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## Auto/Biographical Inquiry into the Lives of Three Female High School Dropouts in the Rural South

Barbara A. Spurlock

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AN AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL INQUIRY INTO THE LIVES OF THREE FEMALE  
HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN THE RURAL SOUTH

by

BARBARA A. SPURLOCK

(Under the Direction of William M. Reynolds)

ABSTRACT

The economic value of an education is thoroughly documented in the United States Census Bureau report, *The big payoff: Educational attainment and synthetic estimates of work-life earnings* (2002). The report clearly shows that earnings increase with educational level. Yet, students continue to leave school before graduating. In October of 1996, 11.1% of persons aged 16 to 24 years were dropouts. They were not enrolled in a high school program and had not completed high school. Nearly a half million of them left high school between October 1995 and 1996 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997).

This inquiry examined the lives of three female high school dropouts in the rural South to search for common threads among their lives and their educational experiences as students in public schools. The three participants are Caucasian, and they range in age from 25 to 38 years old. Auto/biographical narrative inquiry provides the theoretical framework for this study. The methodology includes several semi-structured interviews with each participant to allow them to tell about their personal experiences in school and since leaving school.

This study is significant because the findings support the research which shows that it is extremely difficult to pinpoint one reason that students drop out of high school.

The data gathered from the three participants in this study reveal eight very strong findings: 1) non-normative school transitions during their adolescent years; 2) lack of involvement in the social life of the school; 3) emotions at school or how they felt at school; 4) lack of family involvement in school; 5) location of the high school; 6) demographics of the high school; 7) lack of teacher relationships; 8) lack of school personnel involvement with dropouts. A review of the literature found that current research is moving away developing a profile of the dropout by only considering the characteristics that predict drop out behavior. The research is moving more toward including findings about school-level factors that contribute to or cause drop out behavior.

**INDEX WORDS:** Dropouts, High school dropouts, School dropouts, High school completers, Early school leavers, Undereducated youth, Graduate Equivalency Diploma, GED

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HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS IN THE RURAL SOUTH

by

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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2006

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## DEDICATION

I would have never thought that attending college was a possibility for me until I met Eva Stamey at the Hartwell First United Methodist Church. Miss Eva, who was age 80 years at the time, had just finished taking Speech 101, taught by Steven Gower, through Truett McConnell College at their off-campus site in Hartwell, Georgia. Miss Eva encouraged me to take the same course to help me overcome my fear of speaking in public. I was very reluctant to attempt a college course, but through her encouragement and nurturing I took my first college course and I discovered a hidden love of learning. I thank Miss Eva for seeing qualities in me that I could not see.

Dedicated to

Eva Mae Stamey

“Miss Eva”

Born in Carnesville, Georgia, 1910

Retired Teacher

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have crossed paths with many people who have been influential to me during my college career and during the writing of my dissertation. Most of these people are not even aware of the influence they have had on my life. Then, there are those people who were there for the entire process and I want to acknowledge their valuable contributions to my work.

First, Harrison (Sonny) Spurlock, my son, for encouraging me to seek my doctorate. Even after I had decided that I could not accomplish such a huge milestone, he furnished information to me about the doctoral program at Georgia Southern. In his quiet, intelligent manner he led me to see the possibility of my being able to do this. I appreciate his faith in my ability.

Second, Arthur Spurlock, my husband, kept me grounded when I wanted to give-up and quit. He was a constant help by taking over all of the house work and yard work so that I could concentrate on my “school work”. I definitely could not have done this without the love that he showed by listening to all of my woes and encouraging me to finish.

Third, the three participants for my study were relentless in their willingness to meet with me. They were so wonderful when they cheerfully gave up their valuable time to help me with this research study. Each participant was anxious to tell her story so that other persons may learn from these experiences. I truly appreciate the time and cooperation that they gave me to make this project possible.



Fourth, but certainly not last in importance, are my dissertation committee members. Dr. William Reynolds, Chair, Dr. Ming Fang He, Dr. Michael McKenna, and Dr. Patrick Novotny challenged me to stretch my thinking. I appreciate their willingness to arrange time in their already very busy schedules to meet with me. I thank each committee member for their guidance and support. Their influence has had a lasting influence on my life. Their patience and wisdom are truly appreciated and will always be remembered by this researcher.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The economic value of an education is thoroughly documented in the United States Census Bureau report *The big payoff: Educational attainment and synthetic estimates of work-life earnings* (2002). This report clearly shows that earnings increase with educational level. Adults ages 25 to 64 that worked any time during the study period of 1997-1999 earned an average of \$34,700 per year. Average earnings ranged from \$18,900 for high school dropouts to \$25,900 for high school graduates, \$45,400 for college graduates and \$99,300 for workers with professional degrees.

Synthetic estimates, which are artificially created, to project an estimate of work-life earnings, dramatically illustrate the differences that develop between workers of different educational levels over the course of their work lives. Full-time, year-round workers, synthetic earnings estimates over a 40-year period is about \$1.0 million for high school dropouts, while completing high school would increase earnings by another quarter-million dollars (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). The information from this and other such reports makes it apparent that the quality of life based on earnings is increased with the attainment of higher levels of education.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, *statistical analysis report*, there has been a dramatic change in the value of a high school education. In the 1950s, a high school diploma still provided possibilities for promising career opportunities. Now, advances in technology have helped to escalate the demand for a highly skilled labor force, transforming a high school education into a minimum

requirement for entry into the labor market.

The Digest of Education Statistics shows the percent of high school dropouts among young persons 16 to 24 years old has steadily decreased from 27.2% in 1960 to 9.9% in 2003 (NCES, 2005). However, this statistic may be misleading because people who have received their GED are counted as high school completers. Also, the data are based on sample surveys of the civilian non-institutionalized population.

According to a report by the U.S. Census Bureau (1997), in October 1996, 11.1% of persons 16 to 24 years old were dropouts. They were not enrolled in a high school program and had not completed high school. Nearly a half-million of them left high school between October 1995 and October 1996. The half-million who dropped out from high school between 1995 and 1996 were less likely to participate in the labor force (60.9%) than their peers who graduated from high school, but did not enroll in college (79.6%). Their unemployment rate was also much higher: 28.2% versus 18.4%. Among dropouts, women were less likely than men to participate in the labor force, and they were twice as likely to be unemployed.

### Context of the Study

Many high school dropouts share a history of academic failure and truancy behavior. Their reasons for leaving school are complex, and involve both personal and school related problems (Ellsworth & Stevenson, 1991). The act of dropping out involves an interdependent relationship between student characteristics and school level processes (Natriello, 1986).

Defining dropouts (Rothstein 2003): A statistical portrait states that dropping out of school is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon.

Researchers find that dropping out is a process, not an event.

It is relatively rare for students to make a snap judgment to leave school. The reasons students commonly offer for leaving school – for example, low grades, inability to get along, working, and pregnancy – may not be the true causes but rationalizations or simplifications of more complex circumstances.

Rothstein (2003) also writes about how dropout rates are climbing in the United States and that many researchers hold high-stakes tests partly to blame (2002). Students enter elementary school at risk of failure because of high stakes tests that they must pass before they can be promoted. Research done by Amrein and Berliner reveals evidence to show that high stakes tests decrease student motivation and increase the proportion of students who leave school early (Educational Leadership).

According to the counts of public school dropouts collected by the National Center for Education Statistics, the dropout rate in Georgia is as follows: 1993-94 – 8.7%; 1994-95 – 9.0%; 1995-96 – 8.5%; 1996 – 97 – 8.2%; 1997-98 – 7.3%.

The University of Georgia County Guide reports statistics in the county where the participants attended school to be distressful. In Johnson County Georgia the percent of students not completing high school in 2000 was 37.59%. Of those non-completers, 53.98% were black and 31.1% were white. Educational attainment of Johnson County adults should be a definite area of concern. The low level of education clearly disadvantages parents in their efforts to assist their children in learning



**Table 1**

*Educational Levels of Johnson County Citizens 25 Years or Older\**

<b>Level</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Total</b>
Less than 9 <sup>th</sup> Grade Education	33.2%	22.8%	25.8%
Not Completing High School	59.4%	43.6%	48%
Bachelor's Degree	0.7%	3.1%	2.6%
Graduate or Professional	0.6%	2.9%	2.3%

\*Georgia Guide, 2001

The data reveal that a high percentage of parents of Johnson County children have not completed high school, a circumstance that could contribute to the fact that the high school dropout rate is so high. In 2000, 54% of black residents of the county over the age of 25 had not completed high school and 31% of white residents of the county over the age of 25 had not completed high school. Those students who drop out do not necessarily enter the job market. In 2000, the percentage of youth ages 16 to 19 who were not in school and not working was 27.9, almost three times the state average.

Despite the increased attention to high school dropouts, the understanding and knowledge about what causes students to leave school before graduating is extremely limited. Research has identified the characteristics of potential high school dropouts and yet schools are not able to keep certain students in school even though they have the intellectual ability to learn and to be successful in school.

## Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to inquire into the lives of three female high school dropouts in the rural South to look for commonalities among their public school experiences and their lives. This study seeks to answer the following major research questions:

- (1) Are there common threads among the lives of three female high school dropouts?
- (2) Are there common threads among the public school experiences of three female high school dropouts?

In seeking answers to these questions I turn to a quote from Janice Jipson (1995, p. 197).

So where has my journey led me, and what have I found? I have sought answers and have discovered the power of narrative in my life to map for me the connections between my life experiences. I have found a way to relate my own personal passion for stories and history with 'research' and realized that the knowledge I generate is not from findings or interpretation but from recognition and understanding. And I have learned that I cannot cease seeking to understand the world as I find it.

This quote so eloquently says what I want to propose as the purpose of my study; to understand the world as I find it as it relates to high school dropouts. From this understanding, we can look for ways to improve what is currently being done in schools to try and keep the potential high school dropouts in school until they graduate.

## Statement of the Problem

Public schools are not able to keep some students that have the intellectual ability to achieve in school and to earn a high school diploma in order to graduate. The dilemma of high school dropouts is not a new phenomenon. The United States government began to officially publish statistics on the number of high school dropouts during 1960. This original endeavor published one figure which included students of all ethnicities. Then in 1967 the data began to be presented in a disaggregated form to show statistics for different ethnicities.

Rumberger reminds us that the dropout problem remains difficult to solve because research does not show one strong relationship or set of relationships empirically identified (1983). Thus, research to explore all factors involved in the decision to leave school before graduating needs to be continued. I want this study to add to the on-going conversation about high school dropouts. This study was an inquiry into the lives of three female high school dropouts in the rural South to ascertain what common experiences they had in their lives and in school.

I chose to interview women because the roles of women in society are much different than the roles of men. Cultural expectations of women are established by men in a male dominated society, and this creates a difference worthy of study. Women are socialized to be ladies, quietly accepting, rather than showing hostile or aggressive responses when they are faced with experiences that are sexist or self-devaluing. Through this socialization, women are less likely to externalize blame for their condition. Female dropouts are more likely to blame themselves and to view dropping out as a personal

failure rather than blaming other factors. Because of this internalizing behavior female dropouts are more likely to experience psychological dysfunction than male dropouts (Fine, 1991).

Gretchen-Freed-Rowland is a Native American author who writes about feminism and education (Jipson, et. al., 1995). In her writing she talks about how we can identify occasions where our ideas have been treated as irrelevant or inappropriate, and our voices are not heard. I believe this is often the case with girls in school. Over a period of time, when their voices are not heard, they give up and become disengaged from the educational process. They become invisible.

#### Autobiographical Roots

My lived experiences have shaped the person that I have become. I grew up in the Deep South where women knew their place; in other words they knew their role in life. The role of southern women in the 1950s and 1960s was to live in the shadows of men. Women were subservient to men, and even though some women worked at jobs outside of the home, they were very menial, low paying jobs.

On the farm at harvest time in South Georgia, relatives and neighbors came from miles around to harvest the crops. When the work was finished at one farm, the families and friends would move on to the next farm to harvest the crops of those who had helped them. I remember as a young teen wondering why the women cooked, served, and cleaned-up for the farmers that were gathered together for the harvest. The women ate their meal together, only after the men had finished eating and returned to the fields, and the children had been feed and cared for. My young impressionable mind wondered if women could be farmers too, or if that was something only men could learn to do.

I was the oldest child of an alcoholic father that was often abusive to me. My mother worked long hours as a waitress at a drug store fountain to earn wages for food and to provide housing for us three children. I was scared and thought that I might die that day. Beginning in the third grade I attended elementary school in South Florida. I had often witnessed the Seminole Indians at my school being taken from class for long periods of time. I overheard teachers talking to each other about how the “dirty Indians” had to be taken to the gym to be showered and deloused. These things frightened me even more because I did not understand what was happening. There were so many things that I was confused about. So, that day when the alarm blared, I thought that we were being attacked by the Russians, and that I would surely die. I can’t ever remember being told that when the alarm sounded it was only a drill. I opened my lunch sack and grabbed one-half of the sandwich. My heart pounded in my chest as I got in line to go outside of the school. I was in the third grade and had never learned about fire drills until that day. After my grandmother died, my family moved from Columbus, Georgia to live in South Florida to be near my great-aunt. My sisters and I attended Dania Elementary School where everything was new and strange to us. I lived in a constant state of fear because I didn’t have anyone who explained things to me or anyone to care for me.

During the 1950s curriculum was not relevant to the lives of students. We read a lot about Dick, Jane, and Spot, and we learned to add, subtract, multiply and divide. The curricular focus was narrow and included a hidden agenda for developing students who lived in fear of the United States being attacked by Russians at any moment. We often had drills where we got under tables or desks and stayed until we were told that it was

okay to come out. These drills were to teach us about the possibility of an attack. My life during the 1950s was troubled, but the memories blurred as I faced the 1960s.

I was all alone and I didn't know what to do. My mother and father had divorced and I hoped that things at home might improve. I didn't have any friends because the responsibility of caring for my two younger sisters was placed on me when I was only seven or eight years old, and because my father was known as the down drunk. My family and I were just poor white trash, the type of people that good people don't want their kids hanging around with. I lived in a constant state of fear; fear of the unknown, fear of being alone, fear that someone would find out. My mother married shortly after the divorce from my father. By then my roots of feminism had begun to grow, although I was still not fully aware of it yet.

During the 1960s my life would totally change. This was an era of turbulence, both in history, and in my life. The United States was at war with Viet Nam, there was the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Kennedy was assassinated, and Americans still lived in fear of the Russians. Civil Rights advocates were becoming active in protesting segregation and discrimination against blacks. In the deep South, people were angry and confused because their lives were being turned upside-down as blacks no longer knew their place.

I sat tall in my desk, looking poised and confident. This was an unusual stance for me to take. I usually tried to fade into the background to avoid being noticed in his algebra class. I always tried to escape his gaze in hopes that I would not be called upon to explain anything about algebra. Today I felt pretty and attractive in my new multicolored blouse. I didn't often wear store-bought clothes because my mother couldn't afford to

buy them. My mother made most everything that me and my sisters wore. Many of our clothes were made from feed sacks and flour sacks. But, today was different. I was wearing a brand-new store-bought blouse. He was collecting homework as he walked up and down the rows of desks making comments. He noticed my air of confidence as he approached me. His comment to me was devastating when he said, “Miss Madden, you shouldn’t wear that color, it doesn’t go with your complexion and looks hideous on you”. In my mind’s eye I remember that 15-year-old girl. I recall how alone I felt as my classmates laughed. I remember the helpless feeling of not being able to understand algebra, and wondering why he had to belittle me. What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I learn? I felt that staying in school was hopeless. No one really cared about me or about what I did. I was almost invisible.

My decision to drop out of school was made in 1959 but I actually tried very hard to stay in school. Then, in 1960 I took that final step; I became a high school dropout. My life was like a volcano waiting to erupt. I knew that something was wrong but I didn’t yet have the knowledge base, and I was not resourceful enough to understand what was happening to me. I wondered what a girl was supposed to do after she quit school. The First Wave Feminism had already taken place although I was unaware of it happening and life in the deep South had remained virtually unchanged. During the tumultuous sixties the Second Wave Feminism was taking place.

#### Methodology

This study searches for the common threads among the lives of three female high school dropouts and their educational experiences in public schools. I chose to use Auto/biographical narrative inquiry as the theoretical framework for my study because it

provides a method to allow me to interact with the participants as a high school dropout. Auto/biographical narrative inquiry was used to gather the stories of these three women who dropped out of high school and then went on to earn their Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED) and become successful in life. Semi-structured interview prompts were used to engage the participants in conversation during the interviews. The participants in the study are three Caucasian females who range in age from 25 to 38 years.

### Challenge of the Study

Virginia L. Olesen writes about feminism and qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Olsen reminds us that researchers must beware of the necessity to “attend to representation, voice and text in ways that avoid replication of the researcher and instead display representation of the participants” (p. 366). This is reminder to the researcher to always be aware of the presence of potential limitations when the study is conducted and written as an auto/biography by the researcher who is also a high school dropout.

The results of the study are limited to a sample of three female high school dropouts. The participants were chosen because they attended the local high school in the county where I was employed and a high school in an adjacent county where the demographics are basically the same. They were also chosen because they have earned their GED and are employed. The results may not apply to a more diverse population of participants. There is a possibility that the results may not apply to high school dropouts who have not earned a GED.



## Significance of the Study

Many high school dropouts share a history of academic failure and truancy behavior. Their reasons for leaving are complex, and involve both personal and school-related problems (Ellsworth & Stevenson, 1991). The act of dropping out involves an interdependent relationship between student characteristics and school processes (Natriello, et. al., 1986).

In my mind's eye I recall feeling like no one cared about me at home or at school. It was a feeling that there was no one who cared about what happened to me and it was frightening. My father was an alcoholic who was often without work. My mother worked long hours as a waitress to provide a very basic existence for me and my two younger sisters. This was at a time in history before there was a welfare system. People had to provide for themselves or do without. If we didn't have food there were no food stamps, we simply didn't eat. I was given the responsibility of taking care of the house and my sisters when I was only seven or eight years old.

There have been numerous studies conducted over a period of more than forty years that have identified at-risk factors for potential high school dropouts. The value of an education on the quality of life based on wages earned has been thoroughly documented. Yet, public schools are not able to hold onto many students that have the intellectual ability to achieve in school.

Current research reveals that students enter elementary school at-risk of dropping out because of high-stakes testing. Rothstein(2003) asserts that dropout rates are climbing in the United States, and many researchers hold high-stakes tests partly to blame (2002). Research done by Amrein and Berliner gives further evidence that high stakes tests

decrease student motivation and increase the proportion of students who leave school early (Educational Leadership).

The phenomenon of high school dropouts is not new. It has been statistically measured since 1960. Students believe that they are bored. Teachers believe that students lack motivation to learn. The government leaders believe that more testing and retention will be the answer to all of the achievement problems in schools. It appears that school systems and policy makers are searching for solutions to an age-old problem, but that they do not systematically ask the high school students their reasons for leaving high school before graduating.

The information gathered from the three female high school dropouts in this study may lead educators to a better understanding of what happened that caused them to leave school before graduating. Through this understanding, schools may be able to make changes that will keep students in school until they graduate.

### Overview of the Study

This study is an auto/biographical inquiry into the lives of three female high school dropouts in the rural South. The participants range in age from 25 to 38 years. All three participants are Caucasian, two went to school in the same county and one went to school in an adjacent county where the school and county demographics are basically the same.

In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the relevant professional literature for the study. Chapter 3 explores the method of inquiry, data collection and management, selection of participants, and interview prompts. Chapter 4 includes the auto/biographical narrative of the participants, the interview analysis, and the data presentation. Chapter 5 concludes with the discussion, implications of this study and the conclusion.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature for this study considers why students continue to drop out of high school before graduating. The literature review explores student-centered characteristics of dropouts as well as institution-centered characteristics that contribute to students leaving school before they graduate.

First, auto/biographical narrative is explored to establish a theoretical framework for this study. Second, topics which include defining dropouts, characteristics of dropouts, school-level factors leading to dropouts, and student's emotions about school are researched. The goal of this research is to examine how these traits contribute to creating the high school dropout.

An auto/biographical narrative framework gives me a lens through which I can view the previous studies that have been done about high school dropouts. Auto/biographical narrative inquiry provides an inquiry methodology that allows the researcher and the participants to interact on a personal level to gather data for the study. An atmosphere of equality is established between the researcher and the participants in auto/biographical narrative inquiry.

## Auto/biographical Narrative Inquiry

Unless I understand myself in relation to the study, I have no basis for understanding the phenomenon of high school dropouts or the responses of the participants in the study. Auto/biographical narrative inquiry is an integral part of my everyday life as a professional educator. I use this method of inquiry on a daily basis as I question and listen to responses of administrators, teachers, students, and parents who provide pertinent information to me about their students and children. I then use the information (data) that I gather to produce a mental narrative of the students that I work with as a Lead Teacher, Special Education. A written narrative is sometimes derived from the data and placed in the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) as the Present Level of Performance (PLOP).

As I reflected upon how I approach questions in my personal and professional life it became apparent to me that auto/biographical narrative inquiry is essential to my being as a person and as a researcher. The process is such a natural one that I could not "see the forest for the trees" for several months. Rather than use a methodology that is a natural occurrence for me, I tried to embrace a methodology that was contrived rather than one that was a natural occurrence. New understandings develop through inquiry and through further research I came to understand that auto/biographical narrative inquiry is a viable theoretical framework for this study.

Auto/biographical narrative or self-narratives, and narratives or stories, have been in existence since the beginning of time. Narrative serves to give us a vehicle for understanding ourselves and our surroundings. Barthes (1975) tells us that:

Narratives and stories are among the most powerful instruments for

ordering human experience. Narrative can be expressed in oral or written language, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings, stained glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed, narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative;...(p. 240).

As part of their reconceptualization of curriculum studies in the 1970s, which is when the field shifted from a primary interest in the development of curriculum to a theoretical interest in understanding curriculum, Pinar and Grumet (1976) introduced the idea that curriculum is an autobiographical text. They proposed *currere*, meaning the running of the course, as an autobiographical theory. Pinar et al. (1995) described *currere* as a focus on the educational experience of the individual, as reported by the individual. In *Understanding Curriculum* (Pinar, et al, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2002) Pinar further described *currere* when he wrote: Stated simply, *currere* seeks to understand the contribution academic studies makes to one's understanding of his or her life (p. 520). Pinar and Grumet (1976) outlined a method for *currere* that involved four steps: regression, progression, analysis, and synthesis while continuing to articulate autobiography as a theory for curriculum inquiry. The reconceptualization of curriculum studies opened the field up to recognize many viable methods of curriculum inquiry including autobiographical/biographical inquiry.

Sartre (1938) said “A man is always a teller of tales; he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others; he sees everything that happens to him through them, and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it”. Auto/biographical writing produces narratives about our lives. This method of inquiry leads me to ask myself what experiences, issues, stories from my life can be of benefit to others? My mind is always in motion, playing and replaying stories in my head about what has happened and what may happen. These stories are my own private mental narratives of my thought processes which are as natural as breathing. As I live, these stories cannot be stopped, just as breathing cannot be stopped. Birren (1987) wrote, “I’ve found that we feel stronger and more hopeful after writing and sharing our autobiographies. We see that we must have been good travelers to have gotten this far”. This quote helps me to express my feelings about how auto/biographical inquiry gave me a means to release my thoughts and it allows me to feel a sense of freedom from some past experiences.

Turning to autobiographical memories beyond early childhood, we find that events of personal experience that occur during times of transitions and that are deemed to be intensely emotional persist in memory for many years (Pillemer, Rhinehart, & White, 1986). Using auto/biographical inquiry as the theoretical framework of my study will allow me to look into the lives of three female high school dropouts in the rural South to search for common experiences of these women during times of transitions in their lives.

Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) assert that research data can be categorized into three basic forms: short answer, numerical, and narrative. Participants can be asked to provide data in a short-answer format, in a numerical format, and in a narrative format. Although qualitative research can use all three forms of data, it is primarily characterized by its use of data in a narrative form. Narrative as story is of special interest to qualitative researchers as they try to understand the fullness of human existence by including in their inquiries the unique characteristics that differentiate human existence from other kinds of existence.

In *Experience & Education* (Dewey, 1938), Dewey writes about “the need of a theory of experience”( pg. 25). When the researcher writes about his/her life history, writing in the narrative, first person voice, auto/biographical inquiry can become a theory of experience. The researcher becomes self-reflective, writing from within to express ideas about life experiences which have shaped the person that he/she has become. This experience permits the writer to recognize the power of narrative to convey ideas to others.

According to Marshall & Rossman (1999), narrative inquiry may rely on journal records, photographs, letters, autobiographical writing, e-mail messages, and other data. Connelly and Clandinin (1991) propose that is important not to squeeze the language of narrative into a language created for other forms of research. They also suggest that each inquirer must search for and defend the criteria that best apply to his or her work. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) remind us that as inquirers, we tend to define our phenomenon as if life stood still and did not get in our way. In *My Pedagogic Creed*

Dewey states: I believe finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing. So, life does not stand still; it is continually constructing and reconstructing our experiences. This is a fact I must realize and adapt to as I conduct my inquiry into the lives of three female high school dropouts. Our roles are always changing, our lives are intertwined with the lives of family members and others, we are all employed in demanding jobs, and our lives are busy. The fact that life gets in the way, adds to the complexity of inquiry.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) declare that:

When we say that understanding our own narrative is a metaphor for understanding the curriculum of our students, we are saying that if you understand what makes up the curriculum of the person most important to you, namely, yourself, you will better understand the difficulties, why, and wherefores of the curriculum of your students (pg. 31).

Auto/biographical narrative inquiry is the theoretical framework for my inquiry that will allow me to gain a better understanding of myself and of the participants in my study entitled: An Auto/biographical Inquiry Into the Lives of Three Female High School Dropouts in the Rural South.



## Defining Dropouts

A large body of research exists to predict why students leave high school before graduating. There have been numerous studies conducted to try and determine who drops out of school and why (Altenbaugh, 1995; Brown, 1998; Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Morton 1998). The phenomenon of high school dropouts is not new. It has been statistically measured and formally reported by the United States Census Bureau since 1960. Although the phenomenon of high school dropouts has existed for many years, there does not appear to be a solution to this dilemma. Perhaps one reason that a solution to the problem of dropouts is elusive is that there are a variety of reasons a student may drop out of school and dropping out, most often cannot be attributed to only one reason.

Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995) state that:

The school leaving rate has steadily, but irregularly, declined throughout this century, yet one pattern continues. From all indicators, poor and working-class teenagers abandon schooling at a higher rate than their middle- and upper-class counterparts, with sharply disproportionate rates among minority students. This trend demonstrates a widening chasm between social classes.

According to the terms of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), states districts, and schools are required to report performance measures for their overall student population and to disaggregate results separately for student subgroups defined on the basis of race and ethnicity, gender, English-language proficiency, socioeconomic status, disability classification and migrant status. These federally mandated performance indicators include achievement test scores, and the graduation rate at the high school level (Orfield, 2004).

**Table 2**

**2001 Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity**

	<b>All Students</b>	<b>Native Americans</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>
National Average	68.0	51.1	76.8	53.2	50.2	74.9
South	62.4	58.1	81.9	55.4	52.3	68.9
Georgia	55.5	34.3	79.8	43.2	43.7	62.4

(Orfield, 2004, pg. 21)

Dropout rates in Georgia are the second highest in the country. Governor Sonny Perdue, is currently asking legislature to approve funding to place a completion counselor in every high school. His idea for this initiative is to provide an adult to work with students who have previously been identified as at-risk of not finishing high school. This completion counselor will work to ensure that there is a support system available to these at-risk students so that the students may stay in school until they graduate.

Another education initiative in Georgia aimed at reducing the number of high school dropouts is GO. Education. Go Get It. This is a newly implemented program that

will be a statewide effort that targets children from preschool through high school and encourages them to get their high school diploma. The idea of this initiative is that the Georgia Department of Education will join an effort which will include community leaders and other stakeholders to work together as a team to provide information and support to local education systems in an effort to reduce the number of high school dropouts in Georgia.

Past initiatives taken by the State of Georgia to reduce the number of high school dropouts include changing the laws so that high school dropouts cannot earn their Graduation Equivalency Diploma (GED) until after their graduating class has graduated from high school. And, school dropouts cannot get their drivers license until they reach the age of 18 years.

Despite these initiatives, schools cannot hold on to many students who have the potential to finish high school. Students continue to leave school before they graduate. This study seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) Are there common threads among the lives of three female high school dropouts? 2) Are there common threads among the educational experiences of three female high school dropouts?

Waggoner (1991) states:

In 1980 there were 5.9 million undereducated youth, aged 16 to 24, in the United States, fifty-eight percent of them – 3.4 million – were white majority youth. Only 1.5 million, or a quarter of undereducated youth in 1980, were from the poorest levels of society. The risk of undereducation in the United States is pervasive, U.S. schools are failing to retain advantaged as well as disadvantaged youth through

12 years of education (p. 19).

On June 21, 2006, an article entitled, Georgia among worst in on-time graduation, appeared in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution news. This was a report of the findings in a four-year project financed by the Gates Foundation. The report, by the national education newspaper Education Week, found 56 percent of Georgia's public high school students graduated after four years with a standard diploma in 2003, the most recent year for which national comparison data was available.

According to this report, Georgia's 56 percent graduation rate, as determined by the education report, is lower than the 63 percent rate Georgia education officials reported in 2003. To meet the education goals under NCLB, the state's high schools and school systems have to graduate 60 percent of students on time, or show improvement toward that goal.

The report reveals that nationally, as many as one million students did not graduate in 2003. The reported national graduation rate that year was about 70 percent.

Researchers have reported repeatedly over the past two decades how the lack of a consensus definition of a dropout has contributed to confusion in estimating dropout rates and have called for standardizing the definition (Rumberger, 1986).

In a Washington news report, Robert Lerner, the commissioner of education statistics, said that his agency was conducting a study of the ways in which data on high school completion could be collected and analyzed more effectively. In the September 1, 2004, report by Education Week, Mr. Lerner did not have a firm timetable for when the results of the study would be available.

Time magazine, April 17, 2006, contained a special report, Dropout Nation, which stated that 30% of America's high school students will leave without graduating.

Time magazine reported that on a national level, NCLB was designed to make schools accountable for their dropouts, but it hasn't been carried out very seriously. They further stated that the Education Trust, an advocacy group for low-income and minority students, issued a scathing report in 2005 about how the federal government stood by while states handed in misleading graduation numbers. Three states didn't submit any figures last year, and the figures were clearly inflated for many states.

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings told Time magazine that much is being done to get better data on dropouts. She said that there was a resolution by the National Governors Association last year to set, for the first time, a common definition of a dropout that all states will use to report graduation rates to the federal government. But it's a nonbinding compact that five states, including Florida, Texas, and California didn't sign.

An article in the March 3, 2006 issue of The Atlanta Journal Constitution, talks about a survey of high school dropouts that was used to produce a report commissioned by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It was reported that the study is the first in fifteen years to ask dropouts their reasons for leaving school. The survey polled 467 dropouts ages 16 to 24, from twenty five cities. When they left school, 88 percent said they were passing and 70 percent said they felt they could have graduated had they stayed in school. The most common reason they gave for leaving was that the course work isn't enough of a challenge. John Bridgeland, the CEO of a Washington-based research

company that released the report said “The decision to drop out is not made on a single morning”.

According to a U.S. Census Bureau report, there are 52.6 million Americans with disabilities, nearly 3.6 million of whom are between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, a large and diverse group of young people. The NCLB Act does not count students who graduate with a Special Education Diploma as high school completers for adequate yearly progress (AYP) purposes. In other words, a student with a disability who graduates with a special education diploma is considered a dropout by NCLB for school and school system accountability purposes. A recent U.S. Department of Education press release placed the national graduation rate at 86.5 percent. The rate for African American students at 83.7 percent and Hispanic students at 64.1 percent. The dropout rate for students with disabilities ranges from 25 to 30 percent. This same press release reveals that only about one-fourth of students with disabilities graduate from high school with a regular diploma.

Currently the definition of a dropout that is used by the U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau is: dropouts are 16- to 24- year-olds who are not enrolled in school. People who have received GED credentials are counted as high school completers. Data are based on the civilian non-institutionalized population.

#### Characteristics of Dropouts

Much of the research on school dropouts has focused on the characteristics of those who drop out and what influenced the drop out behavior. Historically, our society viewed dropouts as misfits and delinquents (Cervantes, 1966). This view of dropouts as failures may cause poor self-esteem and may lead to shame and sorrow that has negative

influences on the dropout for all or most of his/her life. Cervantes (1966) describes the dropout:

The dropout is no longer a boon to the national economy. He is clumsily dysfunctional in the computer-precise, machine-oriented, communication-saturated society. His muscles are a drug on the market; his truncated education makes him inadequate to qualify for available jobs; he is in no position to bargain for himself and has little chance to develop himself within an expanding socio-economic universe (p. 196).

The characteristics that were identified by Cervantes (1966) that predict dropout are: 1) two years behind in reading or arithmetic at seventh grade; 2) failure of one or more school years; 3) irregular attendance and frequent tardiness; 4) performance consistently below potential; 5) no participation in extracurricular activities; 6) frequent change of schools; 7) behavior problems requiring disciplinary measures; 8) feeling of not belonging.

According to research done by Rumberger (Orfield, 2004), dropouts reported a variety of reasons for leaving school: school-related reasons – 77 percent, family-related reasons – 34 percent, and work-related reasons – 32 percent. The most specific reasons were: did not like school (46 percent), failing school (39 percent), could not get along with teachers (29 percent), and got a job (27 percent). These reasons do not reveal the causes of why students dropout. Many factors from the students' background may have shaped the students' attitudes, behavior, and school performance prior to their decision to leave school. Dropping out is not just a result of academic failure, but usually from both social and academic problems in school. These problems usually appear early in a

student's school career and they are influenced by a lack of support and resources in families, school, and communities (Rumberger, 2004).

Rumberger and Larson (1998) developed a conceptual framework for studying student educational performance which includes the three categories of background, engagement, and educational performance. This framework shows that family, school and community support is an integral component of these three categories of student educational performance. The framework suggests that dropping out is one aspect of the three interrelated dimensions of educational achievement: 1) academic achievement, as reflected in grades and test scores; 2) educational stability, which reflects whether students remain in the same school (school stability) or remain enrolled in school at all (enrollment stability); and 3) educational attainment which is reflected by years of schooling completed and the completion of degrees or diplomas (Orfield, 2004).

A large body of empirical research has identified many individual predictors of dropping out that are consistent with this framework (Orfield, 2004, pg. 135). According to Rumberger the most important ones are: 1) poor academic achievement; 2) student engagement; 3) student mobility; 4) high school employment; 5) teenage pregnancy; 6) background characteristics including gender, race and ethnicity, immigration status and language background.

Rumberger reminds us that this framework is based on the idea that student disengagement and withdrawal from school is a long-term process that can be influenced by students' early school experiences (Orfield, 2004, p. 136).

Grade retention has been identified as the single most powerful predictor of dropping out (Rumberger, 1995). Although some recent studies have suggested that



retention may have some positive effects on academic achievement, all of the empirical studies suggest that retention significantly increases the likelihood of dropping out (Orfield, 2004). Rumberger (1995) found that students who were retained in grades 1 to 8 were four times more likely to drop out between grades 8 and 10 than students who were not retained.

The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics recently issued a report dated June 2006 entitled *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2002 and 2003*. I captured a few of the statistics that are pertinent to my research to report below.

The **event dropout rate** estimates the percentage of both private and public high school students who left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or its equivalent.

**Event dropout rates by family income:** In 2003, students living in low-income families were approximately five times more likely than their peers in high-income families to be event dropouts.

**Event dropout rates by region:** In 2003, no differences were detected in the event dropout rates for the four regions of the country. In 2002, the South registered a higher event dropout rate than the Midwest (4.4 versus 2.6 percent).

Nine states had event dropouts of 6 percent or more: Delaware, 6.2 percent; Illinois and Nevada, 6.4 percent; Georgia, 6.5 percent; Louisiana, 7.0 percent; Washington and New York, 7.1 percent;

Alaska, 8.1 percent; and Arizona, 10.5 percent.

The **status dropout rate** reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or equivalency credential, irrespective of when they dropped out. The rate focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues.

**National status dropout rates:** In October 2003, approximately 3.6 million 16- through 24-year-olds were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential such as a GED. These status dropouts accounted for 9.9 percent of the 36 million 16- through 24-year-olds in the United States in 2003. Unlike event dropout rates, which have remained relatively stable since 1990, status rates declined over the period between 1990 and 2003.

**Status dropout rates by sex:** Males ages 16-24 were more likely than females to be high school dropouts in 2003 (11.3 percent compared with 8.4 percent).

**Status dropout rates by race/ethnicity:** The status dropout rate of whites remained lower than that of blacks in 2003, but over the past 30 years the difference between whites and blacks has narrowed. This narrowing of the gap occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Between 1990 and 2003, there was no measurable change in the gap between whites and blacks.

The percentage of Hispanics ages 16-24 who were dropouts was consistently higher than that of blacks and whites throughout this 31-year period (1972-2003).

**Status dropout rates by region:** In 2003, the South had a higher status dropout rate (11.4 percent) than each of the other three regions. The South also had a higher rate in 2002 than the other regions.

This report just published this month, adds to the already extensive body of research which seeks to establish the characteristics of high school dropouts and tries to determine what causes students to drop out.

Waggoner (1991) conducted a study on undereducated youth which included out-of-school youth who have not completed twelve years in regular high school and earned a diploma, and youth who have not received an alternative credential such as that obtained by passing the GED test. The study found that youth from families with incomes below the poverty level are much more likely to be undereducated than youth from more economically advantaged families. The study also revealed that students who have been held back or repeated a grade were more than twice as likely not to be high school graduates. This study found that youth living in the South are much more likely to be out of school without diplomas than those living in other regions of the country.

In the past four decades there have been hundreds of studies to try and determine the reason(s) that students drop out of school before graduating. In the past, much of the research has focused on identifying the characteristics of the dropout. Some characteristics are common to the majority of dropouts: attendance patterns, family and

ethnic background, geographic location, socioeconomic status, retention history, and academic achievement. However, it remains difficult to determine exactly what causes students to dropout.

Dropouts are a difficult population to study. There is little concrete evidence from empirical studies that dropouts are misfits and delinquents as described by Certantes (1966). Therefore, several authors have called for more research on the consequences of dropping out. Rumberger (1987) has noted that “the consequences of dropping out deserve more attention from researchers and policy analysts” (p. 116). Natriello, Pallas, and McDill (1986) more forcibly call for more research:

There is a clear need for research on the consequences of dropping out of high school. We know rather little about either the economic or social consequences of dropping out...In order to do this, we need detailed information on the experiences and characteristics of dropouts before they left high school, as well as data on their labor market experiences, cognitive performance, and attitudes and behaviors after leaving school. The High School and Beyond data are by far the best available for this purpose (p. 174).

#### School-Level Factors

Although the bulk of the literature speaks about the characteristics of individual students who dropout rather than the contributing factors of the schools, some data have been collected to make evident the institutional indicators that push students to leave school. The institutional indicators likely to maintain high dropout rates are most typical of school attended by low-income urban students (Fine, 1991).

Research on high school dropouts has begun to move beyond developing profiles of typical dropouts. Recent research has focused upon the influence of school-level factors that contribute to students dropping out. The following two quotes substantiate the fact that schools contribute to unfair practices.

Education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society.

We cannot ignore the significant costs borne by our nation when select groups are denied the means to absorb the value and skills upon which social order rests. (U.S. Supreme Court, *Plyler v. Doe*, 1982)

Do we evaluate the long-term effects of our grouping practices with open minds, or do we see only what we want to see...To what extent do we...automatically offer some youngsters more than their share of the American dream while deferring that dream for others? (Corkin Cherubini, Superintendent, Calhoun County, Georgia).

These two quotes indicate to me that there is something in the schools that contributes to unequal treatment of students. Youths who are not experiencing academic achievement in school may be at risk of feeling isolated and marginal when they attend classes in which teachers are seen by their students as less responsive and caring. Fine (1985, 1987) notes that isolation and marginality arise in large bureaucratic high school settings. Fine found that in large urban high schools youths are routinely discharged for nonattendance. Student's personal problems are often ignored or treated as issues of discipline or inattendance (Fine, 1985, 1987). For example Fine describes the case of Jose who gave his reason for leaving as: "I live with my grandmother and she just came out of the hospital for triple bypass in her heart. Now she needs a balloon put in. I can't

concentrate and got to help her”. In contrast, Jose’s guidance counselor explained the cause for his leaving as “Jose got over involved and was irresponsible about his own education” (Fine, 1987, p. 96). Jose was not asked by the attendance officer why he was withdrawing from school.

High school students are often the victims of a reorganization of society over which they have no control. Today’s youth are the recipients of a move to post-industrial society (Weis, 1990, p. 10). Alienation from school and disengagement from learning are further perpetuated when students’ voices are silenced in schools. Fine (1990) in describing the kind of silencing that surrounds high school dropouts explains:

An yet it is the very naturalness of not naming, of shutting down or marginalizing conversations for the sake of getting on with learning that demands educators’ attention, particularly so for low-income ... (p. 37).

*Learning to Labor* (Willis, 1977) paints the picture in vivid detail of conflicts and tensions between an oppressed group (working-class) and the status quo (middle-class) to show the process involved in the production, reproduction, and transformation of cultural meanings that mold class-based ideology. Weis (2004) expounds that an “us versus them” ideology has been established and reinforced by an opposition to authority and school by today’s working class youth. Weis (1990) states that “The point is that, again, students are not involved in the process of learning. They are involved in the form of schooling but not its substance” (p. 30). Fine and Weis (2004), relate how students describe to them their beliefs that schools want students to feel ashamed or embarrassed

so that students will dropout. This will allow smaller classes and there will be no adult responsibility for the loss of students.

Young people must have a connectedness to school if they are to be successful as students. Sadowski (2003) says that much of a student's success or failure in school centers on questions of identity. Adolescents are concerned with establishing their identity. Since adolescents spend most of their waking hours in school, middle and high schools are "both mirrors and shapers of their identity development experience" (p. 2). Students' identities are directly related to how they see school as relevant to their everyday life. Many times students are not engaged in learning because they cannot see how the material being presented is important to their life. Adolescents are concerned with the here and now, they are not usually concerned with the future. Sidorkin (2002) says it is very hard to stay enthusiastic about producing things that go straight to the wastebasket (p. 13). He says that is why students don't want to do the schoolwork. In other words, students do not see the relevance of most of the things that are taught in school.

In the book *Culture, Politics, and Irish School Dropouts* (Fagan, Friere, Giroux, Bergin & Harvey, 1995), students reveal that they leave school early because of extreme boredom with an uninteresting curriculum. The young people point out that it is impossible to learn that in which you are not interested. They also criticize schooling and teachers by arguing that the teachers did not teach. The early-school leavers say they reacted against boring, uninteresting, and irrelevant curriculum and minimal teaching. When students react against some component of schooling, they become disengaged from the learning process. Students who are not interested in the curriculum but must stay in

school may find that they are often sent to the office for discipline problems and eventually encouraged by school authorities to leave school. Students who do not have to stay in school will become dropouts.

Standards, accountability, and testing are the three federal and state mandates that are influencing schools today. According to Amrein and Berliner (2002), twenty-two states offer incentives for high or improved test scores. Twenty states distribute financial rewards to successful schools. Forty-five states hold schools accountable for test scores by publishing school or district report cards. Twenty-seven of those states hold schools accountable through ranking schools; sixteen have the authority to close, reconstitute or takeover low performing schools; sixteen have the authority to replace teachers or administrators and eleven have the authority to revoke a school's accreditation.

Punishments are attached to school test scores twice as often as rewards.

Research reveals that the single most powerful predictor of high school dropouts is whether a student has been retained in an earlier grade. This factor has been identified in numerous studies of high school dropouts, both qualitative and quantitative (Fine, 1991; Goldschmidt & Wang, 1999; Lee & Buckham, 1991). The NCLB Act mandates that students must pass the state test in grades three, five, and eight in order to be promoted to the next grade. This requirement will dramatically increase the number of students that are retained at least once. The requirement that poorly prepared students pass high stakes tests in order to graduate has been linked with increasing dropout rates. In some urban high schools, the dropout rate is as high as 70 percent (Dolby, et al., 2004). Research done by Amrein and Berliner (2003) reveals evidence to show that high stakes tests decrease motivation and increase the proportion of students who leave school early.



McKnight asserts that as national standardized test scores continue to waiver, as more and more money is tied to such measures to determine the success or failure of schools, few policy makers understand such a technical notion of curriculum as the problem (Reynolds & Webber, 2004).

Studies of dropouts to look at school factors that contributed to students leaving can provide grounds for school-based reform. Although schools can do nothing to change students' socioeconomic status or innate ability, contributing factors to dropout that are under the control of the school may be modified to change the school conditions of marginal students (Natriello, 1986).

Much of the research on at-risk students has been conducted at the secondary level and has focused on dropouts and ways of preventing students from leaving school before graduating (Fine, 1986, 1991; Natriello, 1986; Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1988; Whelage, et. al., 1988). The merging theme from these studies is that dropping out begins early in a child's school career. All children enter school at-risk of failure because of increased high stakes testing. How schools and school systems respond to a student's poor school performance and engagement in learning may have an important influence on her chances of dropping out.

Bertrand, Russell, noted philosopher wrote:

...desire for knowledge is not at all uncommon in the young, and might be easily aroused in many whom it remains latent. But it is remorselessly checked by teachers who think only of examinations, diplomas, and degrees. For the abler boys there is no time for thought, no time for the indulgence of intellectual taste, from

the moment of going to school until the moment of leaving...  
(Egner & Dennon, 1961).

### Emotions In School

Greene (2001) tells us that young persons feel they confront a predefined world, marked off and explained by others (usually others whom they do not know, and who do not have their interests at heart). Greene talks about powerlessness, and the ways in which the sense of powerlessness (unwarranted or not) stands in the way of learning. Young people need to have choices about what they are required to learn in high school as well as choices about the methods that are used for learning. If they feel empowered they are more likely to be engaged in the learning process. Teachers who take a genuine interest in their students as individuals will be able to empower their students. An example of the type of power that I am talking about was found in an article that I read in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 5, 2006 entitled *Dreaming of West Point*. The writer tells the story of Brittany, a 17-year-old, mixed race, female student who has lived in homeless shelters with her mother most of her life. As Brittany's life story unfolds, she tells about how counselors at Southside High School enrolled her in the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) during her sophomore year. For the first week she was desperate to get out, but it was too late. Over the next few months, she took a liking to the military drills. She was an advanced placement student who rose at 4:30 a.m. each day to get to school and stayed late to participate in JROTC. She became committed to the Army's regimented way of life, a sharp contrast to the shadows of her upbringing. When Brittany was promoted to private first class, she said "It was my first taste of power". Because Brittany was empowered, she went the extra mile to be successful in school. She

has been selected for an appointment to the United States Military Academy Preparatory School where her room, board and tuition will be paid.

The Pittsburgh Study is a research project conducted by Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin with 100 school leavers in Pittsburgh. They interviewed 100 students who returned to school, otherwise known as dropbacks, who were enrolled in Pittsburgh's Job Corps Program. As their interviews unfolded, they began to see that one factor stood out. What appeared in earlier and later interview transcripts was the importance of caring, or a lack of caring. A lack of caring was not only attributed to the school environment and school personnel. Apparently no one cared about these young people at home, in the neighborhood, as well as in school (Altenbaugh, et al., 1995). It is interesting to note that these dropouts saw their school leaving and dropping back experiences as tied to no other factors than their own decisions. Although family, school, and social conditions shaped their choices, these students consistently saw their actions based on self-direction. Typically, young people in high school do not have the maturity to make decisions that will have life-long effects on them. High schools must have a support system in place to help students and their parents, make sound, research based, life altering decisions. Guidance counselors in high schools do not have time to counsel students. Their day is filled with school scheduling matters such as student schedule changes, enrollment of new students, and transcripts. Counselors are also given the responsibility for the filing of test results, scheduling remediation for students who did not pass standardized tests, and mounds of other paperwork. This makes it even more important that teachers get to know their students and find ways to help students feel empowered in the classroom. The idea that Georgia's Governor Perdue has about placing a completion counselor in every high

school is a beginning, but it is not the solution. Many large high schools may have anywhere from 500 to 2,000 students. If 10 to 20 percent of the high school students are at-risk of not completing high school, one counselor devoting 100% of his/her time to school completion work, will not be able to meet the needs of these at-risk students.

Rumberger (1991) warns about the complexity of dropouts in this manner:

We use dropping out as a visible and convenient measure of academic failure and graduation as a visible and convenient measure of academic success when neither reveal much about how much or how little knowledge a student has acquired. Thus, in some respects, too much attention is being placed on dropping out and graduating, when we should be more concerned with student engagement, learning, and knowledge (p. 67).

Students can only learn to love something from someone they love (Sidorkin, 2002). Schools that are characterized by strong adult-student relationships provide an environment where all students have opportunities to be successful and to excel. This type of environment has practices and programs in place that help adolescents grow up to be caring and responsible. Students that feel cared about will be more likely to be engaged in the learning environment. I realize that this places a huge responsibility on teachers, but they are the adults in the high schools that will need to create this student-centered type of learning environment. School administrators will have the job of seeing that this is a schoolwide approach by providing the resources and support to all adults who work in the building to empower them. Sidorkin (2002) says:

I propose to alter the shape of schooling as an institution so that the

adult authority is restored without reinstitution of exclusionary practices. Such change will require development of an educational theory based on the notion of relation (p. 79).

In today's society, where there are so many one parent households, where most parents work at least one full-time job, and where young people are left alone much of the time, relationships at school are more important than ever. If schools provide positive nurturing environments, where young people feel safe and wanted, I believe that they will be more likely to stay until graduation. Sirdorkin (2002) says that it is his hope that students will be attracted to schools because of human relationship and that they will want to be in school because of who they will meet.

Sadowski (2003) did an interview study with forty low-income youths and thirty-four high-income youths in the early 1990s. He was surprised when a major finding in the study revealed that the nature of adolescents' school careers correlated with their class status. He found that affluent students were making good grades and that they were on or above grade level and in advanced-track classes. Conversely, he found that 35 percent of low-income participants were identified as learning disabled, emotionally handicapped, or mildly retarded and were receiving special education services. Another major finding was that 37 percent had been retained one or two years, and few of those on grade level reported that they were making decent grades. Sadowski asserts that educators need to become powerful advocates for all students. Teachers also need to be vocal about the ways social-class divisions make it difficult for them to educate all students to high standards (p. 120).

Ladson-Billings (1994) urges teachers to have an attitude of caring which helps African-American students feel more comfortable in school so that they can learn. In her work on examining characteristics of effective teachers, Ladson-Billings found that African American students place important value on caring. These students expect the caring they look for in their community and organizations, such churches, to be present in the classrooms. Delpit (1995) makes reference to teachers caring when she writes about how stereotyping involves African-American girls when they are rewarded for nurturing behavior while white girls are rewarded for academic behavior. Delpit talks about how, because African-American girls are excellent nurturers they are penalized by the “nurturing mammy” stereotype when they are not given the same encouragement as white girls toward academic endeavors (p. 171). Another reference to this problem is one made by Valenzuel (1999) when she writes that what looks like opposition and lack of caring to teachers and administrators, feels to students like powerlessness and alienation (p. 102).

Noddings (1984) talks about the teacher as the one-caring. Therefore the teacher has a responsibility to the student to always do the ethical thing. The teacher’s power is a responsibility to the student, always coaxing, questioning, guiding, to get the best from the student. According to Noddings, moral education from the perspective of caring has four major components: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Noddings (1992) tells us that to be sure that all groups of children receive a high quality education means first that the needs and talents of individual children are met and second, that no children are excluded from a form of schooling from which they might profit (p. 41).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs consists of five levels: 1) physiological needs, 2) safety needs, 3) love/belonging needs, 4) status, and 5) self-actualization. The first four needs must be met in order for us to continue to grow and shape our behavior. Maslow's theory supports the notion that all humans need to be loved and need to feel that they belong. This further supports the notion that caring is important to a student's growth and learning. Noddings (1992) writes that caring cannot be achieved by a formula but, needs to be individualized. This takes into account that people are different and one should not stereotype them. Noddings (1992) continues to urge a moral policy for education that would recognize a multiplicity of human capacities and interests.

This quote from Dewey in *The Child and the Curriculum* (1915) reminds us that:

The child is the starting-point, the center, and the end. His development, his growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth. Personality, character, is far more than subject-matter. Not knowledge or information, but self-realization, is the goal. To possess all the world of knowledge and lose one's own self is as awful a fate in education as in religion (p. 107).

### Summary

The review of literature for this study began by looking at auto/biographical narrative inquiry as the theoretical framework. Auto/biographical narrative inquiry will provide a means for the researcher and participants to share their stories with others who may be able to learn from the experiences of those in this study. Auto/biographical narrative inquiry will provide a vehicle for the participants to give a

voice to the story of their life experiences and experiences in high school that led to them dropping out.

The review of literature found that there has been no standard system for defining dropouts. Traditional methods of counting dropouts yields differing percentages for the same school depending on which agency is receiving the data. Law makers and educators are currently engaged in a process to standardize a formula for defining dropouts. Newer methods of reporting dropouts is not being received favorably by school systems because they yield lower graduation rates.

Research that has been done over the past four decades has focused on the characteristics of those who drop out. Most of the research reveals the same factors, which include family background, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, attendance patterns, gender, ethnic group, and whether the student was retained. Much of the research has been involved in developing a profile of the dropout which really does not tell us the reason that a particular student leaves school before graduating. Because there is such a large base of research on the characteristics of dropouts, schools should be able to do a better job with intervention programs than what has been done. Research supports the idea that dropout intervention should begin in elementary school, yet much of the intervention begins in high school.

A recent report in Education Week, 3/8/06, reported that students said they left school because they were unmotivated, not challenged enough, and overwhelmed by troubles outside of school because they were failing academically. Bob Wise, former West Virginia governor who is now the president of the Washington based Alliance for Excellent Education, which has studied the dropout problem, said he believes the



complaints about boring classes mask the real issue which is the need for work on teenagers' reading comprehension. A separate report by ACT, Inc. supports the idea that a lack of reading proficiency is a widespread problem.

A recent report released by The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics identifies students living in low-income families as being five times more likely than their peers in high-income families to dropout. The same report reveals that the South has more dropouts than the other three regions of the nation.

A large body of research done by Amrein and Berliner on the effects of standards, accountability and testing on schools reveals that high stakes tests decrease motivation and increase the number of students who dropout.

Students who were interviewed say that no one cares about them, yet they take responsibility for their decision to leave school. This research leads me to believe that we need a more caring environment in schools. Students need to feel empowered so that they take more of a personal interest in their learning. Learning must be relevant to the lives of students so that they feel vested in the learning. There needs to be a support system in high schools to provide a safety net for those students that have been identified as at-risk.

All together the review of literature did not provide any new insights into the problems in public education. It did, however, remind us that the goal of education should be based on the needs of the individual child. After a thorough review of the professional literature available on high school dropouts, I must agree with (Rumberger, 1986) when he said "No one really knows what causes students to drop out of high school".

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter establishes my role as a researcher and describes the method used to address the two major research questions in this study:

- (1) Are there common threads among the lives of three female high school dropouts?
- (2) Are there common threads among the public school experiences of three female high school dropouts?

Auto/biographical narrative inquiry is the theoretical framework of this study. Auto/biographical narrative inquiry is also the method used to gather information and collect the stories of the three participants in this study.

#### My Role as Researcher

My identity as I view myself and as others view me is varied and complex. My many identities include white, Protestant, southerner, female, daughter, sister, aunt, wife, mother, grandmother, and educator. In the role as researcher, my identity includes high school dropout. This part of my identity is what has led me to my dissertation study which is An Auto/biographical Inquiry Into the Lives of Three Female High School Dropouts in the Rural South. The significance of understanding my identities is, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) tell us, we know what we know because of how we are positioned (p. 17). Even though I earned my GED and went on to attend college, I still have that very vivid experience of dropping out of high school as a teenager. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) write that qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the

situational constraints that shape inquiry (p. 13). In my role as researcher, I understand the obstacles that must be overcome by adult females who go on to earn their GED, further their education, and gain meaningful employment.

#### Purpose of the Study

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) tell us that curriculum is something experienced in situations (p. 6). The participants in this study will provide details that are significant to the field of curriculum studies. The life experiences of these three female high school dropouts will add to the already voluminous field of research that has been written about dropouts. The intent of this study is to add to the continuing conversation about understanding curriculum. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) state:

Curriculum is often taken to mean a course of study. When we set our imaginations free from the narrow notion that a course of study is a series of textbooks or specific outline of topics to be covered and objectives to be attained, broader and more meaningful notions emerge. A curriculum can become one's life course of action. It can mean the paths we have followed and the paths we intend to follow (p. 1).

Short (1991) states that inquiry is an intellectual activity in which we seek to find out something not yet known or clearly understood. Inquiry is prompted by the need to have reliable answers to certain perplexing questions (p. 3). Public schools are not able to hold onto some students that have the ability to achieve in school and to earn a high school diploma in order to graduate. The dilemma of high school dropouts continues to perplex researchers. Research has adequately identified at-risk factors for potential high school dropouts, yet schools still do not meet the needs of these students. It is my hope

that this study will add some missing pieces to the puzzle about the phenomenon of high school dropouts.

### Participant Selection

I had been employed in the county for less than three years when I began to look for female high school dropouts who went on to earn their GED. I talked with several educators, including counselors and administrators, who have been employed in that school system for many years. They were not able to give me the names of any possible participants for my study. They knew of several high school dropouts, mostly males who had jobs in the kaolin mines, but did not know of any who had earned their GED. It was alarming to me that no one seemed to keep track of what has happened to these high school dropouts in the county. According to the Georgia Guide, 2001, 48% of the county citizens 25 years or older did not graduate from high school yet I initially could not find participants for my potential dissertation topic. I began to mention my dissertation topic to everyone that I came in contact with in the county school system. Eventually, after much searching, I was able to find seven possible participants. I found it interesting that two of the people who helped me find the potential participants were new to the school system, two were office employees, one was a high school teacher, one was an elementary school teacher who took the time to search through her daughter's old year books and I found one while having my hair done. The seven females ranged in age from 22 to 60, three were African American, and four were Caucasian. After consulting with my dissertation committee members, it was decided that the participants should be in the same age range and of the same ethnicity. The original seven potential participants were narrowed down to three Caucasian females ranging in age from 25 years to 38 years. Two

of the participants attended high school in the county where I searched and one attended in an adjacent county. I did not know the three women before contacting them to see if they would be interested in participating in my study. They were more than willing to participate in order to tell their stories so others may learn from their experiences.

### Data Collection and Management

After a thorough review of the available literature concerning high school dropouts, I developed a set of interview questions based on the identified characteristics of a dropout. The questions include the categories of family influences, relationships in and out school, academic performance, and emotions about school. The interview questions were pre-tested in the field and then revised as necessary. Conducting a mock interview of a high school dropout gave me valuable insight into the emotional aspect of the interview. The mock interview unearthed extreme pain that was created in the life of the participant in the field test. The insight gained from the field test helped to prepare me for what may take place during the actual interviews.

The final version of semi-structured interview prompts that are used in this research were designed to allow the participants freedom to tell about the experiences in their life and in their school experiences that led them to dropping out.

In-depth interviews were conducted with all three participants. After the first interviews I relocated to the Atlanta area, which is about 140 miles from where the participants live. I returned to their area to continue interviews. We met in public libraries, at a hotel in Atlanta, and in my old office. I have also collected data by phone, email, and letter. All interviews were tape-recorded with explicit conversations about confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent. Participants were given the

opportunity to assume a pseudonym, and one participant elected to do so. The other two chose to use their own names.

Upon completing the individual interviews, all data were transcribed and a hard copy was produced. All data is also stored on the hard drive of my home computer. The audio tapes from the individual interviews are stored in a secure location at my home. Each participant was given a copy of the transcribed interviews for her to check for correctness. I have read and re-read the interview tapes several times to check for exactness in transcription and made changes where necessary.

### Data Analysis

Raw data have no inherent meaning; the interpretative act brings meaning to those data and displays that meaning to the reader through the written report (Marshall and Rossman, 1999, p. 153). I read the transcripts over several times to become familiar with the data. I then used note cards to code certain terms that appeared over and again in the transcripts. I further organized the data by establishing coding categories which were determined after analyzing the data several times and by referring to the interview prompts. The method of data analysis was interpretational and reflective using the data from the transcripts. Broad themes were coded at first. During the analysis process, the broad themes produced patterns of similarities in responses from each participant. These similarities were further coded into emerging themes.

### Personal Justification

Clandinin and Connelly (2000), assert that there tends to be a rule to the effect that research texts should be written almost as if there were no personal inquirer, no “I” in the process (p. 122). In writing the narrative of the participants, my personal

experiences as a high school dropout were woven into the stories of the participants. I agree with Clandinin and Connelly (2000) when they say that the researcher needs to be prepared to write 'I' as she/he makes the transition from field texts to research texts. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further suggest, we need to convey a sense of social significance and be sure that when I is used it is connecting with them. I believe that this research study conveys a sense of social significance by providing stories of high school dropouts and through the reporting of findings in the literature about high school dropouts. The social significance is thoroughly documented throughout the study.

My role as a researcher became intertwined with the lives of the three women who participated in this study. At each individual interview, when the timing was right, I revealed something about my personal life as a high school dropout. Sharing life events with the three participants was done cautiously and in a nonthreatening manner because it was my intent to slowly share experiences without seeming patronizing. I knew that my intentions could be misunderstood if I revealed too much too soon. I remained diligent in the manner that I disclosed information about myself. The I was always connected to them as I revealed my experiences as a dropout. The sharing of stories was a genuine exchange on equal footing with the participants. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, researchers' personal, private and professional lives flow across the boundaries into the research site; likewise, though often not with the same intensity, participants' lives flow the other way (p. 115). This flow across boundaries during the inquiry constituted a genuine sharing of experiences.

## CHAPTER 4

### STORIES FROM HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

This chapter presents the participants' experiences in public schools and beyond. Three female high school dropouts, Nichole, Tammy, and Kelly, participated in this study. The first section of this chapter presents a brief profile of each participant to provide background information. The second section of this chapter presents the narratives of each participant as they respond to the interview prompts. The reflections of the researcher about the participant's stories and about the researcher's own experiences as a high school dropout are woven into this second section. These researcher reflections are in italics and follow the participant's reply. One participant chose to use a pseudonym but the other two participants chose to use their given names.

#### Three Participants: **Nichole, Tammy, and Kelly**

**Nichole** was born in Macon, Georgia and her age is 34 years. She attended elementary school at the Kite School in Johnson County, Georgia. The Kite school closed and the students transitioned to the Johnson County Schools in Wrightsville. Nichole began middle school at Johnson County Middle School and attended Johnson County High School. Nichole lived with both of her parents up to 4<sup>th</sup> grade when they divorced. She then lived with her mother, stepfather, and sister, and visited her father every other weekend. Their socioeconomic status was middle class. She was a very good student who strived to get all A's. Nichole became pregnant during her junior year in high school. She completed her junior year but did not return her senior year. She earned her GED and went to college. She has earned her associates degree, bachelors degree and masters degree. Nichole is employed by the Candler County School System as a counselor at



Metter High School. Nichole was divorced and has remarried. She has a son in high school and a daughter in elementary school. Nichole is a very outgoing person who loves to learn. She is a great conversationalist.

**Tammy** was born in Flint, Michigan and her age is 38 years. She attended elementary school in Michigan, middle school in Florida, and high school in Georgia. Tammy was an average student whose grades were usually C's and she was a slow reader. She reports that she has had five stepfathers. She witnessed some domestic abuse between her mother and her mother's husbands. Tammy and her sister always had a place to live and food and clothes. But it wasn't always what they wanted. She said that she was raised in poverty. They moved often when Tammy was in school. She reported that when they lived in Michigan they would move all over the same town. She dropped out of high school in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade to care for her sister's baby. Tammy earned her GED and two certificates from Swainsboro Technical School. She is currently working on an Associates Degree. She is employed by the Emanuel County School System at Swainsboro Middle School as a paraprofessional in special education. She is married and does not have any children of her own. She raised her nephew who is 21 years old now. The Department of Family and Children Services often places her middle school aged niece in her custody because of drug use by both parents. Tammy is a very compassionate and loving person.

**Kelly** was born in Georgia and her age is 25 years. She attended elementary school at the Kite School in Johnson County Georgia. During consolidation, the Kite School closed and the students were transitioned to the Johnson County Schools in Wrightsville. Kelly started middle school at Johnson County Middle School and attended

Johnson County High School. Kelly lived with her mother, father, and sister. Their socioeconomic status was middle class. Kelly was a good student in elementary school. She lost her interest in school when she was in middle school. Kelly had a problem understanding algebra and she failed the course twice. She dropped out of school during her junior year and went to the Swainsboro Tech satellite location in Wrightsville to learn algebra and geometry so that she could earn her GED. After earning her GED, she went to Swainsboro Technical School and earned her cosmetology license. Kelly is an outstanding cosmetologist who loves her job. She is a very reserved and quiet person. Kelly has a beautiful spirit and is extremely talented.

#### Participant Stories

**Researcher:** Describe your family structure when you were in school, including what family members lived in the same household.

**Nichole:** I lived with both of my parents up to 4<sup>th</sup> grade and they divorced. In my high school years, I lived with my mother and stepfather. Of course, I visited my father every other weekend. But primarily I lived with my mother and stepfather. Things varied, I have a sister who was my only biological sibling. I had a stepbrother and a stepsister who also lived in the home. At some point I think the stepbrother moved somewhere else, he was older. That was primarily who lived in the home. And my father was remarried and I had a stepbrother.

**Tammy:** My mother, my sister, and I lived in the same house. My mother had been married several times. It was basically just the three of us. I am the oldest of five. All five of us have got the same father but just me and my sister have got the same mother. The other three has got a different mother.

**Kelly:** Mom, daddy, my older sister and me lived in the same house.

*I lived with my mother, father, and two younger sisters until my parents divorced when I was 14 years old. We lived in poverty until my mother remarried when I was 15 years old. Her marriage moved us out of poverty and into the socioeconomic status of middle class. At that time we moved into a new home that my stepfather bought. This move placed me in the attendance area for a different high school and I had to transfer.*

**Researcher: What level of education do your parents have?**

**Nichole:** My mother is a high school graduate. My father is a high school graduate and has a four year degree. He retired from Southern Bell and is reemployed. I think he has his Masters Degree now. My stepfather is a high school graduate. He was employed through a company and has been there all his life. My stepmother is a high school graduate as well.

**Tammy:** My father dropped out and then went in the Navy and got his GED. My mother eventually graduated. She dropped out and went back and got her GED, and went to cosmetology school.

**Kelly:** My daddy is a high school dropout. My mom has a basic teaching degree. She went to college for four years. My sister has her Specialist Degree and she is a teacher. My sister graduated from the same high school that I attended.

*My father graduated from high school. My mother dropped out of school when she was in junior high. My stepfather was a dropout. I don't believe that any of them thought that an education was important, especially for girls.*

**Researcher: How was your attendance in school – elementary, middle, and high?**

**Nichole:** When I was in elementary school I didn't miss a day. When I was in middle school I didn't miss. The rule of thumb in my whole upbringing – and this came from my

mother, and that is: unless I was throwing up or running a fever I was going to be in school. Because the same applied to her in her work ethics as far as going to work. She had to be at work, and unless she physically could not be there, she went, and the same applied to us. We were going to school. I never found a period of time that I didn't wish to attend school, never had a desire not to. So attendance was always high, I never missed. I can't ever remember back on a day that I actually stayed out of school. I don't even have that memory.

**Tammy:** My attendance in elementary school was real good. I just stayed at home when I was sick. My attendance in middle school was good. In high school is when I moved to Georgia, and my attendance was good for awhile. Then it started being real slack because when I moved to Georgia I was in high school. And then, my sister had a child. She was only 15, and she wasn't ready to be a mama. My mama was working two jobs trying to make it and I was living with a man and going to school. My sister just wasn't taking care of the baby. We had to do something to try and help the baby so we took the baby. I was trying to go to school and raise that baby at the same time. It was just too hard. I might be able to go two days a week if that. So that's when I dropped out for good.

**Kelly:** My attendance in elementary school was almost perfect. Maybe I missed a day or two just when I was sick. I missed school a lot more frequent in middle school. I didn't ever get close to failing because of it. But it was a lot of days – probably 20 or so. In high school it was terrible. I missed as many days as allowed.

*I recall that my sisters and I never missed school when we were in elementary school. I don't remember much about middle school, but I believe that my attendance was good. In high school my attendance was sporadic. Overall, my attendance must have*

*been in compliance because we had truancy officers back then. If a student missed too many days the parents got a visit from the truancy officer.*

**Researcher:** How were your grades in school – elementary, middle, and high?

**Nichole:** My grades in elementary school were great. In education, as far as my grades, priority for me at an early-on age. I don't even know where that began. I know my sister, was just as intellectually able to make the grades but did not. She took the hard road. I always felt like grades were a reflection on who I was and if I didn't get an A I was upset. I tried to keep and maintain straight A's even in high school – Beta Club – was going to get the honor seal on my diploma – be an honor graduate.

**Tammy:** In elementary school I remember that I was slow. I was a really slow reader. I got C's. I've always been a C student.

**Kelly:** I went to Kite School and made A's in elementary school. I got my first C in middle school. And, they just declined. I got mostly C's and some B's. I got my first C in 7<sup>th</sup> grade in math. My grades in high school were just about as bad as middle school. I failed my first class in high school. I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade and it was PE of all things. I failed because I wasn't interested in PE.

*I recently looked at some of my report cards from elementary school. I was a straight A student and a Sergeant on the School Patrol. I didn't find report cards beyond elementary school. However, I must have done well in middle school because I was never retained. I began to experience failure in high school when I failed algebra in 9<sup>th</sup> grade.*

**Researcher:** Describe your social life in school.

**Nichole:** As far as actually attending during the day in high school, I am a very free talker, obviously. I would say I was a social bug. I was always friends with everybody. The difference that I had with others in my particular high school was that I did not have a specific clique. Usually by that time girls had already established these cliques. Living in Kite, attending the Kite School and transferring up, I think limited that move from joining a specific clique. You know, I knew who the popular, popular group was. I knew who were the not so popular group, that kind of thing. I just tended to be friends with everyone. I had one or two best friends that I grew up from early-on with. That was my connection. As far as having a specific group, I didn't. That was in school. Outside of school, because of my stepsister being from Emanuel County, I established a lot of friendships in that side of the county. And, as a teenager, I soon learned that things that I did down there didn't get back to my mother so quickly. So I had another life in Swainsboro that no one knew about here. So I had two social lives going on.

**Tammy:** I came to Georgia with my mother and then I met this man and I was living with him. I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I came to Georgia. I was going in high school when we moved to Georgia. In high school I had a few close friends, but I wasn't a cheerleader, or that kind of popular. I just had a few close friends. I wasn't a member of any kind of clique.

**Kelly:** I had maybe one or two friends that I hung out with. I didn't party or have other social life. You might say that I was a loner. I had one or two close friends that I hung around with and we are still friends today.

*I was not involved in any activities in high school. I did not have a social life in high school.*

**Researcher: Describe your relationship with your high school teachers, such as your favorite teacher, or your least favorite teacher.**

**Nichole:** My relationship with my teachers was great. Unless you had one, you know you've always got some that – I believe in respecting adults and elders – and that was just part of it. There was only one time that I just bald-face disrespected my mother and that was because I knew I was right. And I would have went in to battle with anybody if I believed with all my heart that I was right. But generally, I was well behaved, and respected my teachers. I wasn't a cut-up in class, I was there to get it, turn my homework in, make the grade. I also knew how to play the system. I knew that they had something I wanted and I knew not to mess with that and to keep that relationship good. I hate to say it, but it was a matter of learning to play the game. And some people have this spiteful, it's my way and I believe this – but you can have your own beliefs and still get what you want. You don't have to win the apparent battle. There's an underlying one that you can have in play. And I learned that. I don't believe that there was ever really a time that I disrespected. A few favorite teachers that I do have, I had some – I don't know that I would call them favorites – but that I appreciate and respect so much. Mrs. Bray is one of them because she was the one that presented her rules in her class, she didn't waiver from that no matter who you were. She had expectations and she expected the best, and really that's what she got in her class. I believe that as an adult now. If you expect it you are going to get it. If you don't, the person will perform minimally. And, I respect her for she demanded of me. I guess, Mrs. Grace Moore. She was potentially a favorite of mine because there were so many that said that they didn't like Mrs. Moore because her

personality was so – well she was just so dry humor – some people didn't appreciate her. But she was the kind that if you went in there and worked hard and if you went to her with a problem she would help you. If you didn't care, she wasn't going to care. And, I appreciated that concept too.

**Tammy:** Because when I moved to Georgia I was determined I was going to finish school. And then the situation happened and the relationship became very close with my teachers. I think my attitude kind of changed toward school so they saw that I was really trying. My favorite teacher was like no other teacher that I ever had. She was more caring about her students. I don't think that I disliked any of my teachers. They were all good. I saw the difference in the teachers from Michigan, when I come here. They were just different. There was a difference between middle school teachers and high school teachers. High school teachers were more caring, friendlier, like they cared more about their students and not just want to hurry up and get them through.

**Kelly:** No, I don't remember having a favorite teacher. I do remember having a least favorite teacher. They just weren't very nice. They seemed ill and angry all of the time. They weren't very warm, open people. My least favorite teacher was my algebra teacher. She just seemed insensitive. I even stayed some after school but she just wondered why I couldn't get it (algebra) and what was my problem.

*I have tried very hard to remember a teacher that was important to me or one that I liked. In elementary school, I can only remember the librarian, whose name I can not recall. She took an interest in me and my two younger sisters and we used to help her in the library sometimes on Saturday. She would bring us lunch which included the most*



*delicious southern fried chicken. I do remember my least favorite teacher, Mr. Frye, who taught algebra in high school.*

*My heart went out to Kelly as she talked to me about her unpleasant experience with failing high school algebra. She related to me the same kind of experience that I had with not being able to understand algebra and the teacher making me feel dumb and wondering what was my problem. The uncaring attitude of the teacher is a memory that both of us still vividly remember.*

**Researcher:** What were your favorite classes, activities, or lessons that you remember?

**Nichole:** Mrs. Bray (English) is one of them because she was the one that presented her rules in her class, she didn't waiver from that no matter who you were. She had expectations and she expected the best, and really that's what she got in her class. I guess, Mrs. Grace Moore (math). She was the kind that if you went in there and worked hard and if you went to her with a problem she would help you. If you didn't care, she wasn't going to care.

**Tammy:** Probably Social Studies. I've always loved social studies. I would have to say social studies because I like to learn about different cultures. I don't remember any particular lessons or activities that interested me.

**Kelly:** I liked History and a certain teacher that I had. I liked the class because of the teacher. I don't remember any certain lessons or activities. It was just always interesting. Even if we weren't learning about history, you know, he had something we were talking about.

*I think that it is interesting to note that Kelly liked history because the teacher talked with them even though they may not have been learning about history. Apparently this made her feel valued.*

**Researcher: Describe how you felt when you were in class and when you were in the halls.**

**Nichole:** I will be real honest with you. With the things that I went through, some things in high school are not very vivid to me. It's like I blocked out a realm of time for some reason. I talk with people that are my age and they remember specific details and I don't have memories as clear as they do. You know maybe it's because I had so much other stuff that went on right there.

**Tammy:** In class I felt kind of isolated. Kind of alone. Trying not to stand out. Trying to blend in. In the halls I remember wanting to hurry up and get where I was going so I wouldn't be looked at very much.

**Kelly:** In class I always worried they were going to call on me and embarrass me. In the halls I felt rushed.

*Tammy and Kelly experienced the same types of emotions that I had in high school: feeling alone, feeling isolated, trying not to stand out, trying to blend in, scared or worried that they were going to be called upon and embarrassed.*

**Researcher: What events led up to you dropping out of high school?**

**Nichole:** Well, obviously I got pregnant. Let's see, I dated someone who was around four years older than I was. We grew up in the same neighborhood so we kind of knew one another. Back then the issue of statutory rape clause and all those things you know are not like they are now. If they were, in our society at that time it wasn't pushed upon anyway. When I got pregnant I was a junior, and that was in March. And, I knew

immediately that I was going to take responsibility for the actions and I would have the baby because that's always an option that people consider. But, at the same time I immediately started thinking from a mother's perspective, and thought, am I going to be selfish and continue on with what I want or am I going to do what I feel like is best for the family-to-be, because we chose to get married and try to establish that family unit. I was a junior, fixing to be through with the year, and I got married in June. I continued in school and completed my junior year and got married in June, and I did not go back my senior year. Because I was college prep, I had taken everything as advanced as I could. There were only two classes that I could take that were, what I would say meaningful, you know education, not elective related. I felt like bonding with my child in the early beginning was more important than that last year. So I made the decision to get my GED.

**Tammy:** When I started to high school here in Swainsboro I was determined I was going to graduate. And then the baby came, and my sister wasn't doing right, and I don't know, it was just like I was being called. He was so sickly, and having to go take care of him and run him to the doctor, school just come second. There wasn't enough time. I raised the child. He's 21 now and just got engaged Christmas night.

**Kelly:** The social situation was so bad that I just couldn't handle it anymore. There were certain cliques and if you didn't fall into that clique then you were made miserable – in class, outside of class, at lunch. I mean just miserable. I wasn't in a clique. The Kite School where I went closed and we were moved to Wrightsville. It was all white. There were nine kids in my class up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade. We were all tight knit and when I got to Wrightsville it blew my mind. I don't know if it was because I changed schools, we came when I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and I was just always an outsider – I felt like – to everybody.

I probably started thinking about dropping out of school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I just started thinking, there's things that I could do if I don't finish this out.

*Kelly and I are both rather reserved and quiet. She and I both had problems with the high school social scene.*

**Researcher:** Describe the attempts that school personnel made to keep you in school. How did you feel about these attempts? Why didn't it work?

**Nichole:** If there was, I don't recall. I believe the small town atmosphere back then, especially more so back then, I think than now, people knew everybody and knew all the scenarios. There may have been attempts made upon my parents and me not knowledgeable of it. Generally speaking though back then, I feel like most of the personnel probably was very aware of the situation and knew what I probably would do. I had a friend who got pregnant two weeks apart from me in high school, she continued in school. I chose one route, she chose the other. My class graduated in 1990. I got my GED prior to them graduating. Now you have to have a withdrawal form but back then we got special permission from the superintendent.

**Tammy:** She was one of my teachers and when I went to check out that day and take my books back, she just begged me not to quit. She said that she'd help me find a way to stay in school. Right then, I just couldn't see a way. But she begged, and begged, and begged. It made me feel good that she cared and it made me feel sad that I had to quit. There were several others at school and my friends tried to keep me. I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade when I quit.

**Kelly:** No one at school tried to keep me in school. No one contacted me about it.

*Schools have guidance counselors who should take an interest in why students are dropping out of school. Yet, no one from school contacted any of the participants to try*

*and keep them in school. A teacher tried to change Tammy's mind when she was signing out, after the decision had already been made.*

**Researcher: Describe any attempts made by family members to keep you in school.**

**Nichole:** I'll be honest, looking back, I don't remember carrying on a conversation to where if this is something I could or couldn't do. When that happened I got married in June. I immediately became an adult and don't really recall anyone questioning any of the decisions that I made. I know that sounds hard, you know, but pretty much we were on our own. I said this is what we are going to do and I don't recall anyone – now of course my mother always said that education was important. But my father, of course when he found out, said that I would never be nothing. You know that was his response to me – you'll never be anything. Of course that was just motivation and incentive for me just to prove him wrong. But as far as my mother, because she is the one that I would have had that kind of conversation – she knew what I said I was going to do I would do. She knew me well that way.

**Kelly:** No, because they knew how much I hated school.

*Nichole said that education was important to both of her parents. Tammy said that education was important to her mother but that she worked and did not have time to spend on school matters. Kelly reported that her mother took an interest in what she did in school, but that her daddy did not. I remember that my parents did not take an active part in my education. I think that my mother wanted me to get an education, but I don't ever recall her saying anything to encourage me to stay in school.*

**Researcher: What grade were you in when the thought of dropping out of school first crossed your mind?**

**Nichole:** I had finished my junior year and did not return my senior year.

**Tammy:** 10<sup>th</sup>

**Kelly:** 10<sup>th</sup>

**Researcher:** Describe how you felt the day you signed out of school.

**Nichole:** I had the experience of coming in, people finding out, that was a very difficult time. I was the good little girl that got caught. But the experience now before leaving and everybody finding out was just horrible. It was very – well prior to my mother finding out – and deciding what I was going to do – there was a period of time that I went through – wondering – well sometimes I had suicidal thoughts. For a small period of time – because my mom did not know, I didn't know what I was going to do – that kind of situation. And then she just asked me, obviously because I had not went to her to purchase anything for me or whatever, and I fell apart then. From that point on I was okay, but there was a brief three weeks or so – I believe that anyone is capable. Never minimize a comment that I may harm myself or something because I was close.

**Tammy:** I felt awful. I cried all the way there and all the back home. I felt like I had failed myself.

**Kelly:** It just never got any better. I was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade when I quit. I was failing algebra for the second time. I felt relieved the day I signed out.

**Researcher:** Was there anything you could have done that would have kept you in school?

**Tammy:** At that time, I don't think so. Because he was sick and my mama was trying to work to support herself. I don't think so.

**Kelly:** I don't think so – not at that point.

**Researcher:** What are your recommendations to parents about how to keep their children in school and engaged in learning?

**Nichole:** Well, everything to me is on a case-by-case basis. Making recommendations is almost the same as advising them on what I would do. And, as a counselor, from a counselor's perspective, you have to consider what's best for that student. And sometimes from that family's perspective and the situations they have at hand, it might very well be to get their GED. I basically try to listen, make sure they are aware of their options. I encourage them to get your high school diploma, now-a-days it's a little different than when I was getting the GED. So, it's case-by-case, and if you had a student who is living with an uncle who had to take him in because he had no choice – mom and dad are out of the picture, they basically fend for themselves for years – and are very street-wise, they have had to basically figure out how they are going to eat, it's hard for me to advise them when they are sitting in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade that that's best for them. You know, if they have functioned as an adult, going somewhere for two years, reporting on time, minding someone, you know, the child like, some students who have that scenario just don't cope too well. And I have seen them get their GED and become very successful.

**Tammy:** Just start at that young age and make school important, very important.

**Kelly:** Pause.

**Researcher:** When you were in school, were your parents involved in what was going on in school?

**Kelly:** Well, somewhat, but I don't think that they really understood how bad it was.

They just said, aw ignore it, go on with your business. But, I couldn't do that.

**Researcher:** What about when there was something special such as PTO, performances, etc?

**Kelly:** Mama always went. Daddy never went.

**Researcher: What are your recommendations to educational leaders about how to keep students in school and engaged?**

**Tammy:** Try not to hurry them through there. I see a lot of teachers just pushing them through like they're a piece of paper, trying to get them through. Show them that you care about them - that you care if they do well in your class.

**Kelly:** Be more personable – don't be so cold – they were more like wardens than teachers.

*Both Tammy and Kelly expressed that teachers/educators need to show that they care about students. When Kelly talks about how there could have been a smoother transition to the new middle school, that is another form of caring or lack of caring.*

**Researcher: When you first started losing interest in middle school was there anything that could have been done differently?**

**Kelly:** I think if there had been less confusion. The school was new, and we were new to the school, and that first year I was in middle school everyone just seemed out of their element. If things had been smoother and more together, maybe. You could come and look around the school, but you didn't know anything about your classes or anything. So it was like you got there that morning – and wham!

**Researcher: If a student can demonstrate success in a certain number of competencies should he/she be given an early exit from high school with a diploma?**

**Nichole:** No. I believe that you have to, that's just a part of life. But in certain situations that really need to because they have no support system, have a horrible situation, and need immediate recovery out of that, are street-smart, could go into a tech school with HOPE paying, sometimes that's the best thing for their survival and their sanity.

**Tammy:** I don't know about that question because there's a lot of kids that have the brains, the smarts, whatever you want to call it, that shouldn't really stay there for four



years. But, I think the high school atmosphere and the high school years are important to a child.

**Kelly:** I think so. They should have basic high school skills. Because I know the English part, every year that was the same thing, over and over. They should have writing and basic algebra and geometry.

**Researcher: When did you earn your GED?**

**Nichole:** My class graduated in 1990 and I earned my GED prior to them graduating. I went through Swainsboro Tech immediately, as a matter of fact, I think I was still pregnant when I went and took the test. I had no problems with passing it – aced it – no problem.

**Tammy:** I left high school in 1985 and I got my GED in 1994 or 1995. I took the GED classes at Swainsboro Tech, and it took me quite a while, and then they told me that I was ready. I went and took it. I took classes for probably about eight months. I passed it the first time I took it. There was four of us that went to take the GED that day. We took the whole test the same day. We had been taking the classes, and I was the only one that passed everything that day.

**Kelly:** My class graduated in 1998 and I had it before they graduated – early Spring. I went to the little GED school (Swainsboro Tech) over here behind the old primary school. Joyce Harrison taught me basic algebra and geometry. That was a help because I wouldn't have passed the math. It took me about six months and then I went and took the test and passed it.

*When I dropped out of high school I was a sixteen-year-old girl who didn't have a clue about life. I didn't know anything about earning a GED. It was not until I was an*

*adult and I became interested in taking a college course for improving my public speaking that I researched how to get my GED. I passed the GED exam thirty two years after dropping out of high school.*

**Researcher: What did you do after you earned your GED?**

**Nichole:** I got my GED. That was just an obstacle in the way of furthering my education. At first I was not sure because I wasn't sure how I would fund an education because there was no HOPE at that time. I wanted to obviously go further but I didn't know how I was going to do that. The more that I researched, I discovered something called the FASFA and discovered that there was the possibility of getting something called the Pell Grant. I applied and was able to get my college funded. I was married, of course, with a dependent. With our limited income I received a Pell Grant and I went to the Dublin Center campus for two years and I earned my Associates Degree. I then transferred to Georgia Southern University. I drove back and forth from Kite to Statesboro for two years and obtained my Bachelors Degree. I received a Bachelors Degree in Psychology. I wanted to continue my education because my goal was to become a counselor. I know that with a Bachelors Degree that would eliminate finding a position where you actually participated in the counseling process. I got a job that was more of governmental job. But I did start my Masters back then and I think that I went two semesters and I was working at an insurance company. And, I did acquire a position a couple of months, I'd say six months after I graduated, in my field with the Department of Family and Children's Services. I worked there for about 3 ½ - 4 years then transferred to a position with Child Support Recovery and worked there for about three years. I was promoted to an Operations Analyst which was nothing in my field. I was the regional accountant, but it

was a pay increase, and the regional manager wanted me to apply because she knew I needed the job. She always thought a lot of furthering your education and encouraged her employees to do that. I went to school at night while I did that and in three years earned my Masters Degree in Counseling from Georgia Southern University. Through all that I was married and divorced which was not a pleasant experience. We had been married eight years. Before I even acquired the Masters Degree I had to do what was called an internship and I had no idea how I would be able to pull that off. Working 40 hours a week and trying to do an internship in a school setting. But I just told myself that if the Lord meant for that to happen, it would. That we would find a way, and I just didn't give up. I kept on through the program knowing that I would have that obstacle. I was talking about it because it was coming up and someone said you need to call this lady named Michelle, I believe she's going to Metter. Not knowing that there would even be a position open, I went to talk with her. And, within two weeks she had gotten permission from the State. She requested a waiver on my behalf for me to be able to have the role of counselor. I was interning while I did the job, and she was my mentor. I went to work as a counselor at Metter High School and this is my fourth year there.

**Tammy:** I was working in sewing factories and decided, I can't make no money here, this has got to go. So I went back to Swainsboro Tech and got my certificate in Early Childcare Education. Then I went back and got my diploma in Early Education. Then I went to work at the Alternative School in Swainsboro and I worked there for six years. I was a parapro there. I am taking courses on-line to get my Associates Degree. I will get an Associates Degree from Ashworth in Early Education. I will keep working as a parapro at Swainsboro Middle School in 6<sup>th</sup> grade special education. And then, I might

step up – it depends on what’s going on. Because when I get the associates degree I just have to go to Georgia Southern for two more years after that. So, we’ll just have to see. I would like to become a teacher. But, we’ll just have to see what’s going on. I get a lot of enjoyment out of what I do now.

**Kelly:** After I got my GED I went to cosmetology school at Swainsboro Tech in Swainsboro. It took me about a year to get my cosmetology license. I went to work at a hair salon in Sandersville and I am still there.

*Attending technical school or college as an adult female is extremely difficult. Women are generally the care givers in a family and the extra duties at home combined with a job and attending college at night takes perseverance and supportive family members.*

**Researcher: Do you plan to return to school in the future to further your education?**

**Nichole:** I am always up for a challenge. I love to learn. But, as I have gotten older, I have a new outlook on life. I do not necessarily equate my personal success to the level of degree that I hold, hanging on a wall. It as something that was ingrained in me and I always felt that I needed to be the best that I could be. That through the trials that I’ve been through, I’ve learned that’s not always measured by those diplomas. And, I am very happy with who I am no matter what diploma I have or don’t have or educational level, although I see it as important. But as long as I’m enjoying my family, they’re healthy, I’m enjoying life – sometimes you have to stop and smell the roses. And, if you’re living this life where you don’t stop and smell those roses, you’re really missing out. At the rate I was going – working, going to school – I was missing out on a lot. I realize that, so I’m trying to make myself slow down just a little bit. Of course you heard me talk about the

insurance. I just studied on my own at night and passed the insurance test and got my certificate. Which is probably one of the biggest accomplishments I think I've ever done, in relation to difficulty. Throughout every training I've ever done in education, it was the hardest I have ever done in my entire life. It was difficult but I enjoyed doing it. I have something else on my resume. I can choose to do it or I can choose not to.

I enjoy counseling. The rest, you just give it to anyone who would want it. I am frustrated because I cannot do counseling for all the other things. Of course, I do not turn kids away, but I cannot be what I need to be, and that is in conflict with my nature, and it causes me a lot of frustration because I know that I'm not doing as well as I should. Some people don't care. I don't mean to say that they don't care at all. But, it doesn't bother them, but I struggle because I feel that I'm not doing the right thing a lot of times. So, I probably won't stay with it if it continues the way it is, not forever.

**Tammy:** And then, I might step up – it depends on what's going on. Because when I get the associates degree I just have to go to Georgia Southern for two more years after that. So, we'll just have to see. I would like to become a teacher. But, we'll just have to see what's going on. I get a lot of enjoyment out of what I do now.

**Kelly:** Well you know I hear people talk and they have all the benefits and things that I don't have. But then, I think that I wouldn't be happy doing that and I am happy where I'm at. I love it. I am really lucky in my situation that it turned out that way. You know, that I could go and do something that I like so much.

*Kelly told me that she is currently taking a cake decoration class at night. When I asked her if she liked to bake, she replied that she just liked the decorating part of it. All*

*three participants have furthered their education since leaving high school. All three of them still have a love of learning something new.*

**Researcher: Is there anything else about your school experiences that you would like to tell?**

**Nichole:** I was raised to stay in school, if you did not, you would be nothing. That's not necessarily true in our world. Times have changed such as that it can be possible. I don't ever go out and preach that. I believe obtaining your high school diploma and the whole process of being in high school is some thing that you need to experience in growing up in life. Do I regret that I didn't throw the hat up and have the picture of my graduation to show my children? Yeah, you know, I do regret that. So there's something to be said even outside of education purposes for the experience of high school. But again, there are certain scenarios that don't allow you to make a choice in life, and you have to decide. Now I had a friend that went through while she had her child and she stopped there. She doesn't have a college degree. I have a Masters Degree, I had that when I was 30. Eleven years in with the State. You can have success. I think it goes back to the individual person and what is best for them in their situation. I don't feel like there could be XYZ competencies that can be met to determine necessarily if this person is going to be successful or not. Every scenario is different.

**Researcher: Often times in our society the attitude is that high school dropouts are unsuccessful, and unemployed.**

**Nichole:** And statistically that's probably the case, but you're interviewing one of those rare breeds. Now I have dealt with some that have dropped out, and said oh, I'm going to do this, and I knew that was going to happen. You have got to have a desire to become successful and you need to like that with paying your bills, and having good work ethics.

You need to be showing those signs, I feel like, when you drop out. I know that person is going to be successful. If you aren't already showing that just in your day to day life prior to dropping out I don't believe they're going to be successful. Did I party, yeah I did. Did I make some mistakes, yes I sure did. But was I very aware of what I was doing, yeah. And when it came to my education was I on task and made sure I made the grades, yes I sure did. So somebody could have easily predicted that I could have become successful. I can pretty much point out those that are not and those that are I think that it is just a want and where they're going, and know where to find out how to obtain that, and be assertive. If they're living independently, they have already figured that out.

*As I reflected back on my experience of becoming employed I remember stating on my first employment application that I had graduated from high school. The employer checked and found that I had not graduated. Fortunately for me, telephone operators were badly needed, and I was hired based on achieving high scores on screening tests that I took during my processing to be hired.*

**Tammy:** It was hard going back to college because I had a child and I couldn't put his life on hold because of what I had done and what I had wanted to do. I spent a many a night at the Dixie Youth baseball field with a book in my hand and a flashlight in my other hand so I could see what I was reading and what I was doing – what I was supposed to be doing for school and what I was supposed to be doing as a mother. So, I sat a many, a many, a night with a flashlight and a book watching the baseball game.

**Kelly:** No, nothing.

*I agree with what Tammy said, it is hard to go back to school. I went to college when our youngest child was in college. I had to study more to retain what I needed to*

*know. I worked full-time during the day and attended college full-time at night. I agree with Nichole when she said that we miss a lot when we keep that kind of schedule. We need to take time to smell the roses. However, here I am again, going to school full-time and working a full-time job. Learning is important to me. I got a late start, but once I got started I can't stop until I achieve the highest degree, my doctorate.*

### Summary

The stories of these three female high school dropouts were gathered through individual in-depth interviews. I have also used email and phone calls to fill in some missing information to complete the individual profiles on each participant. During the interviews the women openly shared their regrets and their accomplishments with me. Each participant was eager to participate in this study in hopes that someone might learn from their experiences as female high school dropouts who earned their GED and went on to further their education.

The next chapter will present a discussion of the emerging themes from the two major research questions.



## CHAPTER 5

### EMERGING THEMES

This study was an auto/biographical inquiry into the lives of three female high school dropouts in the rural South who have earned their GED, continued their formal education, and gained meaningful employment. The study addresses two major questions:

1) Are there common threads among the lives of three female high school dropouts? 2) Are there common threads among the public school experiences of three female high school dropouts?

There were eight definite themes which emerged during an analysis of the data that was collected from the in-depth individual interviews with each of the three female high school dropouts.

#### Theme #1: Participants had a non-normative school transition

All three participants in the study experienced a change in schools during their adolescent years. Because these transitions are non-normative changes in the lives of these three females, the change caused them some anxiety at a time when they were going through many changes in their lives. Adolescence is naturally a time of turbulence for most young people as they strive to cope, not only with the normal physical, hormonal, and emotional changes of adolescence, but also with the many social and organizational changes at their new school. Transitioning to middle school and high school is quite different from the routine of an elementary school. Students must learn to adjust to the organizational changes such as navigating different schedules which require class changes throughout the day. Students are also faced with the challenge of assimilating into peer groups that may include members who were not at the elementary

school where they attended. Adolescents do not have the problem solving skills in place to deal with all of the decisions that must be made when transferring to a new school, and they need the help of caring adults in the school to assist with the transition.

Kelly reported that she had attended elementary school at a K-8 school that was closed during a countywide consolidation of schools. She began 6<sup>th</sup> grade at the middle school in town. The K-8 school was a small school located about 15 miles from her new middle school. At the K-8 school, she had a close-knit group of friends and there were only nine students in her class. The entire student population at the K-8 school was white. After completing middle school, she attended high school which was located in the same building as the middle school. The demographics of the high school population was about 50% African American and 50% white.

Nichole reported that she had attended elementary school through fourth grade at a K-8 which was in the process of being phased out and consolidated. She began fifth grade in a middle school in the county seat, which is about 15 miles from where she attended elementary school. When she completed middle school, Nichole attended the county high school which is located in the same building as the middle school.

Tammy moved from Michigan to Georgia after she completed middle school. She began high school in a totally new setting.

Under normal conditions, transitioning from elementary school to middle school and then to high school is stressful for most students. These three female students had school transitions that were not considered normal changes in life's journey. Kelly reported that she could never adjust after moving to the middle school because of the social situation. She said that the students had not been prepared for the change. There

was no transition program and she did not know what to expect. Adjusting to the transition to high school under normal circumstances is a challenge because of increased social and organizational changes. It is even more difficult to make the high school transition when the transition to middle school was an unpleasant experience. Tammy's transition to high school was an extremely difficult one because she had moved to an entirely different state from where she attended elementary school.

Students encounter fully departmentalized classes when they transition to high school. For the first time, students come face-to-face with a differentiated academic program. Students are tracked based on past achievement in middle school, the achievement scores can include the student's grades in academic subjects as well as the scores they achieved on state and national tests. The reality of tracking in high school can easily place high school students into a peer group different from the one that they had in middle school. Students that chose not to try their best on standardized tests in 8<sup>th</sup> grade may be tracked in high school based on the scores of those standardized tests, and this often leads to the student being placed in remedial classes even though they are capable of learning at a much higher level. Teachers treat students differently according to their academic track. Teachers believe that college-prep track students are more capable of learning and that they are more willing to learn (Altenbaugh, et al., 1995). This is another stressor that is added to the already long list of changes that take place when students transition to high school.

The participants in this study each had a school transition that is not considered a normal transition. They were not prepared in advance for the transition to the new school. As adolescents, they did not realize what was happening to them, but a transition such as

the one that they experienced can have an underlying effect on their adjustment to the new school environment that can trigger different emotions and behaviors that may last their entire high school career.

Theme #2: Participants were not involved in the school social life

The three participants in the study reported that they were not involved in the social life of the school. They each said that they had one or two close friends that they hung around with, but they did not belong to a particular group or clique in school. Extra curricular activities, that are an extension of the normal school day and that are sponsored and supervised by the school, provide structured leisure time for students. This structured leisure time provides a safe environment free from the risks of unsupervised free time. Adolescents are normally struggling with their identity development and looking for ways to fit-in to a peer group. Teenagers can develop a sense of identity when they participate in after school activities that provide a means for them to express their talents and interests. Participants in extra curricular activities interact with their peers in group situations. This association with peers will allow them to see others in an environment different from that of the classroom and it will help them form new friendships that will carryover into the normal school day. When students have experiences where they can express themselves and make new friends the results will enhance the school day routine and their social life in school will grow.

Students who participate in extra curricular activities at school develop new social skills that last a lifetime. The chances are greater that they will become involved with peers who are more actively involved in school. This increased involvement in school activities often creates an avenue for students to build school spirit.

It is especially difficult to find funding for extra curricular activities in small rural high schools in areas where many of the citizens are living in poverty. Small school districts rely heavily on grants from the federal and state governments as a means of supplementing their budget. The programs that provide funding for after school activities require that a certain percentage of the budget comes from a source other than the grant money. This means that the school system must reach into the community to supplement the budget for after school or extra curricular activities. It is the schools that need this funding most that are unable to capture the funds because the community resources are not there to provide the supplemental funding. Building effective business partnerships is impossible when there are not enough businesses to go around (Fine, Farrar, & Petrie, 1989).

### Theme #3: Participants had negative emotions at school

The three participants in this study expressed some strong emotions about how they felt when they were in school. They had emotions about school that are worthy of including as one of the emerging themes in the study. Tammy said that when she was in the halls she would hurry up to get where she was going so that she wouldn't be looked at. Kelly said that she felt rushed in the halls and hurried to get where she was going. Nichole reported that she can't remember a large part of how she felt in the halls. She said that for some reason she has blocked out the memory of a large part of her feelings in class and in the halls. Kelly expressed her worry that she would be called upon and embarrassed in class. Tammy said that when she was in class she felt "kind of alone, trying not to stand out, trying to blend in". Each participant had emotions in school that

kept them from actively participating in class. Their emotions, which may be translated as fears, carried over into the halls where they tried to remain invisible.

School membership is a theory borrowed from the work of Vincent Tinto who studied the college dropout rate and found significant parallels between the early departure from college and the dropping out of secondary schools. Tinto found that voluntary departure from college is due much more to institutional experiences after a student arrives than to prior experiences, preparation and the strength of individual dispositions. Wehlage (1989) agrees with this claim as it applies to high school students based on evidence from a study that he conducted with high school dropouts and the institutions that they attended. Both Wehlage and Tinto found that the quality of interactions the student has with the institution contribute to the student leaving the institution early. The school membership framework described by Tinto includes four areas: adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, and isolation. According to Wehlage (1989), adjustment is most apparent when students move from middle or junior high school into the high school. He says that this transition can be a source of both academic failure and alienation from the institution. Difficulty with academic matters is a cause of disengaging from school. According to Wehlage, for some, difficulty was more correctly described as difficulty in sustaining interest and effort. Incongruence when applied to schools, is concerned with the cultural match between the student and the institution. Wehlage found that many of the high school students interviewed saw themselves as outsiders. Where schools represent middle-class culture, the problem of incongruence is associated with youth from lower-class backgrounds as well as youth from different ethnic backgrounds. Fitting into the middle-class value structure of a school is a major issue to many high

school students. Isolation refers to both academic and social experiences. Students can feel isolated from their peers and they can feel isolated from their teachers. A central theme of school membership theory is the need for students to have frequent and high-quality interaction between students and adults. The feeling of isolation can be overcome by students when adults show an explicit interest about their academic or personal matters. This display of interest in a student can contribute to their belief that they are worthy of adult attention.

Noddings (1992) talks about the current emphasis on achievement in the public schools, and how it may contribute to students' feeling that adults do not care for them. Students have things that they are interested in talking about and learning about in school. The agenda of the school system is framed so that there is not time for students to express themselves in class. This lack of interaction in classes can lead students to feel that the adults in the school do not care about them. Students may feel that teachers want them to complete the work in class just so that the teacher will be judged favorably by her peers or administrators. After a period of time of having their voice silenced in school, students develop unhealthy emotions about school and what it can provide for them. Students who are considered at-risk do not have the resiliency to overcome these feelings of not being cared about and may chose to dropout before graduating.

#### Theme #4: Participants' family was not involved in school

Nichole said that education was important to her mother and father. She lived with both parents until fourth grade when her parents divorced. After her parents divorced Nichole lived with her mother and visited her father every other weekend.

Tammy said that education was important to her mother but that her mother did not have

time to be involved in Tammy's education because she worked long hours. Kelly said that her mother attended functions at school when Kelly was involved, but that her daddy never attended anything at school. Empirical studies have found that students whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, provide emotional support, encourage independent decision making, and are more involved in their schooling are less likely to drop out of school (Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger, et al., 1990). The common thread among these three participants and family involvement in their education experiences is that the mother is somewhat involved, but the father is not involved.

Each of the participants made the decision to drop out of high school for different reasons. Nichole became pregnant during her junior year and chose not to return to school for her senior year. Tammy and the man that she was living with decided to care for Tammy's sister's baby and raise him. Kelly could not adjust to the social life at school and was failing math. The common thread among these three participants and their decision to leave school before graduating is that no family member made an attempt to change their decision and no one tried to keep them in school.

Theme #5: The high schools were located in areas where many adult citizens were dropouts.

The three participants in this study attended high school in the rural South in areas where a high percentage of the adult citizens do not have a high school education. One of the participants attended high school in a county where the percentage of students not completing high school in the year 2000 was 38.55. The other two participants attended high school in a county where the percentage of students not completing high school in



the year 2000 was 37.59 (Georgia County Guide, 2002). This is a common thread found among the lives of the three participants that is noteworthy.

School districts in the rural South have just as much, if not more diversity than urban schools in the United States. Fine, et al., (1989) suggest that many federal and state initiatives to compensate for economically and culturally disadvantaged children are biased in favor of the urban poor, rather than those in rural areas. Research monies designated by Congress for the purpose of studying educational under achievement in America primarily focus on urban minorities in their educational and community settings. The plight of any rural poor children goes unmentioned in the education journals (Fine, et al.,(1989).

Another dilemma faced by rural schools in the Deep South is the flight from public schools to private schools and academies by white fundamentalist groups and by more affluent middle-class families. As public schools decline people lose faith in public education making them more apt to complain about having to pay school taxes to support schools that they perceive as failing.

Many rural school districts in the United States have higher dropout rates than the national average, and usually higher ones than many metropolitan districts. In comparisons of dropout rates in all of the states, primarily rural southern states are always the highest.

Theme #6: The high schools were located in areas of extreme poverty

The second research question searched to find if there were common threads in the public school experiences of the three participants. All three participants attended high school in an area of extreme poverty as measured by the percentage of high school

students that qualified for the free or reduced lunch program. The student population at both high schools had a high concentration of African American students and a high percentage of students with disabilities. The chart below depicts the statistics for the State and the two counties where the participants attended high school.

Table 3

**School Demographics**

	<b>Emanuel County</b>	<b>Johnson County</b>	<b>Georgia</b>
Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch	68 percent	72 percent	48 percent
African American population	44 percent	52 percent	38 percent
Students with Disabilities	18 percent	18 percentage	12 percent

Georgia County Guide, 2002

Another indicator of the extreme poverty level in the two counties where the participants attended high school is from the U.S. Census Bureau report (2005) based on data from 2003. The chart below depicts the relevant data.

Table 4

**Poverty Levels**

	<b>Emanuel County</b>	<b>Johnson County</b>	<b>Georgia</b>
Median household income estimate	\$25,432	\$24,229	\$42,421
All ages in poverty	21.8 percent	22.1 percent	13.3 percent
Age 0-17 in poverty	33.1 percent	33.6 percent	19.1 percent

Schools in rural areas, where a large portion of the land is owned by only a few people, have limited resources because of a low tax digest. Funding sources for public schools in rural depressed areas is limited because of the decline of agriculture as a way of life, and because of the lack of industry in the area. It is difficult to recruit and retain quality teachers to small school districts, especially given the wide range of competencies needed among high school teachers having to teach more than one subject area (Fine, et al., 1989). This problem of attracting the most qualified teachers leads to demographic changes in the high school when white, middle class, parents remove their children from the public school and enroll them in private schools. Many times it is the teachers that remove their children from the school where they themselves teach, and place them in a better school. Thus, the schools that minority students and students in poverty attend are most often the least effective schools.

Payne (2001) reminds us that poverty is relative. If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague. Parents of high school students attending school in a school system where a high rate of poverty exists do not understand that the situation affects the quality of their student's education through changing demographics, less qualified teachers, and less funding for programs. Students who are at risk are those who, on the basis of several risk factors, are unlikely to graduate high school. Among these risk factors are low achievement, retention in grade, behavior problems, poor attendance, low socio economic status, and attendance at schools with large numbers of poor students. All of these factors are closely associated with dropping out of school (Angus, 1993).

#### Theme #7: Participants did not have a relationship with teachers

The data gathered from the three participants for this study did not show that any of them had a meaningful relationship with a teacher while they were in middle school or high school. Neither did any of them have a role model in school. Nichole expressed that her “relationship with teachers was great” and that “she believed in respecting adults and elders”. She also said that she “knew how to play the system”. But, I did not hear evidence of an on-going meaningful relationship with a teacher. Tammy reported that the “high school teachers were more caring and friendlier” than middle school teachers. She said “I see a lot of teachers just pushing them (students) through like they’re a piece of paper, trying to get them through”. Kelly said “they weren’t very warm, open people”. She reported that the teachers “just weren’t very nice” and that “they seemed ill and angry all of the time”. Kelly felt that her teachers were “more like wardens than teachers”.

The three females in this study did not say that their teachers took a personal interest in them in school. They felt isolated and alone. Sirdorkin (2002), says that students come to school to be social. He says that educators have been foolish to let this only real link of kids’ interests and school organizations wither in recent years. He asserts that we need to restore the power of relations in schools.

#### Theme #8: School personnel were not involved with potential dropouts

Looking for common threads among the public school experiences of three female high school dropouts revealed that when they dropped out of school no attempts were made by school personnel to keep them in school. Tammy said that she had one

teacher who begged her to stay in school the day that she signed out. Nichole and Kelly reported that no one from school contacted them about staying in school. This finding is noteworthy because it appears that school personnel were too busy or that they did not care about what was happening in the lives of these three females to try and intervene with them and with their families. An observant and caring adult in the school would have noticed the signs of disengagement from school long before the final step of “signing out” of school took place. The lack of involvement by school personnel, in a small high school where each student should be known on a personal basis, is an important issue that bears further attention. The three participants attended small high schools where the possibility existed for close relationships to form between adults in the schools and the students.

I found this same type of uninterested or lethargic attitude about the whereabouts of the students who had dropped out of school in this rural area. It was extremely difficult for me to get names of potential participants in my dissertation study because teachers and administrators had lost track of the whereabouts of their past students who had dropped out of school. I borrow this quote from Fine (1991) to capture the dilemma of the students that are at-risk of dropping out in schools across the nation:

Marginalizing the interests of community and family, public schools preserve the hegemony of dominant social classes, races, and ethnic groups as they force young women and men who traverse the public-private boundaries to do so in isolation, with some embarrassment and ultimately to their own educational demise (p. 184).

This quote reminds us that schools are not being successful in reaching out to all students to help them achieve and be successful in school. Guidance counselors are especially educated to perform this task but they are not reaching the at-risk students before the damage is done and their decision has been made to leave school before graduating.

### Summary

Many curriculum theorists are expressing their concern with the focus that is being placed on high stakes testing and the long-term effects this control will have on student learning. Teachers are losing their autonomy in classrooms all across the nation as they are being held accountable for raising the test scores of all children in order to get them on grade level by the year 2014. Apple (2004) states that tighter control over the curriculum, the tale of the test wagging the dog of the teacher and the curriculum, more pressure, more reductive accountability plans – all this may lead to less equitable results, not more (p. 129). As teachers feel more and more pressure being applied to them to prepare their students for high stakes tests, they are spending less time on planning quality lessons that actively involve students in their own learning.

Pinar (2004) asserts that it is not our mission to find out what works and then apply it in the schools. By doing this we are responsible for the anti-intellectualism in our field. He says that this misunderstanding seems to assume that education is somehow like a complex automobile engine, that if only we make the right adjustments – in teaching, in curriculum, in assessment – that we will get it humming smoothly, and that it will transport us to our destination, the promised land of high test scores. Teachers are more inclined than ever before to teach to the test in an effort to increase achievement to close the achievement gap. The exchange and acquisition of information is not education.

Information must be tempered with intellectual judgment, critical thinking, ethics, and self-reflexivity (Pinar, 2004).

With this increased focus on testing, students are feeling that no one cares about them. Foucault (1977) wrote:

The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes (p. 183).

Students believe that the focus in school is for them to produce useless products and to learn useless information that has little relevance to their lives so that they can pass and move on to do the same useless things in another class. It is very hard for students to stay enthusiastic about producing things that go straight to the wastebasket (Sidorkin, 2002). Students feel alienated from their schoolwork, and separated from the adults who try to teach them. Teachers work very hard to teach their students. They care about their students but are not able to make connections with the students in order to form relationships (Noddings, 1992). High school students are feeling all of these emotions about school at a time in their life when they should be enjoying school because they are actively involved in the learning process and because they are forming relationships and actively participating in the social life of the school. Educational research has made the error supposing that method can be substituted for individuals, and this may have increased the alienation of students (Noddings, 1992).

The organizational structure and instructional methods of schools have changed very little since I was a student in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, society has drastically

changed. First, there are many more students now than then. These students are much more diverse in ethnic background, language, religious beliefs, and family structures, just to name a few. But, schools continue to present the same features. The teacher force has also remained basically the same as when I attended school. They are mostly white, middle-class women. The demographics of schools where at-risk children attend are mostly poor, working class, and minority students. In order to meet the needs of students in our society where diversity is increasing, public schools will have to re-invent the ways that they deliver services to students.

The State of Georgia is in the process of changing the curriculum that is taught in all public schools. I believe that the change to a standards based curriculum is a good change. However, if the new curriculum in high school continues to be delivered in the same lecture fashion that has been used since I was in high school, the number of students who fail and leave school before graduating will increase. The old paradigm of educational theory frames educational process in terms of doing (Sidorkin, 2002). This act of doing will not serve to improve what is happening in public schools. Teachers need to have their autonomy restored so that can have the authority, the resources, and the support to teach to each individual student and to take the time to get to know each individual student as a unique person. Continuing to deliver lecture style, test focused, lessons will continue to produce docile bodies (Foucault, 1977). Students complain that teachers don't care. They suspect that adults want students' success for their own purposes (Noddings, 1992). The students may be right. Teachers are under enormous pressure to produce students who can pass the state test. Schools are under state scrutiny to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) or be sanctioned. And, school systems must



make AYP or set aside a certain percentage of their budget to be used to improve their schools.

Pinar (2004), sums it up nicely when he wrote, genuine learning does not occur without our commitment to engage in ‘complicated conversation’ with our academic subjects, our students, and ourselves. In order to recapture the time to make this commitment, teachers must find ways to resist the constant mandates that they are experiencing in their profession. Too often, I have seen teachers readily accept everything that is put upon them without ever saying a word about it. It will be necessary for teachers and administrators to find lines of flight (Reynolds & Webber, 2004) through which they can make a difference with their students. Using these lines of flight teachers can stay in the middle, not appearing to take sides, to have intelligent, complicated conversations about their work. Teachers can use lines of flight to engage their colleagues in discourse about what is important to educate each individual student. Only when teachers find a way to make relationships work in schools – between teacher and student and between student and student – will students realize that the teachers do care for them.

This study raises many unanswered questions which are directly related to the curriculum of schools. Each question raised is worthy of further study to try and further determine what can be changed in schools that will allow all students to leave high school with a diploma. Research has documented that the act of dropping out begins before high school, yet funding for most programs for high school dropout prevention is at the high school level. What can be done to reach students before the decision to dropout has been made? Elementary school students are at risk of failure because of high stakes testing, especially in grades three and five. What can be done at the elementary school level to

help students achieve at a level where they can successfully complete each grade with positive emotions about school in tact? The majority of teachers do not have the necessary training to teach in an increasingly diversified society. How will the immediate challenge of educating teachers in methods for teaching a diverse student population be accomplished? Schools continue to use the same structural organization in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that was in place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How can schools be reorganized to meet the needs of an increasingly changing population? Students who are identified as “at-risk” are often given a watered down curriculum. Why do schools identify students as “at-risk”? If it is to track them into a different curriculum than the general population, is it making a difference for those students? High school students who are at risk of failing are under enormous pressure to perform. Do initiatives such as a completion counselor really help students who are at risk of dropping out, or does it add to the already heavy burden that the student is carrying. Results from surveys of high school students reveal that students do not find the curriculum challenging. What does that mean? I believe that we must delve deeper to learn exactly how the students are defining “challenging”. Does it mean that the curriculum is not relevant to their lives? Does it mean that they are learning the same material from year to year? Or, is it as Bob Wise said, the complaints about boring classes mask the real issue which is the need for work on teenagers’ reading comprehension. A large body of research is emerging to support that student’s need to have an adult in the school that gets to know them and who cares about them. Yet, because of increasing demands on teachers to teach to tests, collect data, and document everything that they do, there is little time or energy left to form relationships with students.

The narratives from the three participants in this study can add to the on-going conversation about what causes students to leave school before graduating. These three female high school dropouts earned their GED and continued their formal education after leaving high school. The data that was collected from their stories revealed eight themes: 1) each participant had a non-normative school transition during her adolescent years, 2) the participants were not involved in the social life of the school; 3) the participants expressed negative emotions about how they felt in school; 4) their family was not involved in the life of the school; 5) they attended high school in an area where many adult citizens were dropouts; 6) they attended high school in an area of extreme poverty; 7) they did not have a meaningful relationship with a teacher; 8) school personnel were not involved with potential dropouts.

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## APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW PROMPTS

What was your family structure when you were in school? What family members lived in the same house?

What level of education do your parents have?

How was your attendance in school – elementary, middle, high?

How were your grades in school – elementary, middle, high?

Describe your social life in school.

Describe your relationship with your high school teachers. Did you have a favorite teacher, who was your least favorite teacher.

What were your favorite classes, activities, or lessons that you remember?

Describe how you felt when you were in class.

Describe how you felt when you were in the halls.

What events led up to you dropping out of high school?

Describe the attempts that school personnel made to keep you in school. How did you feel about these attempts. Why didn't it work?

Describe any attempts made by family members to keep you in school. How did you feel about these attempts. Why didn't it work?

What grade were you in when the thought of dropping out of school first crossed your mind?

What was the culminating event that caused you to leave school?

How did you feel the day you signed out of school?

Was there anything you could have done that would have kept you in school and engaged in learning?

What are your recommendations to educational leaders about how to keep students in school and engaged?

If a student can demonstrate success in a certain number of competencies should he/she be given an early exit from high school, with a diploma?

What should be those minimum competencies?

Why did you decide to earn your GED?

What did you do after you earned your GED?

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM, FOUNDATIONS, AND READING

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INFORMED CONSENT

MARCH 31, 2006

**Title of Study.** Learning Interrupted, An autobiographical Inquiry into the Lives of Female High School Dropouts.

**Affiliation with GSU.** I, Barbara A. Spurlock, am the investigator. I am a doctoral student in Curriculum Studies at Georgia Southern University.

**Investigator Contact Info.** Barbara A. Spurlock, 3617 Nina Court, Loganville, GA 30052. (cell) 478-290-1113, (work) 678 676-2084, (home) 678 639-0063. Advisor: Dr. William Reynolds, GSA (office) 912-681-0291, email: [wrey@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:wrey@georgiasouthern.edu)

**Purpose of study.** The purpose of the study is to inquire into the lives of three female high school dropouts who have earned their GED and have become successful in life, to look for commonalities among their public school experiences.

**Procedures to be followed.** Individual interviews will be conducted with the participants using semi-structured interview questions.

**Discomforts or risks.** Because the interviews will be non-threatening, the participants should not be uncomfortable or feel at-risk. The investigator is a high school dropout and will disclose information about her to the participants. This should help the participants feel more relaxed about telling their stories.

**Benefits of the study to participants and society.** The participants will have the opportunity to tell their story. This can be a very freeing experience for someone that has struggled with decisions that they have made in the the past. The investigator and the participants are the experts on the subject of high school dropouts. Their input will produce suggestions to educators, legislators, and other members of society.

**Duration/timeframe of participation.** The participants will be interviewed several times during the timeframe from January 2006 to May 2006.

**Compensation.** Participants are not offered any compensation.

**Voluntary Participation.** Participation in this study is strictly voluntary.

**Withdraw Participation.** The participants in this study are voluntary and they understand that they may withdraw their participation at any time.

**Decline to Answer.** The participants in this study can decline to answer any questions that they choose to not answer.

**Confidentiality Assurances.** The data will be kept secure and confidential by the investigator. Each participant chose to select a pseudonym so that his or her given name will not be used. Interviews will be recorded on audio tapes which will be stored at the home of the investigator. The audiotapes will be destroyed, by the end of the year 2006. The only person having access to the audio tapes is the investigator.

**Consent.** All participants in this study are over the age of 18.

**Signature and Date Lines.**

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**Barbara A. Spurlock**  
**Investigator**

---

**Date**

---

**Participant's Signature**

---

**Date**

## APPENDIX C

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs		
<b>Institutional Review Board (IRB)</b>		
Phone: 912-681-5465		Administrative Annex
		P.O. Box 8005
Fax: 912-681-0719	Ovrsight@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	Statesboro, GA 30460

**To:** Barbara A. Spurlock  
3617 Nina Court  
Loganville, GA 30052

**CC:** Dr. William Reynolds  
P.O. Box 8144

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Date:** April 4, 2006

**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

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After a review of your proposed research project numbered: **H06110**, and titled "**Learning Interrupted: An Autobiographical Inquiry into the Lives of Female High School Dropouts**", it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable.

**Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.**

**This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter.** If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol, you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,

Julie B. Cole  
Director of Research Services and Sponsored Programs