (42%) and “No” (44%). Only 14% of the survey respondents believed that they had “A Lot” of support from their parents to make the decision to drop out of school. Figure 6.7 further shows the gender breakdown of those who responded to this question. Of those who believed they had “a lot” of support from parents to drop out, 55% were males and 45% were females, those who answered that they had “yes, some” support from parents, approximately 53% were female and 47% were male. Of those who answered that they had “no” parental support for dropping out of high school, approximately 55% were males and 45% were female.
Figure 6.7 Parental Support to Drop Out by Gender of Respondent

Parental Support to Drop Out by Gender

Respondents were asked to indicate the highest level of education participants believed their parents had completed. While this variable didn’t pertain to GED candidates decisions directly, parent(s)’ level of education can indirectly help me formulate some suppositions regarding the sample population. For example, parent(s) level of education is one measure used to identify family socioeconomic status (SES). GED candidates’ ability to set and pursue academic goals can also be affected by parental education, with role modeling also being an important aspect of perceptions about value place on education. Chapter 10 will follow this premise further.

Figures 6.8 and 6.9 below show the educational attainment of mothers and fathers as self-reported by survey respondents. One choice that respondents had was “Unknown” in the event that a parent was either non-participatory in the respondent’s life, or that the respondents simply did not know.
Participants indicated that the largest percentage of their mothers (37%) completed a high school diploma program and at least 15% have completed a GED certificate. Eleven percent (11%) indicated that their mothers had no diploma or GED certificate. Approximately 15% of the participants’ mothers completed a two-year degree, and 17% of the mothers had obtained a four-year (9%) or graduate degree (8%). Five percent of the respondents’ mothers’ educational attainment was "Unknown."

**Figure 6.8 Mothers’ Educational Attainment**

![Parental Education Attainment - Mother](image)

Figure 6.9, below, shows that the largest percentage of participants’ fathers completed high school (31%) with 14% having completed a GED certificate. Approximately 17% of the fathers had not completed a high school program with an equal percentage of the fathers’ educational attainment as “Unknown” to the respondents. Respondents reported that approximately 13% of their fathers had completed either a 2-year college education (8%) or a 4-year college (5%) while 8% indicated their fathers had attained a graduate level degree.
Figure 6.9 Fathers' Educational Attainment

Choices Regarding Dropping Out

Survey respondents were asked if they would recommend taking the GED to others in their situation. Though 94% of the GED candidates responded that they would advise a friend to take the GED if the friend had dropped out, 45% of the participants responded that if given a second chance, they would not have dropped out of school. Figure 6.8 below, shows the gender breakdown of the candidates who responded to the question, "If given another chance, would you have dropped out?" Approximately 63% of the female respondents answered that if given the chance to drop out again, they would make the same choice as compared to 47% of the males. When disaggregating this data by age at exam (see Figure 6.10 below) more of the 17 year olds who responded to this questions (approximately 63%) as compared to 18 and 19-year-olds (approximately 50% in both cases) would make the decision to drop out again if given the chance. Ninety-four (94%) of the respondents indicated that they would advise a peer in their situation to take the GED.
Data collected from this 10-item questionnaire began to answer my third research question, "What characteristics do Maine GED candidates share?" Analysis of the data show a very broad picture of the sample population from which interviewees were selected. Some characteristics about the GED candidates in this study can be drawn from these data using selected frequencies of gender and ages of youth taking the exam, parental educational attainment, and perceptions of drop out choices.

Since Maine GED regulations do not permit testing of 16-year-olds, it was expected that this population would be 17 to 19 years old. Not surprising, was that 18-year-olds comprised the majority of the survey respondents – Maine states this as their "minimum age," with conditional requirements for 17-year-olds. Maine regulations state that 17-year-olds can test if they have been out of school for more than one year or if there are extenuating circumstances, such as for employment or admission to college (see www.Maine.gov/education).
However, the number of 17-year-olds who participated in this study equaled that of the 19-year-olds. This younger group would have dropped out of high school at age 16. More male participants (12) were 17 years old, and indeed, outnumbered 19-year-old males (8). When asked if they would drop out again if given the choice, 63% of the 17-year-olds believed that they would still make the choice to drop out of high school, as compared to 50% of their older counterparts. These younger respondents have also not “aged-out” of the social envelope to graduate with their class, yet the majority does not wish to do so. One assumption that could be made about these results is that younger students are dissatisfied with the traditional high school setting or so alienated from the traditional high school setting, that even with a theoretical “second chance” at a high school diploma, they will not take it.

In many cases, alternative education programs function as an option for students at-risk of not graduating. This survey indicates that this was not a resource for many youth as only 9% of the females indicated they had tried this program compared to 28% who tried to graduate through an adult education. A higher percentage (12%) of males indicated they had been in an alternative education program. One reason for low enrollment in high school alternative education programs may be that some alternative education programs are stigmatized as being only for “the bad kids.” Even as many programs work to avoid this label, one female interviewee reiterated this reaction when her guidance counselor suggested that she enroll in the high school alternative education program. Although she later stated she found success in her alternative education program, she was reluctant to consider this option for that reason. Another reason might be the limited numbers of alternative high school programs. Students must be enrolled in their district
high school to access this program, while adult education programs typically have an open enrollment.

The majority of candidates in this study first think about dropping out of high school at age 16. This is especially true for males, as almost 40% of the boys in the sample population indicated that they were contemplating dropping out at age 16. The higher percentage of 17-year-old GED candidates than is expected might indicate that youth are dropping out when they are legally able and waiting the required year before they take their GED exam. Surprisingly, more girls indicated that they first contemplated dropping out at age 15. The majority of youth in this population indicated that the last year they attended school was their senior year in high school. This finding does not corroborate with GEDTS findings that the average grade level attained for a GED recipient in Maine is their sophomore year; however, the GEDTS survey does not disaggregate this statistic by age level and it could be surmised that averaging all state recipients would distort this finding somewhat.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2006)\textsuperscript{16} community survey finds that 37% of Maine residents who are 25 years of age and over, have not attained beyond a high school diploma or a GED, and that 21% of Maine residents, have no diploma. These data are not disaggregated by gender. The candidates in this study responded that 52% of their mothers and 47% of their fathers had completed at least a high school diploma or a GED. Eleven percent (11%) of their mothers, respondents indicated, did not graduate from high school and 17% of their fathers, they indicated, are high school dropouts. (One might speculate that one characteristic of teen GED candidates is that the parents of this sample

population value finishing at least high school. Census state data includes a broader count of Maine educational attainment.) However, a possible Catch-22, further education, such as a college degree, may be impeded by the financial constraints of parent(s) who have not attained that educational level themselves.

A wider gap exists between mothers and fathers when respondents selected "Unknown" pertaining to their knowledge of their parents' education. While only 5% indicated they did not know their mothers' educational level, approximately 17% of their fathers' educational level is unknown to these candidates. This data was not surprising; seven out of the ten interviewees (discussed further in Chapter 7) indicated that they had either no, or very sporadic, contact with their biological fathers.

Finally, while almost all of the candidates (94%) in this study indicated that they would recommend the GED as an option to friends who were in their situations (having had already dropped out), almost one-half (45%) of the respondents would not make the choice to drop out again.

Summary

The survey results indicated that the majority of youth in this study are 18 years of age, have dropped out of high school as seniors, and have parents who have completed their formal schooling with high school diplomas or GEDs. Many more females than males try other diploma programs prior to making a decision to drop out, with males trying alternative education programs and females opting to complete through adult education or night school.

Other results indicate that there are more 17-year-old candidates than event the GED examiners are aware of, and 17-year-old male respondents outnumbered 19-year-
old male respondents by one-third. Most of the female respondents were 18 and 19 years old. Although many of females indicated that they had first thought about dropping out at a younger age (15) than males, more males indicated they first started thinking about dropping out at the combined ages of 13, 14, and 15.

Almost all of the respondents (94%) would recommend that a peer in their situation take the GED, but almost half (45%) believed that if given the chance to try again, they would not drop out of high school.
Chapter 7

RESULTS OF GED CANDIDATE INTERVIEWS

"It had been two years and I thought I would get over it, but you know, you never really get over it - you get through it... It's like sea glass, like when it first goes into the ocean and it's sharp. But the ocean smooths it over - it's still kind of sharp, but not as sharp as it used to be."

~Jessica, age 18, reflecting on the death of her first boyfriend

This chapter holds the narratives; the life stories the interviewees divulge about their environmental, social, and academic lived-experiences from kindergarten to the decision to drop out of high school. I chose to leave these voices intact rather than decontextualize their experience. The reader will hear the complete stories as I heard them, and hopefully this method will help the reader understand these youths' lives and experience the complexities as I did. The narratives will continue in Chapter 9, as the candidates further relate their reasons to continue with a GED. These ten interviewees were selected for one-on-one interviews through a volunteer contact sheet attached to the questionnaire they completed at their respective learning or adult education centers. The youth represent each broad geographic region in Maine. Their ages range from 17 to 19 years. Seven females and three males participated in this stage of the study.

As previously discussed in Chapter 4, a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix D) was a crucial and strategic instrument in this research. It allowed me the freedom to explore each interviewee’s unique experience and to focus on factors and conditions that youth discussed as the interview progressed. For instance, Mathew explained that he was
the youngest ballroom dance instructor in Maine and had won state awards as a 17-year-old. This teenage GED recipient pursues a passion that is atypical of a teenager. He discussed with me the confidence and self-esteem he found in this pursuit which he did not find as a student in a public high school. This personal account of an interest that Mathew valued became part of my interview because he felt comfortable enough to share it, and more importantly, it was part of Mathew’s unique identity. Mathew’s questionnaire did not capture this dedication to an activity outside of high school.

Following the interviews is a matrix of selected factors and conditions described in the narratives. This analysis method helped to visualize factors and compare the candidates’ experiences in an effort to draw out commonalities and characteristics of this sample population. In many cases, interviewees discussed situations that were corroborated by research on dropouts: persistent and longitudinal conditions they experienced in their homes and school. These narratives and the resulting matrix helped to answer my research questions: “How do Maine youth (17-19 years old) who voluntarily choose to complete high school with a GED describe their social, family and peer relationships, and academic experiences from kindergarten to the point of dropping out?” and, “What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED candidates share?”

The following narratives are first introduced to the reader with a physical description of the interviewees, some observations about mannerisms, or comfort levels, and the interview settings. The stories that follow are written in first person narrative. The interviewees words are verbatim from the interviews, yet have been re-transcribed (and in some instances condensed from longer versions) into a chronological series of events for readability. Occasionally a narrator “voice” will appear as an italicized question or obser-
vation. This narrator voice clarifies the narrative when there is no logical placement.

Other information, such as names of places, teachers, or other potentially identifying in-
formation was omitted as indicated by brackets.

Left out of the narratives in this chapter are the candidates perceptions on missing
traditional graduation rites, their recommendations to their peers about dropping out of
high school, and their recommendations to school administrators about implementations
that would help make public schools more effective and inviting to future students who
may have similar experiences. Their voices on these topics will be heard again in follow-
ing chapters.

To protect confidentiality, the names of the participants as well as any locations or
schools they identify in their narratives have been changed. All interviewees received $20
in compensation prior to the interview. The differing perspectives on the unique chal-
lenges and barriers these teens faced as high school students become evident even as they
share this seemingly “same” educational event.

The following are their stories:

Chad

Chad is the only interviewee who is 17 years of age. I met Chad at a family
friend’s home in central Maine although he took his GED at a northern Maine site and is
coded as such. Chad, the youngest interviewee, was eager to talk to me; his parental con-
sent form had a two day turnaround time. Chad had arranged this particular time and
place because he was helping out his mother’s friend by cutting brush and firewood and
was staying for the weekend. Physically, Chad was slight and small-framed. He was soft-
spoken (I was even afraid the tape wouldn’t pick up his voice) and he talked about his life as if embarrassed by it, frequently looking down at the ground as he spoke:

“When I very first started school, [in New Hampshire] I loved it - and, probably for all the wrong reasons. It was mostly for socializing and lunch and gym and recess – and those bad habits followed me for quite a long time. I didn’t like my teacher; she was an older woman and she wasn’t very pleasant and I feel like I got disciplined a lot. I think I was not paying attention – but I liked playing with my friends. I lived with my mom and stepfather while I was growing up. My last contact with my real dad was when I was two. He hasn’t ever contacted me. My stepfather was an abusive alcoholic. He was abusive to me and my mom [until Chad was 15].

“I had a reading problem in the first grade. I wasn’t meeting up to the standards, but ah, later on, on my own, me and my mother worked on that and I started reading really well. One thing that I remember about first grade is that the woman was keeping me on little books and I wanted to read something bigger. She told me that I couldn’t, but I basically had figured it out. In the second grade nothing really changed. I was still a trouble-maker.”

Do you think that label followed you around?

“Yeah, because I… (Chad pauses, sighs heavily, and then continues)...got disciplined and it never sunk into me, you know? Third and 4th grade was pretty much the same and then when I got into middle school, things really turned. But then, I’d moved to [names town] Maine. My mother had got into a really bad car accident, there was quite a large lawsuit, and she got about $200,000. So, we moved up here and we bought a place
and the money ran away pretty quick. My stepfather went to the OTB, the off-track betting.

"I was diagnosed with ADHD in middle school, but then I got tested again and it was no longer a problem. I really didn’t have that many friends I would say. Starting out in a new school and everything, I didn’t know anybody. Also, I noticed that kids in middle school are really cut-throat. I was really fat. I got teased. And the way I looked – (I also got severe acne in 6th grade summer, starting the 7th grade and that was an entire bad experience on its own!) it affected school – absolutely. Then I started bullying back – and then bullying people even though I didn’t really need to. When I got into the 7th and 8th grade, surprisingly, I had a lot of friends, and I think that I had people that looked up to me – for some of the wrong reasons.

"In middle school...the classes where the teachers were really nice – I did terrible in. And then in my History class, a teacher named Mr. S. – he was a Vietnam veteran – he was very – I wouldn’t say mean – but very disciplined and I excelled in his class! It was very structured and you couldn’t get away with anything – you know? He wasn’t afraid to raise his voice. I liked History.

"Then, we had to have a meeting because my grades were failing and Mr. S. talked to my mom and he asked me if I thought that the work was too easy, that’s why I wasn’t really doing it – and in a way I’d say it was. Because if you looked at any of my classwork, it was great – but my homework – I didn’t even touch. And in that school, a lot of your grade relied on your homework. And also, um, when I was in the 7th grade, we was the first class to get the laptops. So, that was a pretty good experience. I did like it, but at the end of the year (laughs) I had it taken away from me. I lost my privileges.
“I just barely did make it through 8th grade because I was failing all the way through and they were just pushing me along. And then they told me that they really would stop me from going to high school, so, on the last semester, we had enormous projects from the Child Left Behind Act (he means No Child Left Behind). But on that last project, we were doing the Iraqi Freedom Project, and, um, I put in the initiative and got an excellent grade on it, and I was free to go to high school.

“I got into drugs my 8th grade summer. And I really do agree with the saying that pot’s a gateway. Because it introduces you to this person that sells weed and then introduces you to this person that sells something else and then it goes on and on and on. So, I ended up dealing. And, ah, jeez, 8th grade summer I had left my house. Me and my mother had gotten into a fight and I went out and lived a mile down the road in what I guess you could call a ‘crack-house.’ I was really the only kid. The rest of the people were dealers and whatnot. I got involved in all that stuff – I never booted [injected], like heroin, I only smoked. The only thing I haven’t done is acid and crystal meth [methamphetamine].

“I actually liked [names his high school]. We had that open campus thing, where during lunch time you could go out off the campus and you’d come back within the time allowed? So that was a lot of freedom, but I’d skip out of classes a lot. And the first few months of high school, I finally realized, were the most important ones. Because you’re learning all the projects starting out and what you need to do, and I completely missed all of that.

“I had also gone to [names mental health facility] for two months at two different times. I had suicide idolations [ideations]. I was in a rehabilitation program there for two
months. While I was there, everything was great – happy-go-lucky. My mother was very supportive. No matter all the terrible things I done, my mom, through and though, she’s always been there for me. ‘Cause even though I had a stepfather, she was still more like the man and the woman in the family. When I turned 15, it [the abusive behavior] sort of turned. He’s in jail in [names town] now.

“So then, when I came back into the flow of things, trying to get my stuff together, it was just way too much. I tried another [academic] program three, four months before I dropped out. This was in the 9th grade. I dropped out in the second quarter. Almost all of my teachers there helped me to try to get my stuff together. My guidance counselor helped me out a lot; she’s the one that referred me to a program where I would only go half a day, and then I’d go home. But then, once I got into that program, it just caused even more freedom, you know – more to get away with.

(Chad explains how he was involved in a burglary, arrested for failure to appear for restitutions for two class C burglaries, one class A criminal mischief charge, two car thefts and more illegal incidents that he couldn’t remember. As a result, Chad was sentenced to 30 days at a youth detention center. He also gives details about being with his girlfriend during childbirth, to later find out that the baby wasn’t his. He explains how he tried to go back to high school after these experiences.)

“While I was in the youth detention center my mother sold her house and moved to [names northern town]. My mother told me on my way up there that I need to go to church, I need to go to school, and I need to behave in order for me to stay with her. So, just three months ago, I attended [names high school] and I really…it wasn’t the fact that I couldn’t do the school work, cause I blasted right through the school work like nothing
– but it was more like the kids that were there. Because my maturity level, you know, compared to theirs, was really hard to handle. Also, I’d be 20 some odd years old when I graduated. And so I stopped going to school, which started a conflict with me and my mom. But to tell you the truth, it turned out a lot better than I thought. Because right after I dropped out [the second time], I got a job at a local restaurant so my mom couldn’t complain, cause I’m helping her with money a lot. It really took me less than a month to get my GED. And really, I have an 8th grade education.

“I always wanted to be in the military. The military’s been in the family, every single one of my family members all throughout the generations, since my great-great grandmother got off the boat from France, they’ve been in every single major war and conflict the United States has been in. But between about 14 and 16, I lost that will, because of the chemical influences. But I can go to boot camp at 17, I just can’t be deployed and go to war until I’m 18 – and I want to go to Afghanistan.”

Brittney

At 18 years old, Brittney was a participant in another, work-related, focus group I had conducted prior to her interview. The focus group targeted homeless adolescents and Brittney was homeless at the time. We agreed to meet a week later at the same drop-in center. We sat at the kitchen table at the drop-in center where she was very comfortable. Brittney is about 5’5”, slender and tells me she is a natural “redhead” (complete with characteristic freckles which she says later was an object of teasing), yet the two times I met with her, her hair color had changed from a light strawberry-blonde to a dark brunette. She has a stud in her nose and tongue and explained that she would be getting an eyebrow piercing soon after this interview. She smiled a lot, despite what she would later
tell me, and was quick to laugh. She seemed very calm and composed during the inter-
view.

“I had a lot fun in kindergarten, as far as, like, I was really social but I have a
learning disorder, ADHD, so it made it hard for me to learn. I didn’t get diagnosed with it
until, I was in – I think 1st grade. I didn’t really like school but I liked interacting and I
was more into playing – I wouldn’t sit down and do work or anything. I’d be up talking
with people or doing something – I was never very focused. I actually don’t even remem-
ber my kindergarten teacher.

“I don’t remember living with both of my parents – ever. My mom was 20 when
she had me. Mom has a tendency not to stay with one person for a very long period of
time; she’s gone through boyfriends and boyfriends and husbands and husbands so we’ve
never been in one place cause it’s always her boyfriend at the time or her husband comes
first before me and my sister. It’s been that way my whole life. And she was a user and
an alcoholic – so. And, at the time, all my mom’s boyfriends and husbands had a ten-
dency to do things to me they shouldn’t be doing – abuse. Sexual, mental, physical. Mom
didn’t know anything about it.”

(Brittney describes living with a physically and sexually abusive step-father from
when she was 3 to 5 years old. She was threatened that if she told she would be “killed.”
When this abuser finally hit her mother, her mother left him. Brittney states that her
mother was the hardest to convince that the abuse was “real.” I asked her where her bio-
logical father was during this period of her life.)

“Dad never tried to get custody of me. He couldn’t support me. Dad was an alco-
holic for a long time. He knew bits and pieces of what was going on – he surmised things
were going on, but he couldn’t prove the fact that it was. And he called; I talked to him
every so often. (I’ve been going to therapy for a long time. I’m pretty much over the fact.
I mean – it’s still there, I’m not saying it’s ever going to go away, but I learned to deal
with it in my day-to-day life. I have things that keep me going.)

“I also moved around a lot. When I started kindergarten I was in [names town A]
and later on I moved to [names town B] and then to [names town C] area, and then back
to [names town B] and then to [names town D] and [names town E], [names town F], and
then here [town G]. (The reader should know that geographically Brittney moved from
not only different towns in Maine, but also to different regions and school districts along
the coast, in northern, as well as central Maine.)

“First grade I was in [town B]. I stayed back because of my ADHD; I wouldn’t do
the work – nothing. They couldn’t keep me still. And I had to do it [1st grade] all over
again the next year – when I moved to [town C]. Also, when I moved to my new school I
was pretty much picked on the whole time I was in this school, from 2nd to 4th grade. I
was the little chubby girl; red-hair, freckles – they were just really mean kids – in general.
I didn’t go to half of my 4th grade year because of that. I was home most of the time.

“Then I moved into [town B] again and surprisingly, passed my 4th grade year.
When I went to 5th grade, like, when I first got to school I was the kid that was picked on
until I got to about 7th grade. Then I started hanging out with this group of kids that
weren’t – aren’t – good kids. But they were pretty well-known, popular kids – it’s just
they weren’t the best people. And I started dating one of them my 7th grade year. And
that’s when I started – I started using. And I wasn’t the greatest in school.
“In my 8th grade year, I was suspended; I think, four times – two in-schools, and two out-of-schools because of taking off in the middle of the school day – running from the school. I got arrested that year, multiple times, and got put on probation. But I did end up passing 8th grade and went into the 9th grade. I was there only a very short period of time and I ended up getting arrested again and went to the youth detention center for 30 days. When I was using, I got into a lot of trouble with drugs and theft and I had done a lot of different things – I had threatened arson. I wouldn’t do that now. Unfortunately – it’s all true.

“When I got out of the detention center, the psychologist at the center told me they wanted me to go to a psychiatric hospital. I went there multiple times that year because of medication and how it was making me angry and violent and suicidal. And I never went to school. And then I got put in the [names a therapeutic group home] I went AWOL during the summer from that program and came here to this shelter. I wasn’t going to school at all during this time.

“I got arrested again and went to the youth detention center for seven days and then went to my grandparent’s house and I started going to [names high school in town D]. And it wasn’t working out for me there because my two first cousins are pretty popular and everybody likes them. And I pretty much looked like shit compared to them. And not a lot of people liked me there. So, I ended up moving into my dad’s house and went to [town E]. While I was there my depression got worse and I stopped going to school again and ended up going to [names a mental health facility]. And I did go to school there. I was there until Feb. 20th of this year. I was half-way through my 10th grade year when I dropped out. I didn’t want to be in school because of the people. I never had a
good school situation. But the problem with my mom is that she’s an alcoholic, so I really
can’t be in the house with her, so my only choice is stay out on the streets until I move to
Florida in August.”

Kyle

Kyle, 19 years old, and I also met at the local outreach shelter for homeless teens.
Kyle is about 6’ tall and wore camouflaged jeans, black army boots and an armless
sweatshirt over a plaid, flannel shirt. He had the beginnings of facial hair and tattoos
across his knuckles that he later told me he had done himself. Kyle rarely smiled during
the interview and assumed a “tough guy” persona. Kyle remembered most of his child-
hood and could reflect on experiences in great detail. At one point, Kyle’s efforts to
maintain his hard-shell exterior broke down as he remembered an episode in his life that
caused so much emotional hurt he began to cry. He stopped the interview, but wanted to
continue after he felt he had regained some emotional control.

“I didn’t like school. I never really did like school. I liked the education, but, like,
pretty much teachers were always trying to tranquilize me. I was a hyper kid, I was
young. I was active. I always wanted to have fun, go out and have recess, talk, ask ques-
tions and the teachers really didn’t want to put up with that. They really didn’t want to
hear my questions – they didn’t want to experience any of the light that I had to offer at
that age. I would be constantly coming home with a letter saying that your child is too
hyper, he interferes with the kids schooling, he is very destructive in class and da, da,
da…the whole nine yards. So, they started putting me on medication right away, to keep
me stable in school. But the medication made school worse because I no longer was in-
interested in school – I was always sleeping on my desk, passing out in a corner somewhere. So, when the problem started with me was when they started tranq-ing me.

“In first grade, I started picking up some bad habits like stealing and lying – there was a lot of different reasons, you know? In the beginning, before I was born my dad took off to the military, so I never really knew him. And that pretty much messed up my mother, she was 15 when I was born and my dad was 18. So I ended up growing up without my dad. So I didn’t have a lot of discipline

“I wanted to be a part of my school, I wanted good things to happen to me – I wanted people to like me – but it just seemed like the more I tried the worse it got. I was constantly being put in detention, time-outs, pretty much for just being a kid. So, at about 3rd grade, I was starting to make some friends, and things started to slow down a little bit – but we starting to become more poor – and the older I got, I noticed it more. My mom didn’t work. So the desire of wanting things affected me more – like when I’d see a kid come into school with a Gameboy I’d start thinking of ways to take it. Or I see a kid making fun of somebody else or me and I’d want to immediately start a fight with this kid. I started to develop a lot of anger around 3rd grade. And it gradually got worse.

“In the middle of 3rd grade, I moved to [names a town in southern Maine] with my mom and my stepdad. I ended up watching this movie about this girl who could move stuff with her mind. Well, something about that just got to me – and I wouldn’t go to bed. I wanted to talk and understand it more – and something else happened (he doesn’t have any memory of what happened that night) and I ended up barricading the bedroom door – I remember being really angry, not understanding what was going on, and waking up the

17 A hand-held gaming computer
next day in a psych ward. *(Kyle believes this was an extended stay and remembers that his mother rarely visited him while he was there.)*

“When I got out of the hospital I moved back in with my Mom, and she had moved again while I was hospitalized. And I still noticed that my mom was poor. And my mom had a really bad habit of making us feel that and understand that and shedding her worry about being poor and not having enough, on others – so that it stressed everybody out. So me and my brother were starting to feel stress. We had the anger problems, but now we were starting to experience a new feeling and it was stress from being poor and not having things. But with my brother, he had a dad he could go to and his dad could take him and take care of him, but I didn’t have that. So, all these feelings were piling up and all these things were happening to me. I was about 9. And I was constantly angry, I was constantly getting into fights, constantly stealing, constantly running away at night. My mom had to constantly call the cops on me.

“I went to a new school when I moved in with my Mom. And I didn’t have a lot of friends there – actually, it was very hard for me to make friends. I also had trouble with the teachers there, too. They just didn’t want to deal with me. And my mom had no idea what to do, so the only thing she could do was try to get a hold of my dad. It had already been nine years and he had done nothing for me since then, other than to complain about paying for child support. I can understand where my dad is coming from – I can. But he should have made a whole bunch of more attempts than he did. Through all of this my mother was constantly getting involved with alcoholics, abusive relationships and that would play a big part too, because her biggest problem was as soon as she met a man – she’d marry him. Sometimes she wouldn’t even give it a week. And then she’d come
home and say, ‘We’re married’ and I’m like, ‘Well thanks for inviting me to the wedding’ and turn back to the TV. So, multiple marriages, multiple abusive relationships, distress, and poverty.

(Kyle talks about the experience he had with his father in Hawaii where his father had been stationed. Kyle’s stint with his father ended in more school failure and fights with other kids and teachers. His father, also frustrated with Kyle’s behavior, began physically punishing Kyle when he got home from school. Kyle explained how he visited his mother for Christmas and asked to not go back with his father, which she agreed to do. However, Mom had him hospitalized again.)

“I was probably in and out of there [mental health facility] five to six times and stayed for about six months each time for either med evaluations, psyche evaluations, anger management problems. The biggest reason I was there a lot was that they didn’t know what was wrong with me. But there was nothing wrong with me – you see? I didn’t have a mother I could depend on, I didn’t have a father I could depend on, I didn’t have a safe environment, I didn’t have that much education and I was an angry kid. And through that entire time – all through school – all they wanted to do was tranq me.

“I was probably around 7th grade by the time I finally got out of [names mental health facility] and they had me on whole bunch of different uppers and downers. Well, I got to the point where I refused to take my medication. I still don’t take medication. Some of the medication they were giving me actually had a high risk of actually harming me.

“I started going again to school at the old middle school. Well, that didn’t last long either. At this time I came back to all the friends I knew, like John and Mike [not
their real names], and you know? I missed them all, I thought about them the whole time and they didn’t even know me anymore. So…it broke my heart a little bit... (at this point Kyle begins to cry. He can’t talk, and he tries unsuccessfully to hold back tears)... because the people that I cared about…didn’t remember me anymore (pauses) and their life was going in a different direction. And I wasn’t part of it anymore. So making friends was hard. And they said Hi, once in awhile. But they forgot what we had.

“Then I started to experience depression and sadness and the stress and the anger never went away. There wasn’t much happiness – I don’t think there ever was any. I was just going downhill. Again, the teachers didn’t want to help me out. They thought there was no hope for me. So, from that point on I had a BS1 18 which made it even harder for me to make friends because I had a ‘tail’ – the whole time – everywhere I was going. I even heard references to me about being a Columbine child – like, I was somebody that would actually walk into school with a gun and start blasting everybody. I hadn’t done anything that serious and I was labeled as a threat to the community and to myself before I could even finish school.

“So, I started getting angrier and angrier and like fury raged you know, like you’re just glowing and if you had infra-red you’d see a ball of red – that kind of rage started to come out of me. I was 13, 14 years old. And, I was pretty much like, excuse my language, but fuck the world. I cared for people – I did want to help. But I was one of those kids that if your kids got caught hanging out with me – they were grounded. Well, all these things led up to the cops keeping a solid eye on me – and all these services were

18 Kyle describes being assigned a Behavioral Specialist 1, which is common for troubled kids. Typically, this person works for an agency who trains people to be “role models” for troubled kids. He/she will pick a client up from school, has a specific amount of hours to spend with a child depending on a clinical diagnosis, and is responsible for providing a healthy environment and activities for children in their care.
in the way – telling my mom that she should give me up to foster care. So, I ended up going to [therapeutic group home for kids] – and that place was awful.

“But there, the stress got worse cause I had to keep track of my thoughts, what I said, how I felt, I had to keep my facial expressions from staff, from kids. They were trying to put me on meds and I was constantly on guard. Mom visited once in awhile – but not very much. The thing that was saving me was the fact that I had an understanding that there was a higher power than me. And I also had compassion for people. I still care about people. I was forgiving. I still had a heart. I still had a soul. I still wanted to be a part of people’s lives. To make a difference in my own life. I still had that desire.

“This time I get out, and I got right back to [names town] – only now I’m in high school [9th grade]. The kids had heard about me and they were afraid of me. That kind of boosted my ego a little bit – but I didn’t advertise it. I just kept to myself and people just took me being a loner as ‘leave this kid alone, he’s going to come in here shooting people up – that’s what he wants’ and it was the complete opposite. I didn’t want any of that – it’s just that I gave up on making friends and I gave up on trying [to be part of anything]. They already had an opinion set about me and I wouldn’t be able to beat it.

“And it started to go really downhill because of drugs. There was all these things I experienced like stress and anger, rage and depression and sadness – they were just building up and building up and I didn’t have an outlet and I was going to counseling and there was BS1s and the first time I smoked a joint I remember all of that just went away and it was the first time it ever happened, this feeling of just, like, relaxation just came over me.

“Then I got into fights with Mom, got kicked out and ended up in another group home [out of his residential town] – and that was awful, too. They always wanted to
know what my problem was. But at the time this was going on, I was also at [names the local high school] and I was doing great! The teachers got along with me great – they really tried with me. I did all the classes in the high school and then in the middle of the day I went to the Special Education wing. It was going great, and I was happy to be there – I could have stayed in school all day. But what I dreaded was having to go back to where I lived [the group home].

“By that time, I had reached 10th grade, and when I went back to [names hometown high school] things went downhill again. Teachers were constantly telling me to just ‘drop out.’ In the other school nobody knew me. I think if I had stayed there, I would have graduated. Then, because of the constant rejection, and because I was older, I understood things a whole lot more.

“I have something inside me called Pandora’s Box. It’s all my sadness, my depression, my hate, my distaste for certain things that I’ve suppressed over all these years – and when it opens up, it’s a rage you just can’t put a label on. Well, that box started opening up slowly and slowly and slowly – cause I was so disappointed in myself. Cause I knew everything was going great – and then all of sudden, everything’s going to crap again – I come here and teachers hate me and I can’t get along with anybody and the cops were always pulling me over and da, da, da, da – so then I became the bad ass – and I did live up to the name. ‘Don’t come near me – I’ll kill ya.’ And I lived up to everything people said about me. So, I ended up in juvey [juvenile detention] for burglary, criminal mischief, possession of a firearm – a whole bunch of things.

“And on top of this, I’ve found God – well, I have a deeper sense of things – I just know – I’ve had a long 19 years. I do want to go to college. I spent so many years want-
ing to go into the military just to get away. But I’ve kind of pulled myself away from it because I don’t feel like the military is me. I don’t believe that going to war is what I want anymore – I don’t believe fighting for a country that doesn’t believe in the morals and values that it was based on anymore. I guess what I want to do is be involved in the community and be involved in helping others – like PeaceCorp.”

Beth

I met Beth at a community, “mom and pop” convenience store in the coastal town in which she resided. The store is typical of those in Maine – it sits at the cross-section of two rural routes, which, to an “outsider,” may look as if it is in the middle of nowhere. Yet, as a Maine native, I know that it is probably the hub of the town. Beth and I sat at a small picnic table in the back of the store.

Beth is 18 years old. She was on time for the interview and very personable. She has shoulder-length, reddish hair and is a taller, heavyset girl. She wore a t-shirt and jeans and had a silver stud on one side of her nose. She also smiled a lot throughout the interview with dimples on both cheeks. She seemed to have a “laid back” personality, although during the interview she sometimes looked pained as she was relating her story:

“I loved Kindergarten. I had so much fun. It could be because I lived in a small town and I knew all the kids there before I even went to school. I did all my elementary and middle school in [names town]. It was all one school and I got really good grades. Then in 5th grade…I was home-schooled. My father had had a stroke – he was only 48. So I was at home helping my mom out and doing home-schooling through the church – and helping her with my little sister who was a little less than a year old. I actually liked it [homeschooling] but I wouldn’t do it again. I also started to go to counseling when I was
in the 5th grade. They thought I was depressed but my mom didn’t want to treat me for depression, she didn’t believe I was depressed, she wanted me treated for ADHD, like, I have a problem with focusing?"

“Sixth grade was hard. I went back to my old school. I didn’t have as many friends and my teachers were mean. It was really rough. So, I kind of, was like, a loner – sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. I still knew everybody. But I think that the fifth grade interruption made a difference.

“In 7th grade, my father died and I left school. All the kids were picking on me ‘cause I got emotional one day and was crying and they were like, ‘He’s dead, he can’t come back – crying isn’t going to do anything.’ I just stayed at home. I didn’t go to school but I went back in 8th grade. And I was still a loner, but I graduated. And when I went back some of the teachers were like, really nice to me, and they were helping me catch up and stuff. Math has always been my worst subject so that’s what took me the longest. I still liked school in the 8th grade.

“But freshman year? It was fantastic. I absolutely loved it! I loved school. I liked music; I was in chorus. I made new friends in the 9th grade, too, because there were two different elementary [K-8] schools that came together in high school. Then [in the middle of] my sophomore year I moved to North Carolina - me, my mom, my little sister and my sister that’s a year or two older than me. I lived with my grandparents. My grandfather had just gone back into remission so we were helping them out for awhile. I didn’t go to school. I had no choice really; I was too young to live on my own. And then when I came back [to Maine] I went to another school [names school]. I guess I would have still been a
sophomore. That was my junior year, but I had to be a sophomore again ‘cause I didn’t get all my credits.

“All the time I was in school my mom never remarried. She did the bad thing and met guys off the internet. And she dated a lot. She would talk to them for a few months, be like (here she imitates mom with a higher pitched voice) ‘Oh, I’m madly in love with you’ and invite them up for Christmas or Thanksgiving. And I think the worst part is she’d tell my little sister, ‘This is your new daddy.’ If I hadn’t had to move around so much and didn’t have guys in and out of my mom’s life – which was also in and out of my life – I would have graduated high school.”

“So, when I came back I went into Alt Ed [alternative education program]. I think it was a good choice. It was my choice. I went to alt ed from 8:00 till like 11:00, and then I’d go to the vocational school. When I went to the alternative school, I would leave my house at six in the morning and walk there and I wouldn’t go home until late in the evening ‘cause I got so sick of the new houses and the new places and – oh. I passed all year on honor roll and I did the same thing with voc [vocational education]. I learned to be a really good cook – I almost went to a culinary arts school.

“My senior year….well my mom – I love my mom – but she kept getting evicted and we kept having to move from place to place, so it was really hard for me to stay in school. So, I moved in with my sister down here in [names town]. She’s got a house; she’s got two kids I take of every day while they [sister and brother-in-law] work. I get room and board to do this, which is also good, ‘cause, I mean, like I said, I love my mom but I don’t think I could live with her anymore. ‘Cause when I lived there, I wouldn’t unpack my stuff, I’d just keep it packed up and be like, ‘When are we moving?’ I need sta-
bility, and this July I’ll be in the same house for a year, which is the longest I’ve ever been in one place. Me and my sister are best friends. We’ve been best friends since our dad died.

“So, back in October, I was like, you know, ‘I’ve really gotta’ finish my education; it’s driving me crazy!’ so I figured it all out and I started going to the Learning Center in January. So, it’s a good thing I’m getting my GED and not a diploma.”

NOTE: After the interview, Beth told me that she wanted to go to college, specifically, the University of Maine, and major in English. She loves Shakespeare, she explained, and wished her high school had a curriculum that included his plays. But since they didn’t she told me that one English teacher, before Beth left school for the final time, worked with her on an independent study of *Hamlet*. She became very animated as she related this love of literature and even though I had gotten up to leave, I sat back down again. With the recorder off, we talked about *MacBeth* and she asked me what she could expect as an English major. This off-the-record discussion felt like Beth really needed some conversation and wanted to make plans but did not have the resources — or did not know how to access the resources she needed to move forward with her goals.

**Anya**

I first called Anya and left a message on her cell phone, which she returned. She told me that she was 19 years old, was enrolled at an out-of-state college and wouldn’t be able to do a one-on-one interview so we set up an audio-taped, telephone interview. Anya often spoke in starts and stops, hesitant to get the words out. Much of her narrative was punctuated by nervous laughter — often in places that seemed sad or difficult for her.
“I never liked school. I didn’t even like my teacher. I liked the learning aspect – I didn’t like writing papers and reading books that didn’t mean anything to me. I don’t... I don’t remember Kindergarten – they wouldn’t, like, they were always so mean to me. I remember doing the alphabet and I wouldn’t say the alphabet – like, I didn’t know the number after three (nervous laughter).

“We moved from [names town] to [names town] when I was in 2nd grade. I don’t really remember much of that. I had a really cool second grade teacher, but then she left and I had a new one and I didn’t like that one. And, like, I have trouble reading and things, so they put me in – like, with the special people program; and I didn’t like them. So actually, I guess... I guess I got along with my peers. I think it stems back to like, I don’t know, I just don’t like having to shut up and listen to people telling me what to do (laughs).

“I didn’t do well in elementary school. Reading and math was hard for me, but then I got a math tutor, and he was like, ‘She knows how to do it – she’s just not doing it.’ I had reading help – and they were like, ‘Do you not like this lady?’ and obviously I wouldn’t say I didn’t like her, cause I wouldn’t be that rude. My mom and dad got divorced when I was like, um, I don’t really know. I thought I did. My dad was a truck driver, so he was never around anyways. My mom was with my step-father soon after my father, and, um, they just, well, they were together for like 10 years before they got married.

“In 7th and 8th grade – then, I started liking teachers, some of them anyways, and not liking my peers. I was... a... fat kid. They weren’t nice to fat kids... and I had really wiry hair, so like, I got made fun of a lot. But I don’t think I was bullied. I think I was a
bad influence on people. I can mess with people’s heads, I guess. I don’t know. Around 8th grade I also started doing a lot of drugs. My parents let me do whatever I wanted, basically, and I, uh (laughs) – I did whatever I wanted!

“Grade-wise, I was like a C student, that, and a little lower. I liked [high school B]; I had a great time there. I had a really easy time making friends there. I wish I didn’t have to leave. The reason I moved is because I lived with my step-father with my mother and then they, um, separated, and me and my mom moved to [names town]. They got divorced when I was a freshman.

“And then I, um, I started rebelling once I got to [high school A]. I moved out of my mom’s house after that. I mean, me and my mom got along great – I was just – my sister, actually, she moved back home when we moved to here, and I hate my sister. I moved out of my mom’s when I was 15, so, between, so like finishing school – I mean not finishing school wasn’t that much of a surprise to me. I stayed in friends’ rooms, and I just partied all the time and crashed at people’s houses.

“In high school – I smoked a lot of pot. That was pretty much what my high school life consisted of. I didn’t have a set group of friends, you know, like how they have like cliques and stuff? I had, like, friends from, like each of the crowds. I liked it. I liked not knowing what was going to happen next. I went to the last day of high school, and stuff. I just didn’t pass my classes. It was more of an attendance thing; I’d go in one door and then out the other. I just never went back. I would have graduated at 17. My birthday is in September. I’ve always been, like, the youngest. I don’t look very young. I never hung out with people my age anyways, I always tended to hang out with the older people. When I was a freshman, I was hanging out with seniors.
“Dropping out never affected anything. It never affected my jobs or anything – so it really didn’t push me to do it [finish high school]. All my friends even graduated. I even went to the graduation. I love to learn new things, and I like to be intellectual and know things, but school was like – nah – screw it.

“I mean, like, I did get into college, like perfect timing. Like, people are straight out of high school at 18 or 19, and I’m 19, even though I’ve been off high school for like, two years now. I feel good about myself. “I’m in the culinary academy. I’ve always worked in restaurants, and I’ve met some amazing chefs in the restaurant that I did work in, and ah, okay, I know how to cook – so, let’s go with it. I’m a pretty good cook. I don’t even want to be a chef.

“I actually took night classes between living in these apartments, but with work, it’s been – I was like, I’d rather be a full-time worker than cut my hours back. Cause, you know, with rent and stuff, [school is] just not going to work. And like, college just like came into the picture. I didn’t even think about college when I was getting my GED. I was like, hey, what would be gratifying at this moment in my life? I was like, ‘okay, might as well. I don’t have anything else to do’”

_Do you think if school was different you would have stayed in?_

“You mean if they had cared? You know, I probably would have stayed if someone helped. If they were like, oh, well, you’re going to be like my project and I’m going to get you through this – then, I would have done it. But – whatever. Nobody really did that for me. I think that’s probably a lot of it. I don’t know. I got into college, and I started meeting people that I can connect with on my level. I mean the people that I met
in my time off and when I experienced life the way I did – *those* are the ways I made my friends."

**Miki**

I actually first met Miki during a focus group with homeless teens that was connected to a project that was unrelated to this study. After the focus group she had mentioned that she had taken and passed her GED in January and that she had dropped out of high school at the end of her junior year – or, as she said, “she just never went back.” She then gave me a phone number where I could reach her. Miki and I met for her interview at a local downtown restaurant. She is slender and about 5'5", with a tattoo on her shoulder, and shoulder length light brown hair. It was a warm spring day, so we agreed to sit outside for the interview. She was on time and came with a male friend who she was adamant I understood was “*not* her boyfriend.” Miki said she was living in an apartment with her boyfriend at the time of the interview, but prior to that had been homeless since she was about 16 years old.

In person, however, Miki projects a tough demeanor that she seems to need to portray. She invites one to “knock the chip off my shoulder” as she talks about her life and as she interacts with others. Though physically small, her personality is such that she “takes over” and one immediately notices her. This bravado or instinct to be “tough” is as if she might be in danger of a physical fight, or most likely, she projects this persona so that she’s *not* in a physical fight. I believe this persona sometimes made it difficult to know which part of Miki’s story was “real.”

In contrast, Miki is also very personable and articulate. She was polite and courteous when I called her to set up the interview and likewise throughout the interview. She
expressed that she loves to read, and claimed that she also loves to write and wants to go to college and complete a major in journalism. She believes that she won’t try to go to college, however, because she doesn’t know how she will pay for it. I believe she doesn’t know how to go about the application process, although this is something she probably wouldn’t admit. I also believe she is not yet ready to commit herself to a college program.

Although I’ll try to reconstruct it here in a cohesive narrative, Miki tells her story in bits and pieces, going back and forth after she’s answered a question and like she is trying to find the role that makes her appear more socially appropriate; but then, she reverts back to some other, more detailed, and less socially appropriate event in her life. For instance, Miki talks about being in the principal’s office for misbehavior most of her school career and being “aggressive” – yet, she continues that she liked school, liked her teachers and it was “fun.” Most of her monologue is contradictory, much like her persona, however, the truth about the context of her life seems to jump out while other pieces appear to be more wishful thinking, or possibly, as I mentioned previously, to appear to be more socially acceptable:

“Okay. I started at [names the school] Elementary. I got kicked out of kindergarten because some kid stole my block, so I punched him in the nose. They called my mom, told my mom I was too aggressive and couldn’t go back. But I was taught if they hit you, hit ‘em back, and I always did. I spent more time in the principal’s office and my mom spent more time at my school than she did at work. I liked school, school was fun – it was definitely something new to my terms.

“I went back to first grade. I liked first grade. I never got along with a lot of people, though. Not many people there liked me. Kids were teasing me, tormenting, annoy-
ing, poking, pestering. Kids are vicious; it's horrible. I feel like I got teased a lot in school, up until 5th grade. I didn't have any close friends. I stayed to my books, pretty much. I was an A-B student all the way through. Once I hit 5th grade, I made a lot of friends – cause they [school district] combined [names town] and [names town] together in the same school.

"In 6th grade, there was a bunch of dances, a bunch of friends. Granted, there was a lot of fighting and a lot of arguing and a lot of my mom coming to the school because I hit kids and they just weren't smart enough to stay down when I hit them. But I wasn't a bully. I defended the kids that got bullied. I loved my teachers. Miss B was the best. She was my reading teacher. She always seemed to pick out the best books, and I mean, I had ADHD, so it was hard to pay attention. But it seemed like when I was reading something, I'd like, engulf myself in it.

"My family was great. I mean, we lived in a trailer. My brother is four years younger than I am. Different fathers. But my step-dad is great. He's a savior. He is my dad. He's my dad. And they're [mom and step-dad] still together. At first, I resented my mother because my [biological] father was never there. But my father never wanted to be there; and I've realized this as of recently. My mom was 19 or 20 when she got married. But I do remember my mom chasing my father around a table with a butcher's knife before. My dad moved to Connecticut my sophomore year. And I hated him. I still hate him.

"In our high school, they combined [names four different towns] kids all together. It is a horrible mix because you get [town A] and [town B] that have been in the same schools with each other for years. [Town C] and [town D] were never in the same
schools. You’d get people that would bunch together by town. And then you got – Me. The-one-who-just-seemed-to-hate-everybody-because-no-one-could-get-along-with-anybody. I was the whole Hot Topic girl. I wore the pants with the spikes and the chains and everything. Had long black hair, dyed it, you know, didn’t want to deal with anybody. There was about six, seven of us girls that did it. And if you punched one of ‘em, you had to deal with the rest of them. We were the Goth crew - it was everybody from any grade that, you know, didn’t really fit in.

“And then they’d go and have assemblies saying that girls couldn’t wear the short, short skirts. But if you were pretty and you were a “prep” you could get away with it. The “prep” kids got privileged because they had mommy and daddy’s credit card. The principal didn’t really care what they did. I mean, you’d catch the prep kids off in the corner smoking somewhere, and the Goth kids would sit out in our cars and have a cigarette, and we’d get expelled or suspended for it. And I hung out with a lot of guys. I was more one of the guys than I was one of girls.

“Our school went and stuck with the preppy kids. It was favoritism. Just because we were different and felt like dressing like we were different and expressing who we really were – they flipped out on us. They hated the fact that we were different and we felt the need to show it. My school was horrible – I got slut, I got whore, I got everything written on my locker and the school didn’t do anything about it. I mean I watched this kid do it, and they didn’t do anything about it. So I broke his nose. My mom threw a hissy fit. My dad left work to come in and solve this problem, that’s when they finally started listening. This kid was the sports star, he was the biggest prep and he was the baby of the high school. His dad paid for everything the school needed.

19 Hot Topic is a teenage novelty store that sells mostly black clothing, chains, spikes, etc.
So when did you finally leave school?

“The summer before my senior year. I finished my junior year. I ended up getting into an argument with my mom, packed all my things and moved out. I was 18. ‘See ya later, bye.’ It was fine for the summer cause I stayed with my friends and we all partied and did a lot of things – not good – but nonetheless, it happened.

“My mom and stepdad were not happy about me dropping out. I didn’t hear the end of it. So I got my GED. I mean, I’m always willing to learn, I’m always willing to do something, but I don’t like feeling inferior to everybody – and that’s the way the classes generally made me feel. I want to go to college and be a journalist, but they don’t exactly have funding for homeless kids. I haven’t found it yet – and I’ve been searching a long time for the funding to go to college.”

Mathew

Mathew chose to meet at the local YMCA. He indicated that he worked there, so that he could get a key to a teen room where it would be quiet enough for a taped interview. He was very poised and collected during the interview and his calm demeanor and conduct made him appear much older than his just-turned 18 years. Mathew is about 6’ tall and thickset, with the beginning of a beard. He wore a baseball cap (Yankees) and a striped shirt and khakis. Mathew only smiled occasionally during the interview. He seemed defensive when I asked him questions, yet he answered those questions in detail. He also looked at me either like I did not believe his story, or that I would laugh at him. He did start to smile near the end of our interview, which lightened his whole appearance.

Before the interview, Mathew told me that he was the youngest Ballroom dance instructor in the state. He said that this was a passion of his and that he was continuously
learning new dances and even entering competitions. As a 17-year-old, he and his dance partner won 3rd place in a state competition – this was an area in which he excelled, and he spoke with pride about this accomplishment.

“I started school as a homeschooler until 6th grade. I liked it pretty good. I mean, you know there was no pressure or anything from other kids to do anything – so that was a plus. We mostly home-schooled because we don’t believe in evolution and my parents just didn’t want us to get caught up in anything early. Mom doesn’t like the whole public school – how they teach and everything. My dad runs the [names their church] and we go every Sunday. I help to set up the equipment and take everything down every Sunday. My mom and sisters sing, so, they’re, like, the main music (laughs).

“We move a lot. I’ve probably moved a total of 15 times so far, so home-schooling really helped that. When I got into 6th grade, I felt like I was a little behind in math but I was getting there. I was catching up. And it took awhile to get used to [the school setting]. You had to remember what the bells meant? And half the time I was confused ‘cause I was like – Well, the bell rang, what do I do?”

“In the 6th grade, I went to [names a private Christian school]. It was awful. At first, it was good, and then I got picked on. It was just – I was overweight at my age and these older kids that thought they were cool started making fun of me and then it caught on and my class started to make fun of me. I went to the principal but one of the kids that was doing it was the Pastor’s son. I didn’t want to disappoint my parents – so I fought through it and I really didn’t tell them until the 7th grade. I wanted out so bad. These 8th graders – every day – would pick on me, make fun of my last name – make fun of anything they could. My parents took me out after 7th grade, ‘cause they realized how bad it
had gotten. I mean, I don’t know. I was a nice kid, I didn’t bother anybody, and all of a sudden I started to get picked on. And nobody intervened.

“In 8th grade, I transferred to another school. We moved closer from [town] to [town] and then we moved into [town he now lives in]. So that’s when I started to go to that school. About two weeks into school another kid started picking on me and then more kids started to pick on me. They would do it in the hallway or during gym class when nobody could hear it. I told the teachers, I told the principal, I told my parents. Because I don’t deserve to get bullied – I didn’t do anything wrong. And the principal talked to the kids. You know, they denied it? And he believed the kids. So, my parents were furious but I decided to finish out the 8th grade ‘cause it really only started to get bad at the end of the year. We only had like a month left and I decided I’d rather finish this and then move on instead of dropping out and taking the 8th grade all over again.

“The next year I went to high school. A few of the same people from middle school were there, but most of the main kids went to another school. And that really helped me out I thought for a minute. It’s like eight middle schools, they all go to [names high school] for high school. It was different kids, but it was the same problem. One of my friends from middle school is still my friend, but the other one turned on me.

“Finally, me and my parents came to an agreement that it was just too much to handle. Like, for example, I was in science class and we had, like, a two-seat desk so that we faced the room. Me and this kid – we’re in class right? He takes out a nail. I see the nail out of the corner of my eye and then all of a sudden he just goes to the side and stabs me in the side with the nail. Like, out of nowhere! I had a shirt on, and a hoodie, which took most of the blow, but the nail still made a little mark on the side there – and I was
like, what was that for? I went to the principal and said, ‘Hey this kid just basically stabbed me with a nail’ and he said he’d talk to him about it, and the kid, he must have hid the nail or something. He didn’t get in trouble. And then, like the same kid he had drugs with him one day, and I saw it and I told the principal about it, but he got away with it! He had drugs, he stabbed me with a nail, yet he still got away with everything. I told my parents, who talked to the principal and he did not change anything. And it’s always the ‘jock’ it seems like, that is the bully.

“I didn’t finish the 10th grade there. I went to [names a private Christian high school] and finished off my 10th grade there. There was about 20 students who went there. It was nice; I had no problems at all. But money-wise, well, it was a private school – you gotta pay tuition. I had to stop going – I didn’t really have any choice, and after seeing what happened at [names public high school], my parents did not want me to go to a regular high school again. So, at the beginning of 11th grade I started taking the pre-GED. And in January of this year, I took my first GED test – History. And I passed it which really made me happy because it was hard. And then pretty soon I went five for five. I passed everything. As an 11th grader, the whole year I studied GED books. I just did it at home.”

Kyra

Kyra and I had set up her interview at the local Dunkin’ Donuts in her hometown. Yet, when I called to remind her that I would be meeting her approximately one hour before I was to leave, she told me that she had forgotten about the interview and that she didn’t have any transportation to the meeting site. I suggested that it might be easier to conduct a telephone interview and that I could mail her compensation if she was willing.
She agreed. Kyra explained later in the interview that at 18, she was also eight months pregnant, but that was not the reason for her dropping out of high school.

“Well, I really don’t remember my younger years in school; I was 5 or 6 when I started kindergarten and I started school in [names town] so I went to school there until, I would say until 3rd grade. I, honestly, I don’t remember anything before my 3rd grade year. I do remember my 3rd grade teacher and then I moved when I was in the middle of my 3rd grade year. Overall, I always really got good grades in school, up until, obviously, high school.

“I - I liked school. The only thing that I ever had trouble with was... the typical...um...you know...the typical, kids that always made fun of...you know...the little, chubbier kids or the kids that didn’t have the nice clothes or...you know, that’s the only thing I ever had trouble with. I had my own friends. I - I had, you know, I had found – I mean all kids get into trouble, you know – but besides that, overall, I - I did good until I got into high school.

“Middle school, I moved, again. I’m 19 years old and I have moved 16 times, until I got to my 7th grade year. I’ve been in two of the same schools since then. So, the longest I ever stayed in one school was two years. Everybody knows, you know, when you start at a new school it’s scary and you know, you’re nervous, and I had to do it so many times that you would think I’d be used to it, but I wasn’t. You know? I always just had to do my own thing. A lot of people around here are very – I – I – I don’t want to be mean but – stuck-up, you know? I’ve always – I’ve always, always been the chubbier kid in school that nobody really liked. So, I was always made fun of. So I liked going to
learn, you know, I never minded it, but I hated – I hated being there. I hated the people. I’d come home crying all the time.

“I didn’t really have any teachers I could go to until I got into high school. Well, I – I got to know my guidance counselor very well, only because I, um...my sophomore year in high school – um...I, um...something really tragic had happened to me (Kyra never disclosed what this was, and she was so anxious I didn’t pursue it) and I...just...I needed somebody to talk to. I – you know – I lost all my friends because nobody believed me, and, ah...the only way for me to deal with it was to tell somebody who would actually believe you and listen to you. And that happened with my guidance counselor.

“My mom was always a single mother and she just struggled and, um, you know (not to put down my mother, because I love her very much) but she always had different boyfriends. She was young; she was 19 when I was born. The only reason why we moved a lot was because she struggled to take of me and my brother. Most of it was moving in with boyfriends, um, but, I knew she was having a hard time, so I’m just always supportive and I’ll just - I’m always there for her whenever she needs me.

“My dad was not around. He started coming around when I was 16, I knew of him, and I had talked to him, but he was never...never really there. Like a father really should be. I feel like I had to grow up really fast – absolutely. I feel like I was always my brother’s parent.

“I dropped out the beginning of my junior year and my mom convinced me to go back. And I just couldn’t – I still couldn’t do it. I tried. Just, the anxiety and, um...I had really bad anxiety and really bad depression and it...it got to me. I went back to the Alternative Ed high school when I went back. And I just – I couldn’t do it. My guidance
counselor was supportive when I decided to drop out, only because she knew what I was going through.

“She didn’t want me to [drop out], you know. What teacher does? They always try and convince you to go back – but the fact that I had tried to go back, and I couldn’t do it – she basically, well, she understood that I just... I couldn’t be there and it was hard on me. You know, she [my mother] didn’t want to see me hurt anymore. And most of my troubles in school were the kids. You know? And you can’t really change other people’s kids. The teasing was all behind the teachers’ backs. Even if you bring something up to a teacher’s attention and, you know, they tell another kid to stop, or to, you know, whatever – it’s not going to stop. It never did. I told teachers. But there’s nothing that they can do about it. It was in school, on the playground, on the bus, getting off the bus, it was all the time.

“I think that the way kids are brought up are looked back on their parents – they come from families that either they have seen their family members, do such a thing, or their family or parents haven’t said anything to them about *not* being mean or *not* bullying. I understand that sometimes you can’t necessarily control your kids. Some kids will do what they want to do, but when they’re in elementary school or in middle school, I think you should be able to control your kids. There was nothing that my mom could do about it either – she always just told me to keep my head up, and not to listen to them.”

*Are you going to be a single mom?*

“No, the baby’s father is here – thank God! I can say that for *now*, you know, cause you can’t always know. We live together and he’s very excited about the baby –
which surprises me. I’ve known him since I’ve lived here and, um, he is actually very excited. We’re having a little girl.”

**Hannah**

Hannah chose to meet me at the local Dunkin’ Donuts. She is petite with blonde hair which was pulled back in a tight ponytail that accentuated her conspicuously blue eyes. She seemed very comfortable and poised and smiled a lot during the interview. Hannah is 18 years old, and both parents graduated with GEDs. Hannah answered the questions articulately, but not before she paused to think a little bit about what I asked her.

“I started school in New Hampshire. Kindergarten was fine, but once I started to get into elementary school, I was more like an outcast – but it was by choice – I just didn’t like being around groups of people. I was, like, clinically shy. I don’t know why, I was just always shy.

“Junior High [was] when it really went downhill. That was the first time we ever moved. We lived in an apartment before, and my parents wanted to get out of the apartment and they found a nice house in [names the town she is from]. It wasn’t too far from New Hampshire; they thought we’d still be able to keep in touch with our friends, but it never happened. I loved it there [New Hampshire] (pauses). My grades were good – no problems. I would much rather have gone there for high school; I knew I would’ve graduated. And I was involved in sports when I lived there, and when I moved here, and I was just like – Wow.

“In the 7th grade (pauses) I had problems with girls. I ended up getting into the “wrong crowd” of kids. I started doing drugs and drinking. And that’s when I started re-
belling against school. I was cutting classes. My grades weren't good in middle school – and I didn't care. It was really just because I did get involved with the wrong crowd.

"My parents thought I was just going through a stage. They didn't know I was using drugs and stuff until I actually came home one day and overdosed on some prescription pills. But I didn't try hiding it from them, like, I would leave stuff around my room where she [mother] would be picking up my room. She just never caught on. And I didn't even try hiding it. When I overdosed, they thought it was like a "cry for help" kind of thing.

Did you feel like this was a cry for help?

"I think it was [nods]. I went in and had a meeting with the principal and he agreed that it would be fine for me to not go back to school after that. I completely stopped [using illegal drugs] after I overdosed. [But] that began the problems with girls, and when I went to high school, I just kept getting into so much trouble because of just girls. I ended up dropping out again about three months into my freshman year.

"I tried looking for a job – I was not planning on going back. But it was really hard to get a job so young – I was 15 or 16 – and my mom and I went back to the high school to re-enroll and they were like, 'Well, we have the Alternative Program,' and I was like, 'Well, I don't want to go to school where it's all bad kids' and they're like 'No, it's not like that.'

"Once I got to the alternative school – that was good. I had a relationship with my teachers at this school. I had the same teachers all four years and they knew every little detail about me. Like, they have to know all the bad things about you before you go there, so they knew how to handle me, and they knew how to talk to me. So, it just made it a lot
easier. And it's a good thing they have that program because I definitely would not have made it as far as I did! (laughs). You get overlooked at the high school – and at my school [the alternative education program], you couldn’t get overlooked. But they don’t have a math class there. So I had to go back to the high school – full-time, too – and I had to take two math classes and they were separated, so I had to take an extra class just to squeeze in there and it just wasn’t working out. I wish they [alt ed program] would have had a math teacher. I only needed two math credits. I felt bad about leaving high school. I know once I have kids and they’re getting ready for prom, I’m definitely going to wish I went to my prom years and years ago.”

“My parents were disappointed I didn’t get my diploma, but they supported me. My mom supported me more than my dad, ‘cause he was like, ‘Why can’t you do it?’ but he doesn’t really understand what it’s like for girls at the high school. But they knew I was going to go get my GED, so they were fine with it. My mom and my dad both have their GED, even though they didn’t get it until later on in life.”

Jessica

Jessica is about 5’ 6”, 18 years old, with blue eyes and bright, cherry-colored hair. She claims she likes to surf – magazine surf – down the stairs, and at one point broke her foot, which required surgery, doing so. She was quick to laugh and was very much a “free spirit.” Jessica would have graduated last year.

Jessica had a very vivid recall of each year in school and of the conditions and circumstances that acted as barriers to her education. However, because of the sheer length of the interview, some of Jessica’s story has been summarized as narrator voice in her narrative, but the gist of her educational challenges has been maintained in an effort
to describe her background and the key circumstances that led Jessica to her GED program.

"When I started kindergarten, I had a little separation anxiety from my mom, like my family because, like they weren't there. And I really liked to learn and when I was little I used to, like set up like, I used to pretend to be the teacher and my stuffed animals would be the classmates and I used to set up math problems for myself, or have my parents set me up some. I was good at it – my teacher said I was smart. But I used to pretend to be sick a lot, used to play hooky a lot, just like so I could stay home and be with my mom and just hang out. I was friends with people, but it's just like, I guess, I just did not want to be in school for that long away from my mom and I'm not even (here Jessica lowers her voice to almost a whisper) – I'm not even that close with them now.

"I was very spiritual, too, when I was little, I just wanted to know more about God and, like, we stopped going to church when I was little, cause we just always had things going on, I guess, or got lazy, and I wanted to know so much more about God and, just about, how life works, I guess. I'm still really interested in the different religions, because they all like have the same, kind of (pauses, she can't find the words) like they all go back to the same thing, like they branch off in directions, but they come from the same route – I suppose. And it's just very fascinating to me to learn about these different cultures and their beliefs and their traditions.

"Second grade was a little bit easier, because in first grade and second grade I had the same teachers, that multi-age class, so I got to know everybody in 1st grade and then we were all in the same class together, again in 2nd grade. The summer of 2nd grade my parents were going to get a divorce but then, like they went camping together and
fixed things. At times, I think they should have got a divorce. I remember my dad was really upset, like he was crying and we were all crying, but my dad – like, I remember, that was the first time I saw him cry. And my sister, she took it really bad, but like, I guess my role in my family has always been the peace-maker and the one who just like, kind of like, holds everything together because my mom always comes to me for advice, and my sister is my big sister, but she is like my big-little sister? Cause I guess, like, I didn’t feel like my parents really cared about me getting hurt, I kind of distanced myself, and I was more independent? (Jessica describes an older sister who was abusive when she was home alone with Jessica and who, Jessica says, “had anger issues.” Dismissed as “sibling rivalry” by their parents, this sister played a very important role in Jessica’s pre-adolescent life by introducing her to alcohol at age 11, and marijuana at age 13.)

“Third grade was a really fun year. I had a deaf girl in my class, and that was really cool because I got to learn sign language and I still remember a little. And, oh yeah, I was in Gifted and Talented that year, I think it was English or Reading during that time, like a small group of kids went to a different room and worked on different projects and talked about different things. So, that made me feel good!

“In 4th grade, that was fine because my teacher, she was really cool, but, I made friends much easier. And school was kind of fun, that’s where I knew that I was smart, and I was good for something. You know, I got a lot of praise for the things that I did do. My dad helped me out with a lot of my projects because he just, well, he gave me the ideas and I started to do them because they were a lot of fun

“In 5th grade, I was so happy and was in there with a bunch of my friends and we had the funnest class, and [my teacher] made yearbooks for us, and we both had like, a
connection because she was the first one who really knew what was going on at home. Nobody else really asked me or anything, she was the first one. It was cool because she was a teacher, and then she, like kind of opened up to me, and like, was kind of on the same level and she wasn’t talking down to me. She was listening to me and saying, ‘You know if you ever need anything,’ because I was a good student and I did my work, so she was very understanding if, like, one day I had a bad night and I didn’t come in with my homework. She would have been like, okay – it’s all right. I didn’t abuse that.

“I was in all advanced classes for 5th grade, the highest math class, the highest writing, and the people who did really well in writing got to start learning a language, and she knew French so she was teaching French on her free time. I was getting more into the social thing. I was a straight A student up until then, I mean I used to play sick every now and then, cause I kind of got into that habit. And like sometimes my family would get in a fight and I tried to calm everybody down and then forget about my homework – and then I’d try to like do it on the bus, or before the bell rang.

“Middle school was when I started to slide. In 6th grade, I liked my teachers, liked everybody that was in my class. Like, it was fun. One thing I didn’t like was that we were learning about evolution, and it didn’t fit in with what I believed in. And I was like, well if you don’t teach any other religions, why should you teach the scientific way? (Sighs). Like I guess, 6th grade was more about popularity and just like socializing with people and I did my homework, but sometimes I would forget during the night because I would like blow it off because of a varsity game because everybody was there.

“Then, while I was riding the bus, this boy who was in 8th grade liked me for some reason. He was just so cute, he was actually just a sweetheart, he played football
and I got into cheering. Like we had known each other for a year before that, we were really, really close. November vacation I had snuck out to see him, and I got grounded. So he was calling me non-stop and my parents wouldn’t let me talk to him. And so, um, I called him one Friday night on my parents’ cell phones (pause) and both of them died [the cell phones] and I didn’t even get to say goodbye – I just started laughing. And the next day, I was planning on him just showing up at my house, and I was still grounded that day, but, um, (Jessica is having a hard time talking about this – she pauses almost after every word and sighs throughout this piece of the dialogue) I, my parents, let me go out with friends of the family to go see The Grinch, and me and my boyfriend were supposed to see The Grinch that day, but I tried calling him, because I decided when my dad was going outside and do yard work, that I would, like use the phone and sneak a call to him.

“So, I asked for him on the phone and his mom was about to go get him and all of a sudden I heard this like, piercing scream, and, like then the phone hung up. So I called him again, and like, his name was Mathew [not his real name] but everybody called him BooBoo, I called back and I asked for him, and I was like, ‘Hi, is Boo there?’ and she was like, ‘No he’s not!’ and she started screaming. And, so I called him a couple of times from the friend of the family’s house, but his brother was like, ‘I don’t think he’s coming back, and I was like, ‘What the hell?’ The next day we were going to a family birthday party, and the phone rang and it was my friend but I wasn’t allowed to talk on the phone so, um, my mom answered the phone and she told my friend I was grounded and then all of a sudden she was like, ‘Are you serious?’ and like she went into the pantry and shut the door. Then she went upstairs and started talking to my dad, then they called my sister
upstairs, and then she came down and she was being nice to me. I was like, ‘Okay, this is really weird.’ She asked me if I wanted to watch a movie, or if I wanted anything to drink. She told me they were upstairs because they were discussing my Christmas presents. And then my dad came down and shut the TV off, and his eyes were like fire-engine red, they were bloodshot, and he was like, ‘We have to tell you something.’ And, I don’t know, I thought maybe I did something. I was like, ‘What did I do now?’ But, he told me that my boyfriend had died, the night before, that he committed suicide. And, you know, I was staring blankly. And it didn’t hit me until 5 minutes later and tears started like pouring out, and they were like, ‘You can have all the friends you want over, we’ll take you out, you guys can watch movies, what do you want to do?’ And, of course, you know, like – I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I didn’t want to do anything at the time. I just wanted to like – disappear. But, I had my friends over, and that still didn’t help, because some of my friends weren’t that close with him, and some of them were like, ‘Oh, died a virgin,’ or ‘He’s going to hell.’ And I was just like – you don’t tell people that.

“And depression, like, is an illness. I had no idea, he was like the class-clown, he was gorgeous, he played football, he was on the wrestling team and he just made everybody laugh. And I never knew, because he never talked about it and he was always talking about funny things – like the night before, but I guess he got in a fight with his mom, And I think it was just an act of desperation. He ended up hanging himself with his sister’s baby blanket from the railing of the stairs. And I think, maybe, because he was a prankster, he was trying to get his mom’s attention and just scare her? But, I guess he was just inches away from the floor. If he was just a little bit taller, you know? I don’t know. Just after that – I did not want to go school. I did not talk for the longest time.
"I did go the following Monday to school cause there was like this little crisis center going on in the library. But there were people in there that were just trying to get out of class. And I was so upset about that, because I had all these deep feelings for him – and then these people who just don’t even care are there – just trying to get out of class. The principal was not a big help at all – in fact, when my boyfriend died – when I came back the police and the assistant principal took me into their office and questioned me about his death. They were like, ‘Did you get in a fight with him the night before?’ I was just really angry, why would you just – they didn’t even give me time, I just like walked in the door. They took me in by myself and the police – I didn’t have my parents or any adults there with me.

“My parents told me then that if I went to a therapist that I could have as many sleepovers on the weekend as I wanted. And that was like a bribe, because it didn’t even last that long. And my therapist that I had was a guy, and he was just like, sitting too close to me, and cock his head and stare at me, and I felt like I was under a microscope or something. I did not want to open up, I was just so upset.

“And I wasn’t in school for the longest time. If I was in school, I was in the guidance office. I used to have dreams of him coming back and being like, ‘You know, I love you and I’m not dead.’ And then I’d wake up and it would be like really bad dreams and dreams of how I called and his mom was screaming in the phone.

“I was 11 when this happened, and I need to tell you this, this was big. I think I got the idea from Seventh Heaven\(^20\) (which is really ironic) but I saw this girl cutting herself on the show, and I was like - Huh. I was like, maybe that works, you know? I wasn’t

---

\(^{20}\) This is a Christian TV show for teens; perhaps this is the reason Jessica feels it is “ironic” that she begins cutting after having watched an episode that was probably meant as some sort of guidance.
trying to kill myself, but it was more like removing the pain in my heart and replacing it onto my arm, because it’s like something you can control. So, this woman evaluated me and put me in [names therapeutic hospital]21, which was, like, ‘Oh my god.’ I didn’t think I needed to be in there. I ended up being in there for my 12th birthday. That was the first time I went into Spring Harbor. I continued to cut myself, because it just seemed like a good idea to me, because it just felt better afterwards – some sort of release. I continued that through 7th grade as well.

“But in the 7th grade I also moved on, and the first quarter I did good. I got like all As and Bs and I thought this is a fresh start, I’m just going to do better. I even wrote a little reflections thing about who was your hero and I wrote about my boyfriend and just how he has taught me about just like not taking people for granted – and I got the highest score in the middle school. My teacher came up to me and hugged me, she knew him, too, so she felt the same way. I actually wrote a paper last year [at 17] about my boyfriend and this life-changing experience. I just keep going back to that.

“You know if that never happened, if he had kept on living? Then I would have graduated by now and been in college. So, that put my life on hold. I was just so torn up and I guess when that happens to you at such a young age, you don’t know how to handle it and you’re angry at the world. And I was really angry with my parents because they wouldn’t let me see my friends that were friends with him because they were two years older than me. But I could connect with them and we had something in common.

“So the more they tried to keep me away from them, the more I rebelled. I had other friends, too. The other friends were straight As in school and on the soccer team

---

21 This hospital in southern Maine provides services for children, teens and adults who experience acute mental illness or dual disorder issues.
and they would talk about all their accomplishments and could not understand why I could not get myself together. And my best friend’s mom was scared for her, so she wouldn’t let her see me. You know, I think when a friend goes through the roughest time of their life, that’s when you should be there the most.

“And then my sister corrupted me one night. There was my room and the bathroom connected to her room. I smelled smoke. I went in there and went, ‘what are you doing?’ She was like, ‘You’ve gotta try this.’ And I kind of still looked up to my sister, in a way. I did try it and I was just very giggly. I didn’t smoke all the time through my middle school years, but each grade I smoked a little more. It was something to do because it was rebellious, it made me laugh, and kind of like, my friends did it – so I did, too. At the end of 7th grade, I had a psychiatrist that would give me medication for my sleeping and depression and anxiety and stuff. Then I started seeing a pastoral counselor, and she could fill me in on spiritual things as well. (I also saw a deacon after my boyfriend died. I just wanted to make sure that he wasn’t going to punished or anything. And he told me my boyfriend was going to Heaven. So, that made me feel better.) She had like cool, soothing music in the background and a huge couch and I’d get really cold so she had a sleeping bag for me, she gave me strategies for when I was angry. It really felt great.

“Eighth grade started off okay, but 8th grade was one of my most rebellious years and like this time of year, November, is like the hardest month. The smells, there’s something in the air, you know? There’s Thanksgiving coming up and it just reminds me of like how I was so happy and then I went to the other extreme. I liked my teachers and we did fun stuff as well, we had a lot of field trips. But November just kind of killed it for me. So, I was still seeing my therapist and she suggested I take a couple of days off be-
fore vacation, to take my homework. I went up to my grandparents’ house and I watched a bunch of movies – Christmas movies, cause I love Christmas, and we made cookies and I did my homework. They took me shopping – and that helped a lot because it took my mind off the whole thing. And then my friends and I went to my boyfriend’s grave and prayed and we did some flower decorations and stuff. It had been two years and I thought I would get over it, but you know, you never really get over it, you get through it. It’s like sea glass, when it first goes into the ocean and it’s sharp, but the ocean smoothes it over – it’s still kind of sharp, but not as sharp as it used to be. But at least you can pick it up, right?

“So, I passed eighth grade, they just wanted to get me out of that middle school, I got drunk for my first time when I was 14 and that kind of also made school not a priority. I was just self-medicating and during Memorial weekend I realized that drinking isn’t that fun because I was raped by twins. I couldn’t tell my dad, because I was embarrassed. I didn’t want him to know that I knew what sex was even. And then my sister found out and she was calling me a whore. That was really rough because the twins had older siblings, a sister, took me by the hair and was like, ‘They didn’t do that to you.’ I didn’t want anybody to know. But the twins told people, and I was like, I would have gone to the police but, I did not want to face them in court and wanted to forget about the whole thing. And after that you just want to clean yourself all the time – and you just feel like you’re really not worthy of anything.

“So, 9th grade started off really bad. If I had an opportunity to skip, I would. I just did not know where my priorities were. So, one night during October, I went to my friend’s house to watch one of the Sox games, and they had alcohol there.
(Jessica describes another incident of staying out all night that resulted in her parents calling the police and then taking her to another therapist. This was the beginning of a long period of alternative programs and hospitals, including an 8-week wilderness program and an out-of-state therapeutic boarding school for troubled kids. When she came home from the wilderness program, she found her bedroom stripped of all her personal possessions.)

“Everything was just stripped down naked, just white walls. All my clothes were gone. I just resented my parents so much for stripping me of my identity and just everything I knew about myself. They had a list of what music I couldn’t listen to, and no make-up, and I was like, okay. So no fun while you’re home. Then we went to Sunday River and we went skiing, and that was fun, and I got a massage. And I got to see my best friend. And then I got a digital camera for my birthday. I went to the boarding school five days after I got back from Wilderness.

(The “boarding” school experiences are described as punitive and militaristic perhaps with the intention to “break the spirit” of the teens whose parents have paid “tuition” for their children to attend. Jessica says, “We got to talk to our parents every two weeks.” An activity Jessica describes at length in one school in New Hampshire was an exercise where the students were to physically push another student away from them and declare, “I don’t need you!” An 18-month program, Jessica attended approximately 6 months during her first high school year. Schooling was conducted through on-line classes, except for science, Jessica explains, where they had an on-site teacher and were allowed to do more hands-on lessons. “They made maple syrup,” she explains, “which
was fun." After a second episode on restriction – her first offense was "liking" one of the male students – 15-year-old Jessica describes how she planned her "escape.")

“I got put on restriction for the second time. I was just so miserable, you know – And you know? This is very extreme, but, um (pauses) there was a saw, and I just looked at it and I was just like, ‘This is my only way out.’ So I started to cut my ankle, it... it... I mean, it was a, like, I did it deep enough so that I could go to the hospital. I guess it was a cry for help – I wasn’t trying to kill myself or anything. But, you know, it worked. My parents picked me up and took me from the hospital and we went to a hotel and we were there for two days while they tried to figure out what to do. They decided to put me back into [names the first hospital] again. I was begging them the whole time to not send me away – cause they were going to send me away to a 6-month program in Utah. After three weeks I came home, and I just found out that my parents had moved to another town, so I came home to, like, a new house – I didn’t have time to say good-bye to my old house!

“So they decided I would do my freshman year over in public school in my new town. In order for me to do that, they wanted me to have a tutor and I was going to go in there under the Special Ed program because I needed help with studying. I had the most problem in Social Studies. [The teacher] said that I was sneaky and I went under the radar because I didn’t participate in class. English was impossible, because it was really hard and I almost didn’t pass. I did pass – I did pass my freshmen year. I was so afraid that if I was social again with people, start going to parties again, then my parents would send me away. That was my biggest fear. I felt abandoned when I needed them the most.
“In 10th grade, I started to develop my friend group. It started out really good, and then as I suspected, once I started climbing the little social totem pole, I fell out of study habits to get high or hang out with my friends or hang out with a guy that I liked. And I just started hanging out with friends and then just partying on the weekends. And then just partied too much and did not do my schooling. I did not pass History that year, but I passed everything else.

“Then 11th grade, I signed up for that vocational program and that’s where I did the Portland Arts Technology High School. That started out really good because I only had like three classes during the morning, and then I’d go off in the afternoon to dance. That was great; it was just like a release. I got really, really, close to everybody there. I had my two gay friends and we used to come up with a bunch of cool dance moves, just everything was great! And I got my license that year, too, so that was a big milestone and I ended up getting my sister’s car. But then I got introduced to a new group of friends in my high school. And then this girl asked me if I wanted to skip school, and you know? I guess I just love to have too much fun and I can’t balance things. I never learned how to, like, discipline myself – so, I was just oh, okay, cool. That was the easier way to do things.

So when did you decide to leave school?

“Originally, I thought I was going to do online classes, cause I was like, there’s no way I’m going to pass unless I do some, like, crazy thing and isolate myself from everybody – which is not going to happen. Then one of my gay friends from dance committed suicide – that set me back again. You know, I was just so scared to get close to anybody. I stopped going to dance after my friend died; I didn’t want to go there and see that he
wasn’t there, didn’t want somebody to take his spot – then my tutor suggested to me that I should get my GED.”

**Cross-case Analysis**

Table 7.1 below, was constructed to visually illustrate the factors and conditions within the narratives that help answer the research question, “What traits or characteristics do these youth share?” These factors are further categorized by Family, School and Individual, or the context in which those variables typically emerge (Davis, 2004; Keogh, 2000; Lan & Lanthier, 2003). Using Table 7.1 (with support from the narrative data) the following patterns emerged from the narratives. These patterns begin to show connections and relationships that these youth shared as participants in this educational event; however, how these candidates responded to or reacted to these factors and conditions is an important consideration, as well, this table is not meant for generalizing to all populations. Not all youth will respond to their contextual environment by dropping out and completing with a GED certificate.
Table 7.1 Factors and Conditions from the Narratives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors &amp; Conditions</th>
<th>Hannah</th>
<th>Britney</th>
<th>Miki</th>
<th>Kyra</th>
<th>Beth</th>
<th>Kyle</th>
<th>Mathew</th>
<th>Chad</th>
<th>Jessica</th>
<th>Anya</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FAMILY</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-parent biological</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-parent step</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse at home</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No or sporadic contact w/ biological father</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent relocation</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially disadvantaged</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SCHOOL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liked early elementary</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No relationships w/adults at high school</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship w/ 1 adult at high school</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullied or teased</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bully</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty fitting into school culture</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever attended Alt Ed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cite middle school as turning point</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant time out of school (pre-dropout)</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INDIVIDUAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescribed medication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street drug/ alcohol use</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitalized for mental health conditions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spent time in youth detention center</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Emerging Patterns

Family configurations. All ten of the interviewees lived with their biological mothers. Six of the interviewees explained that they had lived in several family configurations because of their mother’s tendency to cohabitate and/or marry different males. These candidates explained having had lived with their biological mother and father (at a very young age and not represented in the matrix because they don’t remember this configuration), their single mother, their mother and her husband, or their mother and her current boyfriend. Seven interviewees stated they had no contact or sporadic contact with their biological fathers. Hannah, Mathew, and Jessica lived with both biological parents, while Miki and Chad claim they had only one stepfather during the course of their school careers. Hannah and Jessica were the only candidates whose parents were also homeowners.

Frequent relocation. Nine of the interviewees indicated that they had moved at least once during their school careers, while six of the interviewees in this study describe having moved to several different home and school settings, in some cases, multiple times during a school year. Says Beth, “I wouldn’t unpack my stuff, I’d just keep it packed up and be like, ‘When are we moving?’” Kyra, who had difficulty with peers in all of the schools, says she “should have” made friends because of her experience with transitioning to new schools, but never learned how to make friends. Mathew describes his family moving several times due to his father’s reassignments, but that he was also homeschooled during these moves, so he didn’t believe it was detrimental to his public school experience.
Abuse. Four of the interviewees discussed abuse at home as part of their lived experience; two out of the four witnessed their mother’s abuse by her, then current, spouse. Brittney explains that she is still in recovery from sexual abuse which began at age three and which was not acknowledged by her mother until the abuser also abused her mother. Kyle says he was physically beaten by his father, while Chad claims a 15-year history of physical and emotional abuse by his stepfather. Jessica describes an older sister who was left “in charge” who also physically assaulted her on several occasions; enough that Jessica had to leave her home and go to the home of a responsible adult. A pattern of non-responsive parenting begins for Jessica, as her claims that her sister was hitting her were also met with the parental wave of a simple case of “sibling rivalry.”

Financially disadvantaged. Using cues from the data, it could be determined that at least seven of these candidates were from financially disadvantaged conditions. For example, Kyle expressed this directly, recognizing that his family’s socioeconomic status was at least one of the difficulties with school, and that this social status was also a source of his “rage”. Others describe disadvantaged environments indirectly. Miki describes her family as living in a “trailer” and has very clear negative perceptions of “kids with daddy’s credit card.” Kyra states that kids teased her because she didn’t have “nice clothes” and that her mother had a “hard time” supporting them. Beth described her family as constantly being “evicted.” A lack of a stable living environment also indicates lack of home ownership that youth from more advantaged families experience.

Liked early elementary. In this study, seven of the ten candidates stated that they initially liked school as early elementary students and, in many cases, had positive academic experiences. Jessica and Hannah described their school careers as starting off ten-
tatively (Jessica describes separation anxiety and Hannah believes she was “clinically” shy) but both girls recall being involved in extra-curricular activities and doing well academically. Anya and Miki state that they liked the “learning” aspect of school; Chad, Kyle and Brittney liked the social component – they had a place to interact with other children even though these interactions were usually met with punitive consequences.

**No teacher-student relationships.** Seven of the interviewees claimed to have had no relationships with adults in their high schools and three interviewees claimed they had had at least one relationship with a school staff member during their high school careers. Hannah explains that relationships with adults as a high school student did not happen until she enrolled in the alternative education program sponsored by the high school, but not the high school itself. Jessica had significant relationships as an elementary student and a better adult relationship with a hired tutor than with school personnel. Others, such as Mathew, Brittney, Kyle, Miki, and Anya did not believe anyone at the high school cared about them, while Kyra, Beth, and Chad mentioned at least one adult they had been able to turn to or confide in while they were in high school.

**School culture.** A pattern of bullying emerged early in the study. Eight out of the ten interviewees claimed to have been bullied or teased in their schools. For Mathew and Kyra, bullying and teasing became the agent for dropping out and seeking a GED. Chad and Anya stated that bullying turned them into “the bullies.” Anya said that she “messed” with people’s minds and Chad stated, “Then I started bullying back – and then bullying people even though I didn’t really need to.” Beth writes off her teasing as “I didn’t mind” while Miki claimed she wasn’t a bully – her physical and often violent reactions were in response to degradation of others by her peer group. Hannah’s bullies were middle school
girls. She overdosed as an 8th grader after she got involved with what she claimed was “the wrong crowd.”

Not surprisingly, “difficulty fitting into school culture” goes hand-in-hand with bullying. Seven of the interviewees believed they didn’t fit into the school culture. Miki openly discusses belonging to a group of “Goths” who dyed their hair black and wore black clothing and spikes in a very deliberate scoff at popular school culture. Anya found solace in groups of older youth outside of her school, while Chad, at 17, couldn’t go back to high school because of a maturity level he believed exceeded that of his same-age peers.

**Middle-school as turning point.** Five of the candidates believe that middle school (6th, 7th, or 8th grade) was when they had the most difficulty staying in school or when they ran into the most obstacles with peer groups or with exposure to drugs and alcohol: Jessica’s experience with suicide was as a 6th grader; Hannah’s inability to be accepted by “just girls” happened in the 7th grade. Beth, after having been removed by her mother in the 5th grade, had difficulty adjusting to the public school setting when she returned as a 6th grader. Mathew states that bullying for him began as a new student in the 6th grade and Chad, Jessica, Hannah, and Brittney began using drugs and alcohol as 8th graders.

**Spent significant time away from school.** Eight of the interviewees spent a significant amount of time away from public school in other settings before their dropout event. These other settings included home, therapeutic schools and hospitals, staying with family, and youth incarceration. Mathew says he had to get used to “bells” as he transitioned from his homeschooling. Jessica explains that academic achievement was not val-
ued in either “boarding school” she was sent to, and that devaluing education in favor of “behavior management” was a setback upon returning to a public high school. Chad and Brittney were brief residents at a youth detention center, and Brittney, Kyle, Chad and Jessica spent a significant amount of time in therapeutic group homes and schools. None of the interviewees mentioned any adult at their schools to make the transition from these settings easier or more welcoming.

**Drugs, prescribed medication, and hospitalization.** Seven of the ten GED candidates had had medication prescribed for mental health and ADHD diagnoses before the age of 16. Four candidates were diagnosed with ADHD while others were treated for depression and anxiety. Chad, Kyle, Hannah, and Brittney experienced mental health hospitalization before the ninth grade – Kyle as an elementary school student. Chad states he was hospitalized for a suicide attempt, Hannah for her drug overdose. Jessica was hospitalized at 12 years old. Nine of the interviewees claimed that they used drugs, such as marijuana or alcohol, as high school students.

Exploring commonality in factors, conditions and patterns across narratives shows an emerging theme of youth who lacked stability, positive adult and peer relationships in both their homes and their schools, and were often diagnosed with a “medical” condition rather than recognition of the negative conditions of their environment. In most cases, these youth were very much on their own as they tried to be “in school.” Yet, without adult support, it is easy to surmise that this was a difficult place to negotiate.

**Summary**

As I interviewed the participants who completed or were completing high school with a GED, their experiences became “real” to me. My task was then to describe it
through the “eyes” of my young interviewees (Cresswell, 1998; Kennedy, 1999; Way, 1998). At 17, 18, 19 years of age, their lives were a mish-mash of childhood and adulthood, a potpourri of pain, loss, failure, resentment, and anger. It was clear that they sought some sense of belonging, recovery, or balance. Some held tightly to spiritual beliefs; others found a niche in music or dance.

Despite their social or academic experience, in most cases these interviewees indicated that they wanted to graduate with their high school diploma and attend their graduation with their peers. Kyra, especially, expresses regret at missing her traditional ceremonies. Mathew had the opportunity to march with the class of GED recipients and took advantage of this opportunity, including teaching his sister to ballroom dance so that he could go to his “prom.”

The cross-case analysis finds that common experiences exist within this sample population. Emergent patterns in the narratives include low SES, bullying, lack of adult and peer relationships, and a pattern of family configurations that included all interviewees living with their biological mothers, and some youth lived with step-fathers (if their mothers got married) and/or with their mother’s boyfriends. Only three interviewees lived with both biological parents. Chapter 8 and 9 will explore further the research questions, “What are the factors or conditions that affect the students’ decision to: a) drop out, and b) decide to pursue a GED?”
Chapter 8

DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

"You know, she [my mother] didn’t want to see me hurt anymore. And most of my troubles in school were the kids. You know? And you can’t really change other people’s kids. The teasing was all behind the teacher’s backs. Even if you bring something up to a teacher’s attention and, you know, they tell another kid to stop, or to, you know, whatever – it’s not going to stop. It never did."

~Kyra, age 18

The conditions under which these youth describe making their decisions to drop out of high school (or in many instances the decisions were “made” for them) are confirmed by the research in the dropout literature. This chapter positions the youth in one of three categories according to their own perceptions of their contextual influences both in and out of their school setting: Longitudinal Conditions, Situational Conditions and Temporary Conditions. As the youth describe factors and conditions that prompted or were prominent in their dropout event, research validates their stories, and I matched this event with categories from the literature. It is important to remember, however, that each situation is intermingled and that the causality of their choice to dropout and complete with a GED is difficult to determine with certainty. I will reiterate, this chapter does not purport to label the participants, but merely point out that literature corroborates these findings.

Also, youth who make a decision to drop out of high school and complete with a GED exam must give up their traditional ceremonies and “rites of passage” typically awarded to the graduating high school seniors. For many, these ceremonies are akin to
weddings and births; they are recorded in pictures and video and are a social rite that means, implicitly, that one is now ready to face the world of work or further education. Typically, graduation ceremonies include yearbook signing, a senior banquet, a prom, a commencement, and final celebratory parties with family and friends. Because it is such a social symbol of distinction, I was curious as to how the GED candidates perceived this event, as their decision to leave their public high schools would mean that they would not be recognized publicly as high school graduates. The following describes the candidates' feelings about missing their traditional rites of passage before and after they made the decision to drop out.

**Missing Traditional Ceremonies**

For some, the response was mixed – while they stated that they "wanted to graduate" with their peers, or that their parent(s) would have liked to have attended a graduation ceremony, Jessica, Anya, and Beth added to their narrative that they probably would have "slipped" or "stuttered" or "tripped in front of everybody" if they had attended. These rationalizations only served to make clear that somehow they may have some regrets. Beth says:

I was thinking about it and I wanted to graduate with my class. That was my dream. But, I don’t do well in front of big crowds, I start stuttering – and I probably would have passed out.

Jessica feels that missing her traditional "rites of passage" is failing in some way:

Well, I contradict myself in that way, because I am traditional, I love Christmas, and like, how guys are supposed to treat girls. But I guess I learned how to be non-traditional, because that’s how my life has kind of been. But, you know, I
wish sometimes… – because, like, my best friend graduated this year and all my friends that I knew – I’m missing out and just like, marching with a special person next to you, and throwing this big party, and going to Project Graduation. It seems, like, I want to have a ceremony but at the same time, like, I don’t want to trip in front of everybody, and just having to listen to long speeches, but just being with the people I grew up – is what I’m going to miss out on – and just saying that I didn’t graduate from high school. I just kind of feel like I failed in some sort of way.

Any, Kyra, and Hannah also wished that they had had a traditional graduation. Anya, a GED recipient, actually attended her high school graduation as a spectator. About this experience she says:

I kind of wished I was up there. Well, actually, what I was thinking most of the time was like, I probably wouldn’t have gone to my graduation anyways. No. I still had the fact, like, you know, I didn’t go to my prom, I didn’t do the cap and gown whole thing, but I didn’t care about it – really. Except when I was there, I was like, ‘Oh. I kind of wish I was up there with everybody.’ I kind of miss that. I mean, like, everyone has it in their past, and I’m like, ‘Oh, well. I don’t.’

Hannah also expresses disappointment about not graduating with her class:

I was disappointed in myself that I couldn’t do it – but there was no way I was going to be able do it at the high school. I tried. I definitely tried. And it kind of upsets me about graduation. Not so much prom, because I’ve never been into that kind of stuff, but graduation – it’s a little upsetting. My mom definitely wanted it.
Kyra truly regrets her decision to drop out. Regardless of her treatment at the hands of her peers, she wanted to participate in traditional ceremonies:

At the time, I was glad I didn’t have to go back, I didn’t have to do any more school work, and I didn’t have to deal with the kids or the teachers or, you know any homework. Um…but I can definitely say that I regret it. And I really, really wish that I would have, you know, just stuck through it. Being able to walk down the aisle at your graduation and having graduation, and you know, that whole ceremony? It really meant a lot to me and I still wish, to this day, that I could have had it – but – you know, you do what you gotta do, and you live and you learn.

Chad and Miki believe that missing graduation ceremonies did not, and will not ever, affect them. States Chad, “It’s over-rated. I always had older friends, and also, the people I hung out with were adults – I just got along with that group.” When asked about missing her graduation, Miki says nonchalantly, “It doesn’t faze me a bit.”

Mathew, a GED recipient, was the only interviewee who participated in a traditional graduation ceremony and prom. The Adult Education Center where he received his GED regularly holds traditional ceremonies for their graduates. He affirmed, “They’re going to have the cap and gown, you know? The whole nine yards! I’m not going to miss the ceremony. I’m pretty happy I’m going to graduate.”

The interviewees in this study indicated that graduation was important to them. They wanted to belong, and though many regretted that they didn’t or couldn’t participate in graduation ceremonies, missing these traditional rites were not a deterrent for dropping out. Many held that dropping out was the only course to follow, given their social, emotional and academic situations.
The Dropout Event

Drawing on the narratives in Chapter 7, the following discussion presents a similar cross-case analysis of the conditions and factors in the interviewees’ lives that influenced their decision to drop out of school. This analysis answers my second research question, “What are the factors and conditions that impact a student’s decision to decide to drop out?” These conditions are further connected to research-based data that corroborates these narrative descriptions of their event.

In many instances, the interviewees self-identified the key factors or conditions that they believed were instrumental in their decision to leave school. For Kyle, Chad, andBrittney, the dropout event was a culmination of their stressful factors including family and peer relationships, institutional abandonment and distressing school experiences. Five of the candidates, Mathew, Kyra, Beth, Miki and Anya talk about specific and persistent school situations they believed directly affected their decision to drop out of their high schools: bullying, frequent relocation, and alienation. Jessica and Hannah describe a single, temporary event in their lives that they believed was a critical turning point in their school careers. It is not the purpose of this chapter to say that the dropout outcome of the interviewees’ experiences are due to these self-identified factors or conditions, more often the conditions and factors that influenced their decisions are so complex and intertwined that it is difficult to get to the core. However, the purpose of this qualitative study is to trust that the GED candidates are telling the stories as they perceived the event and to understand this educational phenomenon from their point-of-view.

The following discussion categorizes the candidates by similar factors and conditions and positions them under the three previously described (see Chapter 4) and re-
searched broad categories: Longitudinal Conditions, Situational Conditions, and Temporary Conditions. Using these categories, I analyzed each narrative to determine in which category the candidates best “fit.” Determining a categorical placement also contributes to answering my third research question, “What personal characteristics and behaviors do school-age GED candidates share?”

**Longitudinal Conditions**

The candidates placed in this category described an early childhood combination of stressful home and school experiences that existed through adolescence. Their dropout event might have been predicted. For example, Chad and Brittney experienced physical, verbal and emotional abuse by stepfathers for most of their early school careers; for Brittney, sexual abuse began at age three. For both, this stressful and painful experience preceded school. Kyle was born to a 15-year-old, homeless mother who was also abused by her father. He attributes some of his early problems in school with being keenly aware of his lower socioeconomic status.

Kyle and Brittney (as well as other participants) also share similar life-long patterns of mother introducing them to and cohabitating with their boyfriends, marrying several men, and often moving their families multiple times to accommodate their latest partner. All three mothers, Chad, Kyle, and Brittney report, were also physically abused by many males they chose to live with them and their children. Chad reports that the man who abused him and his mother was violent enough to be finally placed in a state penitentiary; he doesn’t say what happened.

These candidates reported little to no contact with their biological fathers as youngsters as another factor in their lives as school-age youth. While Chad says that his
father never contacted him, Brittney and Kyle are introduced to their fathers later in their lives for “last resort” living arrangements. The endeavor to “share” parental responsibility, not surprisingly, ended in failure with their children once again being victims of irresponsible parental behavior. The fathers were no more capable of attending to their children’s needs as the other adults in the GED candidates’ lives.

School experiences for these GED candidates also parallel each other. One condition all mention in their narratives is punitive consequences for misbehavior (Chad says he, “got disciplined and it never sunk into me”) from teachers and school administrators. This type of institutional isolation followed each participant from kindergarten through high school. Once again, dropout research shows that these histories are reasonably sure to culminate in dropping out (see Chapter 3). While Kyle claims he “didn’t like school,” Brittney and Chad stated they did like school as early elementary students. All believed, however, that the social interactions with their peers were the primary appeal to school. Brittney says she “couldn’t sit still” and Kyle says that he was “a light” and that he always had questions that teachers didn’t want to deal with. Chad learned that “wanting to play with his friends” was a “bad habit.” The inability to attend to the task of “school” at age four and five describes at an early age that these youth needed more attention and social interaction from adults and peers. However, the institution of school requires that youngsters sit still and “learn” – those who don’t are “punished.” Chad, Brittney, and Kyle were victims at home, and at school found much the same treatment from adults at school.

Highly mobile, Brittney moved from school to school within districts and to new districts several times during her school career. This condition also should be a “red flag”
for school administrators – records that follow students also indicate the schools that the children have attended. She (as does Kyra, Kyle and Anya) states that no teachers, guidance counselors, or adults in any of the schools she attended, spoke with her about the frequent moves. Brittney states:

Nobody did anything. For some reason adults just don’t realize that – I mean, I know I have friends that were going through pretty much the same shit I was, and I swear you’d have to hit somebody with a two-by-four in the face to get them to realize what was going on. I think about what could have happened if somebody knew, but I also, you know, the past is the past, I can’t change what happened. Brittney was referred to and attended two therapeutic schools and then a youth detention center after having stolen a car from the school parking lot in the 8th grade. Trying to return to a new public school situation after having returned from these situations was emotionally and socially straining. She finally dropped out of high school.

Chad’s later school experiences were mostly in absentia. High absenteeism is also distinguished as an indicator of high risk status. He states that when he made it to high school as a 9th grader, the school and the teachers “helped him out a lot” and he explained that one guidance counselor in particular helped him get into an alternative program. Typically, an alternative program supports the needs of at-risk high school students works. However, this soft-spoken boy had stated in his narrative that he had been arrested several times, became addicted to drugs, had run away and lived in a “crack house” all before the 9th grade. Even though Chad “liked” his high school, its open campus policy and then an alternative program with a later start time and less attendance hours meant he was rarely there.
Kyle also tried to establish connections at school but his behavior was a deterrent. He says he “was constantly being put in detention, time-outs, pretty much” he believed, “for just being a kid.” While possibly true for Chad and Brittney, Kyle’s longitudinal conditions were exacerbated by his acute awareness of his family’s poverty at an early age. He believes that “wanting things” was largely his motivation for lying and theft. One persistent condition in Kyle’s life was isolation. Alienated by family, teachers and peers Kyle felt a rage he describes as “like you’re just glowing.” He was admitted to a series of hospitals, residential mental health facilities, and group homes as early as 3rd grade. As a sophomore, Kyle finally found himself in a school in which he felt accepted by teachers, “Who,” he said, “loved me.” He believed it was because they didn’t know “who” he was. However, he had to return to his mother’s house and leave the high school in which he found success. Kyle believes that if he had stayed at this high school, he may have graduated. Instead, he had to re-enroll at the high school where he had an established reputation. The cycle of alienation at his old school and in his residential community began again – and Kyle, also, finally dropped out for good.

Situational Conditions

Five of the interviewees have been grouped under this heading. They describe a persistent home or school event they identify as having impacted their school career but it didn’t necessarily begin in early childhood. One prevalent situation that emerged in the interviews was bullying; while eight out of the ten interviewees acknowledged that they had been bullied at some point in their school careers, Mathew and Kyra had experienced teasing and bullying events in their schools to such an extent that that was the underlying current in their decision to drop out of school. Miki and Anya describe their situations as
being “misfits” – not really belonging to a “peer group” in their schools, and Beth describes constant school disruption by her single mother.

These five interviewees discuss situations that were outside their personal control. While most of these GED candidates said they actually liked learning, the persistence of the conditions they speak of in their narratives required more resiliency to stay in school than they were able to sustain. For instance, Beth’s school life started off joyful. She is exuberant as she talks about the early years of elementary school, including teachers and friends she loved. Beth did well in school, yet her mother habitually pulled her out for months at a time and for “family” reasons (such as caring for Beth’s little sister, sick father, and later, grandfather). Further, she did not provide Beth an effective alternative method of schooling. Beth claims her now 10-year-old sister is the recipient of their mother’s behavior and is not in school, repeating the pattern of sporadically attending a public school.

While she mentions teachers who were “nice,” Beth does not talk about any of the schools working with her to transition her from her sporadic “pull-outs” by her mother. She developed one relationship with an English teacher who designed an independent study course in Shakespeare for her. This, she says later in the interview, she loved and now wants to pursue an English degree in college. Beth attended an alternative education program and a vocational program as a high school senior which she also described as “her choice.” Once again, she found success in a school setting, but the lack of a secure living environment prevented her from finishing high school.

Miki and Anya, though the same age, are in different “places” in their lives. Anya chose to go to college after she passed her GED battery and Miki is still in transition from
homelessness. However, the school experience of “not fitting in” with peers and peer groups in school and the comfort they found with communal living and friends outside of their school group, were similar.

Anya says that she never really “liked” school. She struggled with math and reading and relates that tutors often told her she wasn’t “trying hard enough.” She was identified for a Special Education program, which she also declared she didn’t like. Anya says peers targeted her as a “fat kid” and she had been teased a lot by other students and especially in one particular middle school. There was some hesitation on her part to say “fat kid” and she laughed nervously after she said it. But, she clarified, she didn’t feel like she was being “bullied.” She believed she was the “bad influence” on some kids in her school and that she had the ability to “mess with people’s minds.” Anya also talks about communal living as a young teenager, and that making friends who were on her “level” was more fulfilling to her. She never fit in with any one peer group in high school, states Anya, “I was friends with everybody.” She also says that most of her high school friends were not in her class but were “older.”

Miki’s narrative is laced with violence. She talks about punching a child in Kindergarten, breaking noses, and wearing spikes to school. While Anya says she could “mess with people’s minds,” Miki reacted physically to any alienation or teasing she felt. And although she perceives herself as “the-one-who-just-seemed-to-hate-everybody-because-no-one-could-get-along-with-anybody.” She also describes being in a Goth group with “everybody from any grade that, you know, didn’t really fit in.”

Miki talks about youth in her high school being “privileged.” She recognized that those students who were more economically advantaged had more power in the school.
While there is some doubt about the authenticity in some of Miki's dialogue, in this part of the interview, she is clear and cohesive. She mentions in her narrative that she lived in a "trailer." Though it would be difficult to get Miki to disclose this verbally, her interview leads one to speculate that when compared to other students in her school, her own socioeconomic status was the well of her violent reactions. She cannot relate the social context of her schooling with indifference; when she speaks of her peers, her voice reflects a tone of anger, resentment, and pain. Also, she adds, she physically assaulted a "jock" who she said was calling her a "slut" and a "whore" before school administration did anything about it. Miki states at the end of her interview, "I don't like feeling inferior to everybody – and that's the way the classes generally made me feel." Anya and Miki experience communal living with youth who were not from their high school peer group. Anya states she left home at 15; Miki was 18 when she left.

Kyra, like Mathew, experienced bullying at several different schools. Her single mother moved several times when Kyra was in elementary school and she was forced to make new friends at these different schools. She does not mention that there were any transitional steps taken by the schools to help her adjust to her new school or to foster relationships with new classmates. Unlike Beth, Kyra believes that her constant mobility was not the key factor in her decision to drop out because in 7th grade, she states, the moving stopped. Kyra believes that most of her difficulties lie within the social context of the schools and with kids who "didn't like chubby kids...or kids who didn't have good clothes."

Mathew is one of the three interviewees from a family with intact parents. Of the Baptist faith, his parents instilled in Mathew a sense of religious and moral convictions.
He was homeschooled for religious purposes until he was in the 6th grade after which he was enrolled in his first school. Mathew did very well academically; however, he became a victim of bullying and teasing, he believes, due to his weight. He indicated several times that he was always nice to people, but that there was a “see-no-evil-hear-no-evil” climate in the schools he attended.

Mathew was from a town in Maine that pays tuition to a school of the student’s choice. He thought this would alleviate some of middle-school bullying because the chief aggressors chose to go to another high school. Yet, this was not the case. In high school, Mathew was bullied again by “jocks” and he believed the school’s emphasis on competition created a social pecking order in which the aggressors were highly regarded by students and staff. Eventually, without adult intervention, the bullying became the agent for Mathew to drop out and seek a GED as a means to graduate from high school.

Kyra had difficulty talking about her experience with bullying, but she told me that bullying occurs “in school, on the playground, on the bus, getting off the bus, it was all the time.” She stated that she also told adults in the building about the bullying, but that nothing was done. She does not blame the schools for the way her peers treated her as Mathew does. Kyra believes that it is parents of the bullies who are responsible for teaching their children to be kind to others. Her perception is that until parents intervene there is nothing the schools can do. Students who are bullied, she claimed, must simply “live with it.”

Temporary Conditions

Jessica and Hannah stated that a single event precipitated their spiral toward dropping out. Jessica’s school experience was largely interrupted by the traumatic event of the
suicide of her 13-year-old boyfriend. As she told her story, it was apparent that she was still, at 18, very much troubled by the fact that she never got to say "goodbye." Hannah believes that a move to a new state and a new school, again as a middle-schooler, was the turning point in her otherwise successful school career. At one point in the interview, both girls considered that "if that hadn't happened" they would have graduated.

Both girls are from biologically intact, two-parent, families. We can tell from Jessica's narrative that her family is even fairly affluent. She talked about skiing vacations and a family decision to build a house rather than to vacation in Costa Rica. Both families owned their homes – the events that precipitated these girls' decisions were not due to an accumulation of situational conditions so many of these interviewees expressed.

For Jessica and Hannah elementary school was, for the most part, successful. They describe having good relationships with peers and doing well academically. Hannah says that she played on sports teams; Jessica was a cheerleader. Jessica entered 6th grade with enthusiasm, discovering her social "self" as a very typical middle-schooler. However, Jessica's life was quite literally interrupted by the suicide of her very first boyfriend, a 13 year old 8th grader. It is obvious through her dialogue and her emotional responses to the questions that followed that this part of her life had a profound effect on her. Another teenage suicide in her new high school was the tipping point for Jessica, and she couldn't return, even to a program that she believed was "great" for her. Advised to take her GED, Jessica was hesitant, but decided that she was getting too old to continue in a high school program. By her calculations, she would be 20 if she were to have continued on the diploma path.
After moving, Hannah had difficulty making friends with a positive peer group. She experienced a drug-overdose in the 8th grade which she believes was a “cry for help.” School administrators suggested that Hannah attend the school’s alternative program. Away from the girls who were drinking and drugging, Hannah enjoyed school and developed personal relationships with her teachers while meeting her academic and social-emotional needs. She found success and attended school regularly. However, the school system did not provide math instruction to their alternative education students and had them complete this instruction at the high school. Since Hannah needed two math credits to graduate, scheduling was difficult. With a break between math classes, the school’s practice was to “fill in” the time with another class. Unfortunately, the school’s rigid stance on this issue put Hannah back into a full-time situation at the high school in which the climate and the peer group were stressful. Unable to face this situation again, Hannah dropped out of school for last and final time.

**Summary**

Through first person narrative, the interviewees describe the conditions, factors, and situations that left them, in many instances, to rely on their own personal resources to complete school. None did. For Chad, Kyle and Brittney, school careers began as punitive and negative. Five of the candidates believed their school careers were interrupted by persistent social situations that were beyond their control: persistent bullying, school Jessica and Hannah believe they suffered from a single interruption in their school career that led the way toward other harmful events and left them feeling estranged from traditional public education.
These dropout categories are used to show the variety of conditions and situations under which these youth are compelled to drop out of high school and mirror the dropout literature. Most of the youth did not drop out until their junior or senior year of high school after having remained in their school situations for many years. Many, after having left school, declared that they simply could not go back – not because of academic failure (though for some high absenteeism led to school failure) but primarily because of the social stressors they felt and the lack of positive peer groups or adult intervention. And for many, if not all of the candidates, deciding to leave school was not necessarily a “decision” but rather a reaction to external factors and conditions that left them bereft of a sense of human value.
Chapter 9

GETTING THE GED

"I’m getting my GED because there’s a lot of things I’m interested in doing...to have the life that I never had, and when I have kids, to make them have a life that I didn’t have. To break the cycle from the rest of the family, cause I really do want my education, it’s just the fact of everything that I had gone through and didn’t get that when I should have been getting that."

~Brittney, age 18

This chapter explores some of the factors that influenced the interviewees to complete their schooling. This chapter contributes to answering the research question, “What are the factors and conditions that impact a student’s decision to complete with a GED?” I asked the GED candidates why they decided to complete with a GED and not with an adult education diploma or a return to an alternative education setting at their high school. This decision-making process was explained to me by several of the interviewees and included valuing completion, the time it took to complete, and their own sense of needing to regain their “selves” – including discovering a sense of self-esteem and self-actualization. The narratives continue. They illustrate the decision making process and also their rationale that their GED completion was a more viable means to graduation.

Continuing the GED Stories

Beth

“My senior year...well my mom – I love my mom – but she kept getting evicted and we kept having to move from place to place, so it was really hard for me to stay in
school. And between 7th grade and now, I've lost a lot of people that I care about, so it's really setting me back. So, I moved in with my sister down here in [names town]. She's got a house; she's got two kids I take of every day while they [sister and brother-in-law] work. Back in October, I was like, 'you know, I've really gotta' finish my education; it's driving me crazy!' So, I figured it all out and I started going to the Learning Center in January and I've passed my first two tests. In English, I got a 510, and in Science I got a 480. My average is 490 right now so I'm very happy. So, it's a good thing I'm getting my GED and not a diploma. I don't think I could bring the two kids to school. I get room and board to do this, which is also good, 'cause, I mean, like I said, I love my mom but I don't think I could live with her anymore.

"I want to go to college. I'm not going to be done with all my tests before September. I'm hoping by the time I want to go to college I will have my own place – I really want to go to UMO but if I can't, I'll go to Thomaston Community College. But I really want to go to UMO."

Anya

"When I got my GED, I was probably like in my fifth apartment – every apartment was a whole different group of people. I lived in, like, communes, like, they were crazy. But it just fell apart. We all just split up and went our different ways, and I ended up living and renting a room off this old lady. And I was right next to the high school, and I was like, well, I'll just go and get my GED. I don't have anything else to do. I actually took night classes between living in these apartments, but with work, it's been – I was like, I'd rather be a full-time worker than cut my hours back. Cause, you know, with rent and stuff, it's just like not going to work. And like, college just like came into the
picture. I didn’t even think about college when I was getting my GED. I was like, hey, what would be gratifying at this moment in my life? I was like, okay, might as well, I don’t have anything else to do. You know, a lot of people that take their GED don’t even pass it the first time. I’ve heard that most high school students don’t even pass it. I took it my first time and passed it. By myself. So, I was like, okay!” (NOTE: Anya is currently in college majoring in Culinary Arts.)

Brittney

“I mean I feel great that I’m not in high school anymore. I don’t have a bad reputation, people talking about me, harassing me anymore, and I’m doing great! Since I moved here and I haven’t been in high school, I have more friends than I count and they’re all there for me and it’s really great having the support that I need. And they’re like my family. They support me more than my family does. It’s just, like, you can take your GED at any time, take your tests at any time – like, it’s not like you have to be there to do it. And it doesn’t take that long to get it, either. Only a few weeks. I mean, mine’s extended because I’ve been looking for work and stuff because I’m out on my own. And that’s something I need to do before I can do that. Even if I just get a minimum wage job, you know, I need something, to keep supporting myself. But I think it would probably be one of the best decisions if they’re [other students] in my shoes that you can make – honestly. I mean it’s going to be hard no matter what you do. But, you know, you gotta fight through it and hope for the best. And don’t try to impress other people. You’re doing it for yourself – not for other people.”

“I’m getting my GED because there’s a lot of things I’m interested in doing...to have the life that I never had, and when I have kids, to make them have a life that I didn’t
have. To break the cycle from the rest of the family, cause I really do want my education, it’s just the fact of everything that I had gone through and didn’t get that when I should have been getting that. I feel a lot better about myself when I pass those tests. It really boosts your self-esteem when you get it and it comes back and, ‘Oh, you passed! You got great, high scores on this.’ Like, that’s awesome. I know I felt great when I did testing on my reading and stuff and found out at 17 that I had a college level of reading. I was like, ‘Wow, that’s pretty cool,’ I never really thought of that.”

**Mathew**

“I want to graduate. I didn’t want to take the steps to get a diploma because that would take way too long for me – I didn’t want to go to night classes. I like to study, so I thought, well the GED is said to be the same exact thing as a diploma, if not better, so I decided just to go for the GED, to get it – and it’s worked out. The GED was perfect because I studied and I actually understood what it was. I took the pre-GED tests in the fall and I was 17. The start of my senior year, I said, ‘Okay, I’m ready.’ And in January I took the first one – which I already told you I passed – and then I passed my 2nd one which really got me a kick-start. I was really excited about it, and then I took my reading. When I first started taking it, I thought it was going to be, like from the book that you studied from. I really studied the book hard cause I was like, ‘I don’t know, are they going to ask me this, or not?’ So I studied it, and then I really started to get more confident as I passed every test. This would have been the year I graduated with my class.”

“I’m thinking I’m going to KVCC. I’m not sure what I’m going to study yet, but I’m really leaning toward business management. I’m going to stay home and save some
money on room and board. Right now I’m looking for a second job, but I really want to, at least, get more people [for Ballroom dance instruction].”

**Jessica**

“At first I thought a GED was out of the question. I want to graduate. But then I didn’t want to be a super, super senior either. So, I went down to adult ed and they told me that I could get into any college, I just need to prove myself first. And I was like, okay, well I’m a smart person so I should have no problem proving myself, and that was how I decided it was the right thing to do. You know if I stayed in school, I wouldn’t have passed and I would be a junior again this year. Then I’d be 20 when I graduated.

“My dad got a good job in Florida, I visited down there twice. I visited the Daytona Beach Community College, and the people in the performing arts program said almost everybody gets a scholarship to somewhere. So, after two years you can transfer to the University of Central Florida. So, I have a plan and it feels good. But right now I’m working as a hostess.”

**Chad**

“Because my maturity level, you know, compared to theirs [students at his new high school] was really hard to handle. Also, I’d be 20 some odd years old when I graduated. And so I stopped going to school, which started a conflict with me and my mom. I didn’t decide to get my GED until two months ago. And the thing is that, jeez, I got every test done and took my pre-test in a period of two days, and then I said, ah, this is a piece of cake and then I just concentrated on working for about a month, and then I came back and finished my last one. So, if you take out that period of time when I didn’t do anything, it really took me less than a month to get my GED.”
As a 17-year-old, Chad is preparing to enter the National Guard and has plans to begin a lifelong career in the military – with a retirement age already chosen. I asked if it was important for him to get his GED to get into the military? He responded, “No. The National Guard, now you can get in without having any diploma or GED. It’s just that you’re not going to accelerate in rank. And I plan on being a lifer – cause after 20 years of service I can retire – so I’ll be 37, 38.”

Miki

“I was horribly, horribly upset [about dropping out] and then I was talking to the drop-in outreach people actually, and they told me to get my GED at the Learning Center. So I did. So I got my GED. I got my GED because I don’t do the class situations. I mean, I’m always willing to learn, I’m always willing to do something but I don’t like feeling inferior to everybody – and that’s the way the classes generally made me feel.”

“I want to go to college and be a journalist, but they don’t exactly have funding for homeless kids. I haven’t found it yet – and I’ve been searching a long time for the funding to go to college.”

Kyle

“By that time, I had reached 10th grade, and when I went back to [names hometown high school] things went downhill again. Teachers were constantly telling me to just ‘drop out.’ In the other school nobody knew me. I think if I had stayed there, I would have graduated. Then, because of the constant rejection, and because I was older, I understood things a whole lot more.

“If I don’t get it [GED] then what these people have always said and are still saying about me to this day – are going to be true. I’ve constantly been told that I’m going to
amount to nothing in my life – I’ve been constantly told that I’m going to nowhere and that I’m going to accomplish nothing. And I’ve been told these things all my life – I’m not going to be successful. And I knew by dropping out that I was disappointed in myself and I put myself down a lot. It’s because it is a true fact that you don’t get paid squat unless you got an education. So, I made my attempts to pull away from the life that I’d been involved in my entire life – come down here, get involved in the services that could help me, and put foot to ass – I’m pretty much getting the stuff done that I need to get done. I went out and got counseling and shelter, and I made sure I was stable. I get involved in groups so I can be a part of the community, I can interact with people. I’m doing a complete 360 with my life. I’m completely changing. I’ve got one more test to do – and I’m done. I guess what I want to do is be involved in the community and be involved in helping others – like the PeaceCorp.”

Hannah

“I wish they [alternative education program] would have had a math teacher. I only needed two math credits. Hannah was required to finish a program she started at the alternative education site at the regular high school – which she stated ‘wasn’t working out.’ I felt bad about leaving high school. I know once I have kids and they’re getting ready for prom, I’m definitely going to wish I went to my prom years and years ago.”

“My parents were disappointed I didn’t get my diploma, but they supported me. My mom supported me more than my dad, ‘cause he was like, ‘Why can’t you do it?’ but he doesn’t really understand what it’s like for girls at the high school. But they knew I was going to go get my GED, so they were fine with it. My mom and my dad both have their GED, even though they didn’t get it until later on in life.”
“I want to be able to go out and get better jobs, and I want to go to college. And if I don’t have my diploma, I still need my GED. I actually, wanted, for the longest time to be a massage therapist and now it’s just changing and I’m going to go and take business management courses.”

**Kyra**

“I want my GED, obviously, to get a better job and support my family, now. And since I’ve worked at [names a nursing home facility] they – I’ve always wanted to get into, um, a medical field? And they have a program where they’ll pay for you go and get your CRNA [Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetist], so, I really, really want to do that. And, like I said, you can’t do it without a high school diploma.”

**Factors that Motivated Youth to Complete with a GED**

The candidates in this study have previously described the factors and conditions that influenced their decisions to drop out. For some getting completing with a GED certificate is interrelated. Unable to face the prospect of returning to a debilitating or dehumanizing school situation, the decision to graduate with a GED is often “made” for them – there really are no other choices. In some cases, youth believed they could finish high school faster and pursue other opportunities earlier with a GED than if they stayed in a diploma program while those with jobs or those who were seeking jobs had the opportunity to work while studying for exams or pre-exams. These candidates describe multiple reasons they have for completing with a GED that is not unlike their diploma-ed counterparts: they have goals and aspirations, they want to be more competitive in the job market, but also, they want to restore their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.
Post-secondary Education

Many connected “getting a better job” to going to college. Eight of the ten interviewees expressed a desire to one day go to college. Anya was already there. Jessica said she wanted to be in college eventually, but will work and save money before she ventured back to academia. Mathew was looking into business management; he also wanted to stay home and save some money and hopefully expand his own business. Kyra wanted to go into a medical field and enjoyed working with elderly persons. She wanted to become a CRNA, but she understands she cannot participate in the training she needs without completing a GED certificate.

Personal Satisfaction

In my pilot study prior to this dissertation, one GED recipient told me very candidly that dropping out of high school began her “healing” process. In most cases, “personal satisfaction” for these candidates is also connected to “healing.” For Brittney, deciding to finish high school with a GED and passing each exam is a continuous flow of much needed self-esteem. Passing each exam gave her the confidence to move on as she became closer to realizing her goals and aspirations. Brittney says she wants her GED because she wants to learn a trade, but mostly, she says, she wants to “prove” to verbally abusive family members that she is “not this idiot piece of trash they think she is.” Brittney believes that passing the GED will also help her as a future parent in order to be the role model she never had. She states, “I want to have the life that I never had, and when I have kids, to make them have a life that I didn’t have. To break the cycle from the rest of the family.” Getting her GED is “proof” to her and her family that she is intelligent, capable, and valuable.
One important feature that makes the completing the GED exam personally satisfying is that the candidates are their own stake-holders. They are accountable only to themselves. Independent of adults or systemic pressure, youth approach the GED testing sites on their own. This high-stakes exam is also structured (at most sites) so that a candidate can take each test one at a time and at separate sittings. This test-taking experience restores a sense of success they had not experienced in their high school settings. I believe for these youth who lived in environments that were so often out of their control, the GED presents an opportunity for them to be in charge of their lives, perhaps for the first time. Jessica (who was also worried that if she stayed in high school she would be 20 at graduation) says, “I’m actually one test away from getting my GED and it feels so good every time I accomplish those tests, you know, because I feel smart and I actually like answering those questions, and knowing that I feel competent with my answers.” Often they are surprised when they pass. States Chad, “It really took me less than a month to get my GED. And really, I have an 8th grade education.”

**Finding a Better Job**

All of the candidates were aware that they could not be financially secure, or find a “good” job without a high school diploma. Kyle states, “It is a true fact that you don’t get paid squat unless you got an education.” Chad, who will join the military post-GED, wants to be afforded the opportunity to be promoted to officer status as part of his goal to make the military a career. Beth said, “You can’t go far in life without a high school diploma or a GED – you’ll be working at Burger King the rest of your life!” Others agreed – not finishing at least a high school education is not an option if they wanted to have any level of financial stability.
Summary

The findings from the General Educational Development Testing Service (GEDTS, 2006)\textsuperscript{22} corroborate the reasons these GED candidates want to complete their high school education. GEDTS statistics gathered from GED candidates around the state show that the largest percentage of Maine test takers (approximately 60\%) took the exam to pursue further education. The second most popular reason (56\%) was for “personal satisfaction,” and 42\% of all Maine candidates were taking the GED for “a better job.”

Regardless of their backgrounds, these GED candidates have goals and aspirations beyond their GED completion. These candidates were aware that obtaining their GED certificate meant that they will be in a better position to find a job, or, as in Chad’s case, to be promoted. Most of the interviewees believed they will go on to a post-secondary education at some point, if they were not already enrolled. For many, especially Brittney and Kyle, getting a GED is also a way to prove themselves worthy to their peers, family and community, and more importantly – to themselves. Each time they passed an exam they became more confident in their abilities, and realized that their failure in academia were often not attributable to their cognitive ability. In this respect, the GED becomes the catalyst for healing the wounds of their social, emotional and relational backgrounds.

\textsuperscript{22} These data do not disaggregate by age and candidates were allowed to select multiple reasons for completing their GED exams.
Chapter 10

CONCLUSION

"The teachers need just as much help as the kids, you know?...Um, there needs to be services that are for the teachers. And there needs to be funds that can relieve the schools from all of this financial stress that they're going through and there needs to be free lunches and free breakfasts and more donations for books for the libraries and less dramatic people that want to make a difference for the kids."

~Kyle, age 19

Disconnections

The ten Maine teenagers who volunteered to tell their stories about dropping out of school to complete with a GED are articulate, serious, and personable individuals. To meet them, one might assume that they are “typical” high school students; however, the maturity level that each exuded as they revisited their lives and school experiences exceeds their 17, 18, and 19 years. They have ambitions and aspirations beyond high school even as many described disadvantaged family, social, and economic environments and being victims of bullying and alienation by peer groups and from school experiences. They talked about searching for relief – some through spiritual soul searching and some through drugs and alcohol. They talked about wanting to be in school. They talked about missing graduation ceremonies – some with regret – and they talked about healing. They were surprised and delighted as they passed each GED exam and stated out-loud that they are not the “trash” people thought they were. By the time these youth had interviewed with me, they seemed to have regained a significant sense of self-esteem and confidence that they had not felt since they were first excited about entering kindergarten. This holis-
tic analysis has convinced me of the importance of the relational-cultural theory as a lens from which to explore this educational phenomenon.

Using this lens, the following discussion attempts to understand the current "shift" to the GED certificate for an increasing number of students, implications from the narratives, and recommendations for school personnel, both from the youth who experienced this event and from my own professional point-of-view. Further, this chapter recommends future research directions. I do not claim that all GED candidates are the "same" or that recommendations will "fit" each individual circumstance or situation, but rather, how the factors and conditions that emerged in the experiences of this select group of GED candidates affected their ability to stay in a traditional high school program and, however paradoxically, gave them insight and purpose to complete their education through the GED process.

One of the more conspicuous findings woven throughout all interviewees' stories was the lack of authentic adult or human relationships and the isolation youth felt in their families, their schools, and their peer groups. This broad theme of disconnectedness and isolation was voiced by each interviewee. This is not a new finding. Relational-cultural theory supports the claims from decades of experienced educational professionals from educational philosophy – Nel Noddings, Debra Meier, Alfie Kohn – to educational psychology – Carole Ames, Carol Dweck, Tim Urdan, to name a few – that the value of human relationships, the ethic of care, sense of community, personalized classrooms, non-restrictive learning environments, exceeds that of persistent insistence on stoic academia. Yet, time after time, generation after generation, and dropout study after dropout study,
marginal youth describe relatively few adults (if any) who help them accomplish their academic goals.

This consistent and constant theme bears scrutiny. One tends to wonder if we, as a society, have resorted to “passing the buck” when it comes to caring for our children – preferring to believe instead that “it” is someone else’s problem. And this includes the responsibility of the schools to care for the children it enrolls. I wonder how long we can continue to say that it’s important to “care” but then expect someone or something to do the caring? When do we, as a society, say enough lip-service let’s do something? These disconnected and discarded children emerged once again in this study as they described how their memories of childhood included abandonment, neglect, alienation, isolation, and medication. These youth described how they were detached from their parents and families, their communities, and their schools.

**Parental Disconnection**

One of the first disconnections for these youth was the disconnect within their families. Many described being abandoned by parents, and especially biological fathers, even as they were physically, emotionally, and sexually abused. Brittney’s 3-year-old cries to be released from a sexually abusive step-father were met by her mother with disbelief, until her mother was also physically abused. Interviewees Chad, Beth, and Kyra echoed each other as they stated – “I love my mom – but…” after which they described irresponsible parenting choices; Beth described her mother as “meeting men off the internet” and introducing them to her little sister as her “new father.” Chad described a 15-year history with an abusive and alcoholic step-father his mother “couldn’t” leave because of her own self-esteem issues. Kyra related that her mother’s tendency to need a
partner, regardless of the affect on her children, also disrupted education in the form of multiple relocations in order to move to her new partner’s apartment.

Even parents from extremely different social strata seemed alike in their decisions to leave the responsibility of caring for their children to others. Kyle and Jessica (from different social strata) described sporadic visitation as they left them in the care of hospitals and “schools.” At 15, Jessica believed the only way she could reach her parents was to slice open her leg with a hand saw, deep enough so that she could be hospitalized and so that the “school” administration would be forced to call home. Her parents’ response was to pick her up at the hospital and, while they were at a hotel, to make phone calls to find her another group home – which they did. This parental behavior of leaving her at institutions made Jessica feel as if she needed to “escape” rather than she was being cared for in a healthy environment. Said Jessica of her teenage-hood, “I was so afraid that my parents would send me away…. That was my biggest fear. I felt abandoned when I needed them the most.” Kyle described the same situation, rarely seeing his mother when he was institutionalized for behavior.

Another prevalent parenting pattern is the striking absence of, and lack of care from their biological fathers, especially when their children clearly need support. Corroborated by the survey data, almost twenty percent (20%) of the survey participants listed “unknown” about the educational level of their biological fathers – speculatively, because of the limited contact with their fathers. Seven candidates in this study reported that their fathers did not participate in childcare unless confronted by their mothers. Miki, who admired her stepfather for being a “savior,” declares she “hates” her biological father in her interview. Chad says he last saw his father when he was two years old. Anya
met her father again as a 16-year-old, and Brittney and Kyle describe being thrust upon their biological fathers only at a time of last resort. None of the interviewees in single-parent family configurations describe any other family members, such as aunts, uncles, or grandparents taking an active role of stepping in and parenting, with the exception of Beth who finally finds a stable living situation with an older sister. She will finish her education in exchange for taking care of her sister’s children.

**Community and Economic Disconnection**

Statewide, GED examiners believe that economic conditions in their students’ families were also dismal and that community resources are becoming scarcer, and doing so at a steady rate. Mills and farming, major players in Maine’s economy, they stated, are leaving or closing and in this wake wider gaps in employment and recreational opportunities for youth and for their parents are opening up. Other communities, such as western and most certainly coastal Maine, rely on seasonal employment and tourist dollars to provide for their families. One GED examiner describes a community that recognizes a high rate of teen pregnancy and has taken action by securing teen mothers care for their children so that they can finish high school. Yet others said that the “economic divide” in their communities is painfully obvious to their teenage clientele, and the disconnectedness from the “have and the have-nots” is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed.

**School Disconnection**

*Lack of relationships with teachers.* Another form of disconnection occurs in institutional practices of public schools. In all cases, interviewees were set adrift, like little islands, in their school systems. Seven out of the ten interviewees reported that they had no adult relationships in their schools; and in the case of bullying and teasing, adults
in their school were unresponsive to their pleas for help. The survey participants in this study indicated that approximately half of the youth dropped out of their public high schools without having had any conversations with school personnel. Most of them were seniors. Eight of the interviewees reported spending long periods of time out of the public school system only to enter and reenter with no formal transition other than a guidance counselor schedule of classes. Why aren’t “red flags” raised when records are clearly indicating risk? Brittney says, “You need to hit teachers in the face with a 2 by 4 to get them to understand what is going on.”

**Adversarial discipline policies.** One of the consequences of disconnectedness from adult relationships in school and at home is social “acting” out. These youth self-report their in-school behavior as: stealing a car, skipping classes, confronting teachers and administration, fighting, and not doing homework. Chad sighed heavily as he remembered that his own need to socialize as a kindergartner and throughout his schooling was met with punitive consequences. Brittney also “couldn’t sit still” and later on was suspended repeatedly; Miki believed her mother was in the principal’s office more than she was at work.

A punitive consequence for misbehavior is standard procedure for teachers and school officials. Indeed on a management level, it is easier and less time consuming for administration to simply take away privileges, dismiss, suspend and expel youth than it is to act as mediator or support. Our society “sees” no other options and reacts rather than prevents. Even as youth in this study describe their struggle with personal situations and complex social conditions, they also have expectations that adults will be not be available and accessible to help them; rather, the adversarial position of school personnel serves
only to create more disconnection, conflict and self-deprecation when youth need more comfort and care in their lives.

**Disconnection from peers.** The lack of adult intervention in the cases of peer alienation described in this study is corroborated by the adult GED examiners. Alienation from peers in school was described as ranging from overt and covert bullying, Mathew and Kyra, to being ostracized by peers, Hannah and Miki, to total isolation where the school setting, as in Kyle’s case, became a source of rage and hostility. Kyle says:

I just kept to myself and people just took me being a loner, as ‘leave this kid alone, he’s going to come in here shooting people up – that’s what he wants.’ And it was the complete opposite. I didn’t want any of that – it’s just that I gave up on making friends and I gave up on trying [to be part of anything].

GED examiners also believed that very bright youth are taking GED exams *because* of their disconnection from their school culture and their peers. Stated one examiner, “They left because of the social scene at high school. They can’t handle the day to day in a public high school – they didn’t fit in.” Some examiners said the current pressure on youth to enter college is an alienating factor for some youth they see; and that high school guidance departments are failing to recognize youth who want to pursue a different post-secondary direction.

High mobility and relocations to multiple school settings caused youth to have to make new friends and become accustomed to different peer groups. For Hannah, this was not only difficult, but painful. Her disconnectedness from an appropriate peer group at her new school was an agent in her downward spiral. The hidden “curriculum” that youth practice in schools is a great source of relational disconnection if allowed to go un-
checked by adults. None of the youth in this study had any adult help transitioning into their new schools.

Medication and Hospitalization

A distressing finding in this study was the prevalence of mental health diagnoses and subsequent medication as a result of youth behavior that might be simply have resulted from lack of any adult connections. Many of the teens I talk to, not only in this study, but as I work with homeless youth, youth in alternative education programs, and even public high school youth, amaze me at how astute and knowledgeable they are about current prescribed medications for children. They can recite the brand names and the generic substitutes, recommended dosages, effects and side-effects, and the consequences of combining most prescribed medication. They are walking pharmacists.

Medication has become a societal substitute for “caring” and was prevalent in this study. Six of the interviewees were diagnosed with ADHD during their school careers and half of interviewees spent a significant amount of time in therapy, therapeutic “schools” and hospitals, and psychiatric wards. Kyle became prescription-drug free. He stated repeatedly in his interview that adults in his life were always trying to “tranq” him but he believed he was just “a little boy with a lot of questions.” After recalling his mental health hospitalizations during his interview, he exasperatedly declares:

The biggest reason I was there a lot was that they didn’t know what was wrong with me. But there was nothing wrong with me – you see? I didn’t have a mother I could depend on, I didn’t have a father I could depend on, I didn’t have a safe environment, I didn’t have that much education, and I was an angry kid. And through that entire time – all through school – all they wanted to do was tranq me.
Many of the interviewees who had been prescribed medication felt, like Kyle, that they were suffering from conditions in which they needed emotional support and adult connections – they were not suffering from a disease that needed to be medicinally managed.

The GED as a Means for Reconnection

It is beyond the scope of this study to suggest that one might educate parents to be more responsive to their children, or to offer financial literacy courses to families who struggle, or to change the vast and disturbing economic challenges this country has found itself mired in for the past eight years, but I believe we can say that one reason for the “shift” to the GED is because youth are trying to reconcile family and systemic dysfunction in an effort to find a sense of stability and fulfillment in their lives as well as a tangible route to completing a high school degree.

At some point these GED candidates realized that they were not going to graduate with a traditional high school diploma. However, these youth were not discouraged or defeated. The final outcome for them, rather, was a returning sense of self-determination. Though some expressed disappointment in not being able to graduate with a high school diploma, and some truly regretted that they would not participate in graduation ceremonies, they were also motivated to prove that they can graduate, as Brittney says: “if I put my mind to it.” These youth found their locus of control and an internal power they needed to finally be able to take charge of their lives.

I believe it is not beyond the scope of this study to suggest that it is easy to provide human capital and to encourage social and emotional connections as well as academic success to all children. For those who were victims of abuse and abandonment,
alienation and isolation, the “shift” (as Paul Barton coins) to the GED represents a new beginning. It is more than an exam; it is a bridge to crossing over into a new life of self-respect and opportunities. This process can be likened to a “healing” or therapeutic process as the youth report ultimately generating more like-minded friends (rather then being “forced” to choose a peer group), a healthier drug and alcohol-free lifestyle, a support system, and the development of goals and aspirations that will take them away from their past experiences. One GED examiner states, “They perceive getting their GED as a step toward a future direction.” Says Brittney:

I mean I feel great that I’m not in high school anymore. I don’t have a bad reputation, people talking about me, harassing me anymore, and I’m doing great! Since I moved here and I haven’t been in high school, I have more friends than I count and they’re all there for me and it’s really great having the support that I need. And they’re like my family. They support me more than my family does.

These youth have learned their lesson well. They will also disconnect from the systems that kept them deprived of human connections. Paul Barton (2005) believes there is has been little data regarding the “shift” to the GED. Erikson (1968) says that developing youth will rebel in an effort to save their “lives.” I believe this shift to the GED may be just that – a social and emotional change agent that youth need in order to give them a chance to better their circumstances and reconnect with not only society but their sense of self-worth.

**Criticism of the GED and Researcher Response**

Unfortunately, the stigma of receiving a “good enough diploma” is still embedded in our society. While the youth know that this route to graduation is crucial, empirical
quantitative research puts emphasis on productivity in the workforce and claims that youth with GED’s are cognitively advanced but do not have the persistence that their diploma-ed counterparts have. Carniero and Heckman (2003) personify the GED exam as an “inadvertent” test that:

[S]eparates bright by nonpersistent and undisciplined dropouts from other drop-outs. It is, then, no surprise that GED recipients are the ones who drop out of school, fail to complete college, and fail to persist in the military. GED holders are ‘wise guys’ who lack the ability to think ahead, persist in tasks, or to adapt to their environments. The poor performance of GED recipients compared to high school graduates who persevere through the tasks required in school demonstrates the importance of noncognitive skills in economic life (p.141).

I would argue that this statement does not take into account the “quality” of the environments to which these youth were to have “adapted.” I take umbrage at the very condescending comments that noncognitive skills to which youth must “persevere” (as do their high school graduate counterparts) provides them the opportunity to work through “tasks required” of them in high school. For these youth, the “tasks required” in high school were that they succumb to dehumanization and degradation of their spirit and soul. Kyra was one of the few interviewees who truly regretted her decision to leave school. She says, “I just… I couldn’t be there and it was hard on me. You know, she [my mother] didn’t want to see me hurt anymore. And most of my troubles in school were the kids. You know?”
Researchers, Golden, et al., (2005) interviewed college students who had returned to school years after having dropped out of high school. States Golden and colleagues of their youth:

We have been moved by the emotion that is still evident in college students who are, in some cases, 20 years removed from their high school days. Those of us involved with the education of today's teenagers need to witness these tears left over from the past so that the stories told 20 years from now will be happier ones (2005, p. 315).

I wish the stories presented here were “happier.” However, the Maine students in this study describe disconnections from social, family and peer relationships, and further, academic experiences from kindergarten to the point of dropping out as bereft of stability, role models, peer support, and emotional resources. Yet they do persevere. While economic and labor market analysts find that GED recipients have difficulty holding jobs and have above average college attrition rates (Barton, 2005; Boesel, 1998, Heckman & Kruger, 2003), this qualitative study contradicts such a perspective by showing a persistence and resiliency among the interviewees in this study who find themselves recalling, often heartbreaking, childhoods.

In summary, the overarching finding in this study reveals that many candidates have endured numerous relational disconnections across environmental and social conditions that one GED examiner called, “unthinkable.” Regardless, these youth are concerned about their lives and are interested and active in pursuing a standard of living that will elevate their social status and help them to heal some of the emotional pain they endured as children and adolescents. There are no claims that the GED is the silver-bullet
that will magically fulfill their goals and aspirations but rather, it is a step that they take as they become the people they know themselves to be.

**Recommendations**

One tremendously important goal for me in doing this study was to bring forth the voices of the youth who experienced this educational phenomenon. The following sections are these youths’ recommendations to other teens and school personnel, researcher recommendations for schools and communities and recommendations to continue to explore and examine the lives of the children positioned in the margins of education with little concern that they survive – these children who are very much an integral part of our educational system.

**Candidates’ Recommendations to Other Teens**

The general advice to other students by the candidates in this study was to understand that dropping out was a serious decision. Table 10.1 below illustrates the responses to the question, “What would you tell other teens who were thinking about dropping out of high school?”

**Table 10.1 Youth Recommendations to Other Teens**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hannah</strong></td>
<td>“I’d tell other students who were thinking about dropping out of high school to really, <em>really</em> think about it. Because it is going...well, you are going to have some regrets, later on in life, without it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kyra</strong></td>
<td>“Well, if it’s necessary. If you really, <em>really</em> have to do it. And you really, <em>really</em> can’t be there – I can’t say that I would support them – but, if, you know, that’s what they want to do, then they gotta do it. Otherwise, I would highly, <em>highly</em> suggest for everybody to at least get their high school diploma. It’s a great accomplishment and it’s a great feeling.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Matthew  “I’d say it depends on the reason that you’re dropping out. But if you were to, I would suggest the GED, but it depends on the reason. I’m not happy that that was the route that I had to take to get here, being bullied is not fun, but it did work out for me, even though I was bullied.”

Beth  “If you’re going to drop out of high school, you should really get your GED, cause you can’t go far in life without a high school diploma or a GED – you’ll be working at Burger King the rest of your life.”

Anya  “I mean, I’m pretty, like – I can take care of myself. You know I’m going to make sure that I’m okay – but like, some people are just – lost. And I never really had too much doubt in myself in what I could do. If they feel like they’re going to be okay – then, go for it. Get your GED. Do what you want.”

Miki  “My advice to other kids who are thinking about dropping out of school is they need to evaluate whether it’s really worth it. Figure out what they’re going to do after they drop out, and don’t just wing it – ‘cause winging it doesn’t work. It gets you to where I am.”

Jessica  “You know, there are people who cannot be in the school setting because they get distracted or they get anxious. But if they were in my situation, I think the best choice for me was to get my GED. That’s what I would recommend because you know, if you’re behind and you know don’t feel good about graduating when you’re 20 and you don’t want to put that time in, a GED is the better way to go, and some people aren’t really cut out for the high school environment.”

Almost half of the youth in this study, survey participants and interviewees alike, indicated that if given the chance, they would stay in school. These youth recommend to other teens that before making the decision to drop out, evaluate the choices and understand that there may be some regrets. However, they also recommend that the GED as an option is a good one. These 17, 18 and 19 year olds are aware of the financial and emotional disadvantages of remaining a high school dropout.

Candidates’ Recommendations to School Personnel

Nine of the interviewees had recommendations for school personnel. Much lengthier than the recommendations to other teens, these voices reaffirm their experiences
in the school setting and perhaps reflect previous contemplation. Knowing their stories, the recommendations fall into place. The following are the candidates’ responses to, “If you could change the way school is, or talk to school administration, what would you say?”

**Mathew.** “I’d probably have almost every teacher in the hallway to see what’s going on. Because when you have 500 students moving through a hallway back and forth, if something happens, you can’t really notice it right away. There were no teachers in the halls when we were switching classes. They were in their rooms, preparing for the next class. They had a few teachers in the main hallway, but like in the bottom stairs, there was no teachers. Anything could happen down there and no teacher would be aware of it. And I’d probably put video cameras in the classrooms, because if the teacher doesn’t know what’s happening, you could go back to the tape and see what the kid was doing.”

**Kyle.** “You got to take slow baby steps on working towards fixing this child’s problem, if it is in their capability to do so....So, just to be more aware and to understand that there are kids out there that aren’t dealing with a normal life, you know, they’re going through a lot of stress and a lot of difficulties many years before school. It wasn’t easy.”

*What would you tell school officials about how to better help kids like you?*

“I wouldn’t start with school officials – I think I’d start with somebody who could help the schools first – and I’m talking about the teachers. The teachers need just as much help as the kids do, you know? The generation is getting worse. They’re dealing with more cocky and more disobedient kids every day, so their patience is wearing thinner and thinner. Um, there needs to be services that are for the teachers. And there needs to be
funds that can relieve the schools from all of this financial stress that they’re going through and there needs to be free lunches and free breakfasts and more donations for books for the libraries and less dramatic people that want to make a difference for the kids.”

“And drugs – nip that crap right in the bud. Get it out of the schools. When they say no drug tolerance, they should mean no drug tolerance. I don’t want to see a kid get suspended or expelled but if he’s getting busted with drugs all the time, he should be segregated from the kids – put in a separate room. I was – and I wasn’t using drugs! If you can make a difference in a kid’s life, then do so.”

Jessica. “I just think, like some of the teachers just don’t really want to get it, or they’re just black and white. And I think that there should be more teachers, there should be certain teachers who are cut out to deal with those kinds of people. And I’m sure that there’s teachers like that, but I just don’t think there’s enough.”

“PETs help because then everybody’s on the same page, the parents are included, teachers get updated on what’s going on – so all the teachers can work together. I had a couple of teachers who were always there at my PET and others who had, you know, sports after school – I mean, obviously they made a commitment, but it just doesn’t feel too good, when like, you know – can’t you just a take a day off, or a half-hour and just listen. If the teachers were more interested in the students themselves instead of just worrying about passing their students. If the teacher can open up and be on the same level of the teenager, you know, ‘cause teenagers, you’re at such an awkward age and you’re figuring out everything and you know, there’s a lot of confusion going on. A teacher that’s
just like, on this pedestal and looking down on you and talking down to you, you’re not going to want to open up, or even cooperate with them.”

**Anya.** “You mean if they had cared? You know, I probably would have stayed if someone helped. If they were like, oh, well, you’re going to be like my project and I’m going to get you through this – then, I would have done it. But – whatever. Nobody really did that for me. I think that’s probably a lot of it.”

“Well, a lot of people, are like, these kids have learning disabilities and stuff. I don’t think that they do. I think it just needs to be taught differently – this way of teaching people – it’s not working anymore. When I went to a small school, it worked really well for me. I did well there, actually. I was like a straight A student there. Small classes, teachers are great. But then again, that was like a school that I didn’t know anyone there, no one knew me. I started off on a completely different foot.”

**Beth.** “If I hadn’t had to move around so much and didn’t have guys in and out of my mom’s life – which was also in and out of my life – I would have graduated high school.”

_Could the schools have done anything to keep you in school?_

“Unless they have apartments above the school, then I don’t think so, because I had to go with my mom wherever she went. ‘Cause, like, I didn’t have any other place to go. I need stability and this July I’ll be in the same house for a year, which is the longest I’ve ever been in one place.

**Miki.** “[School] needs to be more focused on the students themselves and not just on the money or their curriculum. They need to overhaul the school. They need to go in and take out the favoritist [sp] teachers. The courses are fine. They need to pay attention
to the students. It needs to be more challenging. It needs to be more focused on the stu-
dents themselves and not just the money or their curriculum.”

**Chad.** “Jeez, I remember if you wanted to get high, you just go to school. Even
when I went to [names second high school] I mean, it’s there. And it’s so obvious, ‘cause
once you’ve been around the block several times, you can just pick ‘em out the moment
you walk through the door. And I was told that schools are going to be cut down to like to
like two or three? You think they have a problem with drugs? Wait until all the drug
groups at the different schools are together – it will be out of control!

“Also, I would say to lighten up. Teach more hands-on activities. Because when
somebody is going on and on, within the first fifteen minutes, the person’s ears are going
to shut down going through one ear and out the other. I think that’s a huge problem for a
lot of kids. One thing that gets me, too, is like, all the stuff you’re taught in middle school
and high school does not amount to anything when you’re out in the work force. You
don’t remember that stuff – I mean, unless you’re in a real high paying job and you need
something that’s required for high education and you might need something like Algebra
or some science knowledge and stuff like that. But other than that, like, basic math, mul-
tiplication and division is always important. But other than that, people don’t really re-
member. So, really I think it’s a long, wasteful time.”

**Hannah.** “If I could talk to high school administrators, I would tell them to take
better care of their alternative schools. Like, there is one computer out of 30 computers
that will work. You know? Where we do not have enough seats for all 30 kids? The heat
doesn’t work in the building. You know, it’s just, like, I think that’s what used to make
me mad in school because I had no problem going to school when I went there, not at all.
That’s the only thing that I would have to say to them – they act like the alternative school is not important – when really it is. It keeps kids from dropping out. It gives kids a second chance. I think the alternative school is always being overlooked just because it’s called the ‘Alternative School.’ If I could go and talk about the alternative school, I would have nothing but great things to say about it. It’s awesome; I love alternative school. They don’t just accept anybody, you know, they actually want people that need it. Like, if they can make it at the high school – go to the high school. But if you can’t make it at the high school – come here. I definitely love it.”

These GED candidates “see” issues in their schools from a student perspective. They offer advice from training teachers to understand how to better serve them to “everyone being on the same [academic] page” to making sure there are alternative educational options for youth who have difficulty in traditional settings. Giving voice to teens in the margins uncovers persistent situational conditions, like bullying, and offers strategies from the “non-professionals” about how to deal with them. Listening to these voices is imperative. They might possibly be the solution to high dropout (or “push out”) rates, better attendance, school violence and drug use, and helping teachers understand that most youth really do want to be part of their school community.

**Recommendations for Schools and Communities**

The findings in this study show economic, social, and emotional deterioration in our families, in our communities, and in our schools. The following suggestions are not costly or far-fetched or beyond the reach of those who hold positions that can bring about change. Based on the voices of the youth and the GED administrators who corroborated many of their stories, these are my recommendations.
Increase Connectivity to School. In accessing the teen GED population for this study, one historically large testing site declined to participate. They explained their school district had addressed the problem of their high dropout rate by establishing a new alternative education program to serve those youth who were leaving the area high school in record numbers. This successful option proved to decrease the number of high school dropouts, as well the load on the Adult Education center that served them. As a result, record numbers of teen GED recipient decreased dramatically.

Other districts would be advised to advocate for non-traditional options, such as alternative education programs, vocational education, and alternative school choice. Public schools that address diverse learning styles and intelligences better serve students who are “mismatched” in the traditional high school setting and can significantly increase student success rates.

Another way to maximize connectivity to school is to recognize and be pro-active about increased support for youth who show clear “red flags” from early elementary school. For Chad, Britney, and Kyle, histories of school failure, aberrant behavior, high absenteeism and frequent relocation to schools and communities, should have been indicators of difficulties at home from the first week of Kindergarten. This is neither news nor a new finding. Literature that addresses longitudinal factors and high dropout risk conditions is decades old. Supports for students in these categories should be routine in this century. Schools that are responsive and caring can reconnect youth through after school groups, peer-to-peer groups, one-on-one mentoring or connection to a teacher, anything that helps them feel wanted and important in the school setting.
Supporting the youth as they navigate a new school from either a family move or a move from a group home or youth detention center should be a matter of school policy. Susan Lieberman, from Keeping Maine’s Children Connected (KMCC), recognizes this as a need and has established individual contacts in all of Maine school districts with a requirement that children who are frequent movers are identified and that supports are in place to serve those children. To date, these KMCC contacts are established, but there is no indication that the schools have yet developed consistent protocols to help high mobility youth transition to their new school settings.

And finally, probably the least costly financially, but the best investment in time and resources is to re-culture our schools to not accept bullying or alienation. I believe this cannot be stressed enough. There is no reason for schools to be places where youth fall victim to other youth. Maine’s Best Practices in Bullying and Harassment Prevention: A Guide for Schools and Communities addresses bullying, harassment, and aggression in schools and offers strategies to implement a safe school culture. It is not enough to have the information – parents, community members, school administrators, teachers, and students need to insist on creating a culture that envelops caring, adult role modeling, empathy, and relationship building. For adults who work with this population training or resources on how to build relationships with teens would also be beneficial, as would preservice teacher and higher education administrative training.

Increase Connectivity to Community. In 2008, economic divides are evident in our communities and in our schools. One GED examiner from a small bedroom community stated that their school district was taking necessary steps in recognizing ways to improve educational outcomes for low SES students in their district. She says that her
community is using Payne’s (1996) "additive" model which focuses on providing information and building mutual partnerships in the community to solve systemic problems related to poverty. For example, this community acknowledges that there is a high rate of teen pregnancies in their area. Rather than ignore this, or pass out condoms, they have contracted a space to provide what is no doubt costly childcare for these young mothers so that they can finish school. Other communities might take steps to increase job opportunities for youth by contracting with local businesses and providing mentors. Creative and proactive involvement with the community will increase connectivity and give youth opportunities to explore job and educational options.

**Implications of this Study**

What do we "hear" when we listen to the voices of the people who experience the educational event of dropping out of high school? As adults, are we content with the outcome? As educators are we happy that we’ve done a great job? Or do these stories make us uncomfortable? The oldest interviewees in this study were 19 years of age. They were 4 and 5 years old when they started this journey – they are telling us how it all ended.

One implication from this study might be that GED candidates in this study demonstrated that they cannot be, and should not be, easily categorized or dismissed. They *wanted* to be in school. They understand the value of education and they, like their diploma-ed counterparts, have goals and aspirations beyond high school. Students like these need to be heard and listened to without bias or judgment.

Another implication from this study is that schools, at all grade levels, must practice a relational model, whereby the focus is on building and maintaining positive and responsible relationships with adults. This will require a paradigm shift. Decades of re-
search in education, human development, psychology, and spirituality consistently shows that youth (and adults) need attention and care to thrive. However, as evidenced by these narratives, many schools are still rigid and out-dated in their perception of what makes a school “good” and in contrast develop especially negative responses to those youth who don’t “fit” the traditional, two-parent, middle-class model. This needs to stop. If administrators and state officials are ultimately concerned about increased graduation rates, school climate and approach must become less authoritarian and more responsive to the needs of all of their students. The mantra must be “Any student can be at-risk at any time.”

And finally, this study implies that the GED remains an important and necessary tool to high school completion and needs to be honored as such. Along with the obvious function of providing a high school completion certificate, the GED as a second-chance option also serves to reconnect youth to their communities and provides a means to regain sense of self. Without the GED, many youth would remain uncredentialed and would suffer more hardship both financially and emotionally.

Further Research

While this study accesses a small sample of youth from Maine who have voluntarily made the shift to the GED, it is clear that more research can be done. This small sample only begins to illustrate characteristics of teens in very limited pockets of Maine—but other populations exist: the “quiet dropouts,” above-average youth from middle-class SES who were bored with school; teens in urban areas; teens in youth detention centers; homeschooled teens; and/ or college-age GED recipients. Other research methodology might include case studies or longitudinal ethnographies. Research continues on the ef-
fects of standardization as it pertains to testing and scores that stress literacy and numeracy; however, little research explores the side-effects of testing, such as decline in social-emotional and relational support. Further, passing their GED exams outside of the school setting often restores marginalized youths' sense of self-esteem and emotional well-being. This implication of emotional "healing," should be further investigated.

Other research initiatives might include:

- Exploring how and if additional school and alternative educational choices can decrease the number of teenage dropouts.
- Investigating if a responsive school culture increases high school completion rates.
- Implementation and evaluation of teacher/student one-on-one mentoring programs with at-risk adolescents.

One recommendation for further study would be to explore this educational event as it applies to the tenets of relational-cultural\textsuperscript{23} theory. My initial conceptual framework, based on the concepts of Bronfenbrenner's system of development and Erikson's psychosocial interactions through life stages, certainly can be applied to this research. However, I would now posit that close focus on the power of human-to-human interactions, would be even more instructive in framing the developmental impact of school-children, and especially at the systemic level. The youth in this study wanted and needed adult interaction and sometimes adult intervention. However, through each narrative threads a theme of disconnection from positive human relationships. Further study might explore the implications of implementing a relational-cultural model in our schools to continue to estab-

lish the dire need to reconnect with our children, and to offer them a healthier, happier childhood and school experience.

**Contribution of this Study**

This study does not purport to generalize to the lives of all teenage dropouts who turn to the GED for completion. Indeed, there are several populations of teens whose environmental, social, emotional, and relational context in the GED event have not been explored in this study; namely, inner-city youth, gifted and talented youth (the “quiet” dropouts), incarcerated teens, and those from other geographical areas.

My main objective in conducting a primarily qualitative study was to bring forth the voices and the stories of these youth to help us understand that it is the stories that will ultimately change the way we view this educational event, and because it is the stories that are sorely missing in GED literature. Through youth voice, this study hopes to empower youth to help communities, administrators, teachers, and counselors to understand why they are dropping out of traditional programs to complete with GEDs. Youth voice helps to advise policy changes that will accommodate those who are alienated from their school culture, and challenges the quantitative literature that stigmatizes GED recipients as “less than” their diploma-ed counterparts. The life stories these youth tell contradict the findings that GED candidates are non-persistent and do not persevere at post-secondary education or jobs – training, economists say, they must learn in high school. These youth have persisted through impossible economic, emotional, and social adversity, yet continued to pursue their desire to complete high school, to set goals, and to move forward with their lives, not unlike their diploma-ed counterparts. I believe the contribution of their stories forces a continued need to become a more responsive culture.
Final Thoughts

This study has been an extraordinary experience for me. As a teacher and a parent to hear these youth speak about their childhoods, their school experiences, and their half-apologetic reasons for why they were medicated, hospitalized and incarcerated (as they are only now realizing it might not have been their fault) – was disheartening. I had the opportunity to meet them, which my readers did not. I know their names, even though I have named them again. I watched them cringe, and laugh, and look down, and smile and cry when they came to the pieces that were difficult for them to talk about. But they persevered through the interviews, like they persevere through their lives. If merely living through devastating and debilitating conditions could be graded, these youth have excelled. They have learned more about survival in this world than many adults I know.

And as I read and reread each narrative, each story, I became more immersed in their event and more angry that these very bright young people are not honored for what they can contribute. As Kyle said, “they [teachers] didn’t want to experience any of the light that I had to offer.” Mostly, they are punished, over and over again, no one in their lives has bothered to even be kind.

These stories also remind me of my years as a high school teacher. In their voices I hear my own students: Crissy, who, at 15, had to stay home to take care of her alcoholic mother – when I asked a counselor at the school to please find out why she had not been in school, Crissy returned, angry and confrontational. When I explained that I was worried about her, she cried and I cried, and she said no teacher had ever cared that much. When I left that school, she wrote me a poem. Or 17-year-old Steve, who asked, “What’s a nice person like you doing in a... school?” Or, Nikki, who I visited in the hospital after
she had been removed from her home, and brought her her homework; she loved *To Kill a Mockingbird* and read it three times. There are more. My students were surprised and shocked that someone cared about them. As a high school English teacher, I also had over 90 students to teach and mentor – 120 one year. As a college instructor teaching At-Risk courses, I have heard the excuse from teachers and guidance counselors that there’s just “too many” kids to get to know them all. I find that excuse to be (as my teenage daughter would say) lame. Jessica, nails it on the head when she says, “There should be certain teachers who are cut out to deal with those kinds of people. And I’m sure that there’s teachers like that, but I just don’t think there’s enough.” I’m afraid that I’ll have to agree.

But this is not intended to be a treatise on the evils of school or teachers who have too much to do to care. In fact, I am trying to make concerted effort to not blame, but rather to look at the combination of factors and conditions that the youth in my study endured. The most unnerving of these factors for me was the prevalence of children who were prescribed medication and, for some, hospitalization; once again, as if the “problem” existed in the child. In no other culture are drugs so commonly used as substitute for parenting and care. In no other culture does society condone (ignore?) this practice. When we have to *tell* our communities to support children, when *drugs* become the replacement for caring – we are in trouble. Kyle says people were always trying to “tranq” him when what he needed was a caring family and stable home environment. Beth was depressed about the death of her father; Jessica was reeling from a suicide. These life events don’t require medication or hospitalization – they require honest and authentic human care. Mathew was only interviewee who did not experience prescription drugs to
"cure what ails him." My favorite phrase, the one I tag my email with, is a quote by Nelson Mandela. It reads, "There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children." I wonder about a societal soul that justifies pills in place of love.

And finally, the two interviewees who made the greatest impression on me were Kyle and Jessica; Jessica with her cherry-red hair and free spirit and Kyle with his army boots, his emotional wall, and his very unsmilingly serious persona. These young adults also exuded an inner character; they had seemed to preserve their "selves." Jessica and Kyle were also on the extreme opposites of the spectrum of interviewees in many ways – and in many ways their experience mirrored each other. They differed in personality and approach to life. Jessica, bubbly and talkative, was an extrovert who got her energy from socializing with her friends, while Kyle didn’t trust people and lived in isolation. They were at the extremes of the social and economic status; Jessica, fairly affluent – Kyle described an awareness of his family’s poverty. Both had an overt existential intelligence, and if they lacked human connections, they believed strongly in their spiritual connections. Yet, here they also differed. Kyle believed strongly in one Christian God; Jessica was searching for a universal truth. Both also had an inner sense of empathy and not only recognized the fallacies of the world they lived in, but forgave it for its misgivings. After describing his bouts with extreme anger that he metaphorically refers to as a "Pandora’s Box of Rage," Kyle says, "The thing that was saving me was the fact that I had an understanding that there was a higher power than me. And I also had compassion for people. I still care about people. I was forgiving. I still had a heart. I still had a soul. I still wanted to be a part of people’s lives. To make a difference in my own life. I still had that desire."
Kyle was the only interviewee who broke down in tears. I watched this “tough guy” dis­solve as he painfully and stoically recalled being alienated from the only friends he re­membered as being close to as a child. And even as the mother in me wanted to get up and hug him, I knew that the years of pain he had endured would not permit him to let me, a stranger, into that chasm of hurt. I needed to respect him, as he needed to find the strength and regain control within himself.

And Jessica, I dubbed the philosopher in the bunch, somewhat inadvertently summed up this experience for not only her, but also for others. Even though she is refer­ring to living through the experience of a suicide as a young girl, her analogy of the shap­ing of sea glass to describe how she felt is a very fitting comparison to the outcomes of these Maine GED candidates. “It’s like sea glass,” Jessica says. “Like, when it first goes into the ocean and it’s sharp. But the ocean smoothes it over – it’s still kind of sharp, but not as sharp as it used to be.” It is my hope that someday we have no more “broken glass” or kids who need a whole ocean to smooth them over. But rather, that they remain whole and that we come together, community, schools, parents, culture and society, to under­stand the value of, the fragility of and how we, as a society, shape, our children.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
Appendix A. Map of GED Survey Sites
## Charting the Course to 2002: a Summary of Changes to the GED Tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEST</th>
<th>What's the Same</th>
<th>What's Eliminated</th>
<th>What's Included for 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Writing Skills</td>
<td>45-minute essay; 3 item types (correction, revision, and construction shift); Sentence structure, usage, and mechanics; Informational documents (&quot;passages&quot;). Part I, multiple-choice, and Part II, essay; Examinee must complete both parts.</td>
<td>Scoring—except for homonyms, possessives, and contractions. Commas—only tested when they are used to eliminate confusion.</td>
<td>Business Communications (letters, memos, reports, applications, etc.); &quot;How to&quot; texts (e.g., dressing for success, leasing a car, planning a trip, etc.); both 200-300 words, 12-18 sentences. Organization—transitions, text divisions, topic sentences, and unity/coherence. Essay scoring rubric changes from 6-point to 4-point scale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Multiple-choice in sets and single items; Measures comprehension, application, analysis, and evaluation; Covers history, geography, civics, government, and economics; National, global, and adult contexts; Text and visual sources.</td>
<td>Behavioral science—psychology, sociology, anthropology—not tested as separate content area; some concepts tested within context of other areas.</td>
<td>More history, civics, and government; More graphics, photographs; More clearly defined content in U.S. and world history; More analysis; Different content areas tested within same item set; More single-item questions. At least one &quot;practical&quot; document (voters' guide, tax form, etc.); At least one excerpt from U.S. Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Federalist Papers, or landmark Supreme Court cases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Multiple-choice in sets and single items; Text and visual sources.</td>
<td>More single items, fewer item sets.</td>
<td>Integrated with National Science Education Content Standards; Earth science includes space science; Physical science includes physics and chemistry; Increased focus on environmental and health topics (recycling, heredity, disease prevention, pollution, climate) and on science's relevance to everyday life; 50% conceptual understanding; 50% problem-solving. Increase in graphic stimuli from 30% to 50%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting Literature and the Arts</td>
<td>Reflect diversity—gender, ethnicity, age, region; Passages range from 300–400 words; One poem (8–25 lines) and one piece of drama represented; No graphics, viewing addressed in textual manner.</td>
<td>Definitions: Popular Text and Classical Literature redefined as time periods; &quot;Literal comprehension&quot; now &quot;comprehension&quot;; &quot;Inferential comprehension&quot; now &quot;synthesis.&quot;</td>
<td>Content areas defined by type of text: Literary (75%) and Nonfiction (25%); At least one comparison/contrast question. Nonfiction will include one business document and one selection about visual representation; 20% comprehension, 15% application, 30–35% analysis, 30–35% synthesis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Measures algebra, geometry, number relations, and data analysis. 25% set-up questions—examinee must identify correct way to solve problem.</td>
<td>&quot;Not sufficient information&quot; questions decreased from 12% to 4%.</td>
<td>More emphasis on data analysis and statistics; Two parts: Part I permits calculator. Part II does not. Candidate will have practice time with calculator prior to test; Alternate Format items approximately 20%; Item sets in which candidate must access multiple pieces of information—pie charts, bar graphs, tables. All candidates will use Casio fx-260 Solar.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C. GED Survey

Please read the attached letter of consent before you complete this survey. If you are interested in participating in a paid ($20) interview about your experience as a student, please fill out the attached contact form – otherwise, do not put any identifying information on this questionnaire.

Thank you for your help!

Date of GED exam: __________ Gender: Male Female
Age at GED exam: __________ Left high school voluntarily: Yes No

1. How old were you when you first thought you might not complete high school _____

2. Did anyone at the high school talk to you about dropping out before you stopped going? Yes No

3. Did you try another program? If yes, what was the type of program? Circle all that apply.

- Home-school
- Alternative Ed
- Adult/Night School
- On-line Diploma Program
- Private school
- Other

4. Were you involved in any extra-curricular activities in high school? (Like a sports program, student government, music/art/theatre, etc.)? Yes No

5. What grade were you in when you officially stopped going to high school? _____

6. Did your parents support this decision? Yes, some Yes, a lot No

7. What is the highest level of school your parent(s) or guardians finished? Circle all that apply.

- Mother: No diploma High School diploma GED 2 year college
  4-year college Graduate Degree unknown
- Father: No diploma High School diploma GED 2 year college
  4-year college Graduate Degree unknown

8. Did your friends support your decision to drop out? Yes, some Yes, a lot No

9. If given the chance, would you make the same decision again? Yes No

10. If someone were in your same situation, would you advise him or her to take his or her GED? Yes No
THANK YOU! PLEASE SEE ATTACHED SHEET IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE INTERVIEWED.

Interview Contact Sheet

I would like to interview you! If you are interested talking about your experiences in school and how you made your decision to complete with a GED certificate, please see the attached letter describing the study. You may either contact me by email, Cheryl.brown@umit.maine.edu, or at the University at 581-2431 if you have any questions, or leave me your first name and contact information below and I will get in touch with you. If you are selected, you will be paid ($20) and it should take about 1-1 ½ hours. All information will be confidential. Some things I might ask you would be to describe your school life from Kindergarten to the point of dropping out, to describe what your home life was like during that time, and to describe why you wanted to get your GED.

Thank you for helping with this study – your story is important.

First Name: _________________________________________________________

Email: ___________________________ or phone: ____________________________
Appendix D. GED Candidates Interview Protocols

Interview Date: __________________________ (Go over confidentiality and consent form)

1. Could you describe your overall school career, starting with Kindergarten and going through high school? (Probe: Did you like school? How were your grades? Did you like your teachers? What did you like/not like about school? etc.)

2. Could you describe your home life during those years? (Probe: Were there major changes in your life? New family? Move? Change in health or health of a family member?)

3. When did school become a place you didn’t want to be in anymore? Could you describe how you felt at that time? (Probe: Were there any outside influences – for example: peers, siblings, family crisis that may have been contributing to your beginning to feel disconnected from school?)

4. How did you feel when you decided to “drop out” or discontinue your high school program? Were you approached by anyone in the school before you officially left? Did you have to have an exit interview or sign any papers?

5. Did you have parental support to drop out? (Probe: How did support (or lack of support) affect you and your decision? Could you describe your parents or guardians reaction to your decision?)

6. Were you approached by a dropout prevention team or guidance counselor prior to dropping out of school? (Probe: Did any school personnel try to keep you in school? Describe what happened - )

7. Why was it important to you to get a GED? (Probe: What were some of your reasons for going back and taking this test? Why did you choose this option as opposed to finishing school in either an adult education diploma program, or an alternative education program?)

8. What are your feelings about missing traditional graduation rites: such as ceremony, prom, yearbook, banquets, etc.?

9. What would you tell other students who are thinking about dropping out of high school?

10. Recommendations to administrators. If your future child was in high school, what would you hope he/she had that wasn’t available to you? Would make any changes? (Probe: What would you do the same? What would you do differently?)
Appendix E. Interview Protocols for GED Administrators

1. Could you describe your community? For instance, some social demographics, schools, jobs, or opportunities for teens?

2. Have you seen any trends or changes in your teen population since the time you have been an administrator at your testing site? For instance, More teens? Fewer teens? Younger or older recipients?

3. Have you seen any changes in teen attitudes or perceptions regarding graduating with a GED?

4. Would you describe the culture or community attitude toward school or schooling and if you believe your community beliefs influence a teen’s decision to drop out of high school and graduate with a GED?

5. Is there anything else you would like to add? Probe: Have you noticed or feel that there is something important I should know about your teenage population?
BIOGRAPHY

Cheryl Saliwanchik-Brown is a life-long Maine resident and a certified K-12 teacher for the state of Maine. She has worked in Maine schools for over 12 years as both a regular education and an alternative education teacher. She has worked with at-risk students for over 26 years. Cheryl's formal advocacy for at-risk youth began at the University of Maine where she had the opportunity to work with teens as an instructor for the Upward Bound program. Cheryl has presented at several Maine conferences on dropout prevention, at the New England Educational Research Organization, and at the national American Association for Suicidology conference. Cheryl is currently working as an Educational Consultant for the Maine Youth Suicide Prevention Project and teaching undergraduate Multicultural and graduate level courses in At-Risk Education for the University of Maine. She is a candidate for the degree Doctor of Education in an Individualized Program from The University of Maine in August, 2008.