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LISTENING TO RECENT HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND THE NEED TO RECONCEPTUALIZE SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Beatrice A. Geddie

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LISTENING TO RECENT HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND THE NEED TO RECONCEPTUALIZE SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

A Dissertation

Presented to

the College of Graduate Studies of

Georgia Southern University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

in

Curriculum Studies

---

by

Beatrice A. Geddie

August 2002

June 14, 2002

To the Graduate School:

This dissertation entitled "Listening to Recent High School Dropouts and the Need to Reconceptualize School Violence Prevention" and written by Beatrice A. Geddie is presented to the College of Graduate Studies of Georgia Southern University. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Curriculum Studies.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family whose support and encouragement were invaluable. My husband, Larry, and my two children, Laura and Bryan, provided valuable insights and patiently listened to my many concerns throughout the dissertation process. Larry provided honest feedback, technical advice, and editing assistance. Laura provided inspiration and helped me better understand the problems faced by female high school students within the public schools. Bryan also contributed to my understandings of the many concerns of adolescents as they negotiate their way through high school. I thank them for their valuable input, emotional support, and on-going enthusiasm throughout the dissertation process.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Corinne, and my late father, Andy, who always inspired me to "reach for the stars." My mother's keen wit and her ability to find humor in almost anything was comforting and motivational. She always encouraged me to continue my research, despite frustrations and disappointments. Her ability to reframe obstacles into challenges and to make me laugh when I wanted to cry enabled me to complete this dissertation.

My father passed away while I was working on my dissertation and his pride in all my accomplishments gave me the self-confidence to believe in myself. Both my parents also instilled in me the need to fight for social justice and to question inequities that often go unquestioned. I thank them both for nurturing and encouraging me to probe deeper into ethical and moral issues and to have the courage to take a stand, even if it is not popular.

I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to all the participants in my study who gave of their time and helped me better understand the emotional and social issues that influenced them to drop out of high school. Without their contributions this research project would not have succeeded.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful for the advice, encouragement, and support that my dissertation committee provided throughout this project. I would especially like to thank Dr. Delores Liston, my committee chair, who introduced me to a wide array of feminist theorists who inspired and challenged me to question the status quo, to confront inequities, and to consider the ethical implications of my actions. She opened my eyes to issues I may have intuitively contemplated, but lacked the skills and knowledge to intellectually debate. Dr. Liston's continual prodding and her thoughtful questioning encouraged me to go beyond how things are represented, to uncover possible hidden agendas, and to seek solutions.

Dr. Bill Reynolds introduced me to Henry Giroux and a host of critical theorists that echoed many of my personal concerns about education. He troubled my thinking and inspired me to question many assumptions about schools and society. His insights enriched my dissertation and his encouragement enabled me to extend the parameters of my research.

Dr. Leon Spencer provided tremendous emotional support and intellectual insights into areas related to counseling that inform this project. He also provided knowledge that enabled me to address racial and ethnic issues that are important to this research. Dr. Spencer's advice regarding cross-cultural interviewing proved invaluable.

Dr. Linda A. Bell inspired my work on this dissertation. After reading her book, Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence: A Feminist Approach to Freedom, the kernel idea that became this dissertation was germinated. She spoke to many of the concerns I

had about violence and repositioned my thinking by incorporating a feminist perspective. I am grateful for her suggestions and comments regarding my dissertation.

I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Bryan Deever who introduced me to Michelle Foucault's concept of power. The intellectual stimulation that his courses provided remains embedded within my psyche and I am grateful that I had the opportunity to have him as a professor.

There are many more individuals that encouraged and inspired me along my intellectual journey that go unnamed. However, their efforts to trouble my thinking and problematize previous thought assumptions remain intact. I would like to thank the faculty of the Curriculum Studies Program at Georgia Southern University for all their support.

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ABSTRACT

LISTENING TO RECENT HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS AND THE NEED TO RECONCEPTUALIZE SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

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As the high school dropout rates in Georgia exceed the national average, public concern mounts. The complex interactions of internal and external factors that contribute to students' decisions to leave school before graduation require reconceptualizing the educational process on multiple levels. This dissertation addresses current public school policies designed to prevent violent acts and punish offenders, policies that reveal limited understanding of underlying causes, deterministic assumptions and an overwhelming desire for quick fixes. Interviewees deemed many of these policies not only ineffectual, but also as contributing to a negative school climate that encouraged them to drop out. Furthermore, some participants thought that this negative climate encouraged school violence.

Qualitative research methodology grounded in critical and feminist theories frames this dissertation. The perceptions of ten recent high school dropouts regarding

school violence prevention policies that overtly and covertly influenced their decisions to drop out were presented. The participants disrupt dropout stereotypes since most of the interviewees were honor students who had no previous record of disciplinary infractions; had supportive parents who had finished high school; had completed the requirements for a general equivalency diploma (GED) and had plans to attend college. Data collected through individual interviews and focus group discussions suggest the arbitrary enforcement of zero tolerance policies to prevent school violence, as well as the lack of enforcement, contributed to participants' decisions to drop out.

School violence prevention policies requiring out-of-school suspension (OSS) for disputes resulting in physical contact, even if one party was acting in self-defense, contributed to several interviewees' decisions to dropout. Negative perceptions of the school were often exacerbated by dress code violations related to school violence prevention that were identified as being unfairly enforced and ineffectual. Several participants cited the lack of intervention as reasons for their dropout status since reports to school personnel regarding bullying were routinely dismissed.

Participants identified the need for greater sensitivity to individual differences within the school community and the need for implementing proactive violence prevention programs that help students deal more effectively with conflict situations. Students also perceived a lack of care by school personnel related to their individual concerns contributed to their decisions to drop out.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

School experiences may vary, but students and adults perceive an atmosphere ripe for potential violence. Whether or not school policymakers understand the complex nature of school violence and its impact on decisions to leave school remains moot. Current practices designed to prevent violent acts and punish offenders seem to reveal limited understanding of underlying causes, deterministic assumptions, and an overwhelming desire for quick fixes. Arguing that school violence is not what it appears to be, but rather "just one manifestation of a chronic, systemic, lethal disease both reinforced and hidden by a national ethos that romanticizes our violent past, deifies science, and celebrates aggression ... while letting it shape our future," Spina (2000) contends that current practices are Band-Aids where tourniquets are needed (p. xv-xvi). Agreeing with Spina, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the social, economic, political, religious, cultural and psychological factors framing school violence prevention policies and practices in schools and society?

2. What are the perceptions of high school dropouts regarding school violence prevention policies and practices and to what extent did they overtly or covertly influence students' decisions to drop out?

3. In what ways could school violence prevention be reconceptualized to make schools safer and encourage school completion?

Uncovering the complex factors contributing to school violence and student dropout behavior demands a critical analysis of the multiple factors affecting students and their families. We must rethink our current assumptions and expand our understandings of how a multiplicity of factors and ideologies contribute to violence and school leaving. Such an undertaking requires investigating violence in schools and society through "a dialogic, inter- and cross-disciplinary approach" (Spina, 2000, p. xvi).

To begin this inquiry, researchers Prothrow-Stith and Quaday (1996) in Schools, Violence and Society identify frightening trends supporting a "culture of violence" in the United States:

> The complex interaction between poverty; racism; drugs and alcohol; the loss of jobs and living wages; unrestricted and overabundant supply of guns; lack of personal opportunity and responsibility; disinvestments in community, schools, and after-school activities; family violence; and our national admiration for violence play a critical role in sustaining our culture of violence. (p.153)

By understanding the underlying social, economic and political factors contributing to school violence, researchers and policymakers are better positioned to develop strategies for creating and implementing procedures and practices that promote safe schools, as well as meeting the educational needs of all students. I hypothesize that current procedures aimed at creating "safe and drug free" schools may create a façade of security that only exacerbates the potential for school violence. In addition, such practices may also contribute to a school climate that is inhospitable to some students and encourages dropping out of school. Russ Skiba, Director of the Institute for Child Study and Associate Professor of Counseling and Psychology at Indiana University, and Reece Peterson, Associate Professor of Special Education at the University of Nebraska and

Vice President of the National Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, agree. They state that in addition to virtually no data suggesting that zero tolerance policies reduce school violence, some data suggest that "certain strategies may create emotional harm or encourage students to drop out" (Skiba & Peterson, 1999, para. 22). This dissertation works toward increasing understandings of these issues through interviews and focus group discussions with students who have prematurely abandoned their education.

Situating the Personal

Understanding and acknowledging the dangers of speaking for others through my research effort, as well as acknowledging my own positionality within the research project, provide safety nets for generating more honest discourse. Feminist philosopher Linda Martin Alcoff (1995) urges us "to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others" (p. 244). She warns of the dangers of speaking for others that include "the possibility of misrepresentation, expanding one's own authority and privilege, and a generally imperialist speaking ritual [and that] speaking with and to can lessen these dangers" (p. 244). Alcoff (1995), recognizing the problematics of speaking for others, outlines two widely accepted claims:

> First, there is a growing awareness that where one speaks from affects the meaning and truth of what one says, and thus that one cannot assume an ability to transcend one's location.... The second claim holds that not only is location epistemically salient, but certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous. (p. 231)

Although my methodology and my attentiveness to acceptable research design are crucial, the need to acknowledge that I speak from a specified, embodied location without

pretense to a transcendental truth is imperative (Alcoff, 1995). Acknowledging my own privileged position I heed the dangers of speaking for others, but do so with the goals of social justice foremost in my mind. As both mother and professional school worker, personal and professional motivations cannot help but become intertwined as I grapple to understand my experiences and the experiences of students in public schools. Accepting the futility of denying the personal, I deem it necessary to provide some relevant anecdotal material.

As an educator in both public and private schools for over twenty years, my understanding of the rationale behind many school policies and practices related to "zero tolerance" remains confused. Why students who would rather not be in school in the first place are suspended for excessive tardiness or why students practicing self-defense in a fight are expelled along with individuals who started the fight still confuse and concern me. As a teacher I understand and support the need to have school policies that promote safe schools, but I question whether zero tolerance serves this purpose effectively. Having taught middle school students for many years I have witnessed the increasing number of young people who drop out before high school graduation. Some students who later dropped out fit the profile of those labeled "at risk" and seemed to be headed down a road of self-destruction. Others appeared less vulnerable, yet also chose to leave school before graduation. Recalling how they shared with me their future aspirations in middle school, none had resigned themselves to dropping out but rather all spoke of completing high school. What happened during their high school years to alter their future trajectory perplexes and concerns me greatly. No doubt this research, in part, is an attempt to

relieve my own personal anxiety about these issues. My concerns transcend those of a professional educator and encompass the frustrations and tensions inherent in being a mother and citizen.

As a mother of two adolescents my experiences with the public schools take on new dimensions. Even though the motivation promoting this research effort remains professionally grounded, the personal cannot be excluded from the discourse and demands recognition. It is not my intention to denigrate the efforts of those promoting policies to create safe schools, but rather to alert policymakers to problems within public schools that may contribute to school leaving. Thus, this research effort might be viewed as a call to action for rethinking and redefining the notion of school violence prevention. It is also not my intention to critique the efforts of the high school student interviewees attended, but rather to alert those concerned to overt and covert problems facing students who later dropped out. A description of my own children's personal experiences with zero tolerance policies is provided in order to better understand how these policies work and in order to acknowledge my own situatedness within this project.

During my daughter's freshman year she responded from her home to a personal website developed by a classmate that made derogatory comments about her high school. Believing this was an opportunity to freely voice their opinions, several students expressed their dislike of the principal and many of the school policies. Admittedly, the language was less than poetic and my daughter commented on actions by school personnel she deemed racist. The administration learned of the website and proceeded to expel all students who had responded to it. School administrators classified the offense as

an act of violence against the school and refused to alter their disciplinary decision. The American Civil Liberties Union took the case and eventually the charges were dropped. Since that time the ACLU has taken on numerous cases involving free speech and public schools.

However, the experience left my daughter bewildered, disillusioned and angry. As both a parent and an educator I was concerned that students had so much animosity toward the school and the administrator. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics and the National Education Longitudinal Study (revised 1990), dislike for school was rated as the top reason for dropping out of high school. The percentage of 8th to 10th grade dropouts who reported a dislike for school as their primary reason for dropping out exceeded 50%, with 57.8% males and 44.2% females expressing these views. Rather than opening up discussions around areas of discontent, the school ignored students' concerns. Regardless of the merits of their discontent, ignoring them sent a clear message that their thoughts and feelings were unimportant. In interviews with students involved with this incident that later dropped out, it appears the actions of the school had a lasting negative effect.

A second incident occurred when my son was also a freshman. A jacket had been loaned to a friend and returned the night before my son wore it to school the next day. During a routine drug and weapon search at the high school the next morning the police officers found remnants of marijuana in his jacket pocket. My son denied knowing about the substance and was taken to the police station where my husband and I were summoned. According to zero tolerance policies he had to be expelled for the remainder

of the school year. No explanation was sufficient to reduce the sentence, yet police officers agreed that such an offense on the streets would result only in a fine. Even though the ACLU considered taking this case, we decided to home school our son for the remainder of the school year.

While my son was being home schooled, my daughter dropped out during her senior year of high school. She stated that the incident during her freshman year and the suspension of her younger brother were contributing factors to her desire to disengage from the public high school. Even though she was a good student and eligible for college admission, she decided to complete her high school education and receive her high school diploma through an Internet program. She is now a sophomore in college, but the experiences she encountered in high school and the experiences of many of her friends remain vivid. My son returned to the high school for his sophomore year and plans to graduate. Recently however, he has been discussing his desire to complete his high school education through an Internet program.

The innocence or guilt of my children regarding these incidents is less important than the way school policies were carried out. In both cases, school disciplinary policies aimed to prevent school violence appeared blind to issues of students' rights, as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal issues. Whether rights guaranteed by the Constitution are upheld within public schools seems questionable. Furthermore, to what extent these policies and the disciplinary actions that follow have had the potential to create increased student hostility and frustration that can lead to more student dropouts and violent acts on school grounds must not be overlooked. Interviews with high school students who left

before graduation directly and indirectly target several school policies and practices designed to prevent school violence as reasons for their departure. Presently, Georgia has one of the highest rates of high school dropouts in the United States (National Dropout Prevention Center Online, 2001). As the local dropout rate continues to escalate, finding solutions to problems causing students to leave school are imperative.

Creating Space for Silenced Voices

Ethically and spiritually committed to helping improve the lives of students within public schools and working toward goals compatible with social justice, I am driven to find possible solutions to problems that limit what Freire (1998) has termed "pedagogy of freedom." Aronowitz (1998) explains the universal nature of such a pedagogy and states:

> In this respect we may take *Pedagogy of Freedom* as the basis of what Nietzsche calls 'new principles of evaluation,' where the term 'evaluation' indicates not a fixed set of criteria from which to make superficial measurements of social policies but a series of concepts by which to forge a new educational process. (p. 13)

It has been my experience that public schools seldom include transformative educational experiences that promote "pedagogy of freedom." McLaren (1989) acknowledges:

> Americans traditionally have assumed that schools function as a mechanism of the development of democratic and equalitarian social order. Critical educational theorists argue otherwise; they suggest that schools do not provide opportunities in the broad Western humanist tradition for self and social empowerment and in fact often work against those opportunities. (p. 162)

Empowering students to recognize, question and challenge obstacles in their lives requires "the cultivation of an imagination that can conceive of lives lived in different ways, in pursuit of different goals, in relationships of a different quality" (Purpel &

Shapiro, 1995, pp. 108-109). Even with a "commitment to the value of students' experiences and the integrity of the life stories told by them one must remain alert to *not* become an arbiter of the truthfulness of these stories, a privileged judge of their correspondence with an actually existing world" (Purpel & Shapiro, 1995, p. 108). Critical theorist and distinguished professor at the University of Massachusetts, Donald Macedo (1998) warns that "the understanding of one's historical and privileged position requires a great deal of political clarity. However, political clarity can never be achieved if one accommodates to a position of ambiguity that usually suppresses one's ideological contradictions" (p. *xxx*).

By trying to understand my own historical and privileged position and reflecting on my own ideological tendencies, personal subjectivities become more discernible. By working to divest from my own "class-and-Whiteness privilege—a privilege that is often left unexamined and unproblematized and that is often accepted as a divine right" (Macedo, 1998, p. *xxx*), my research effort has the possibility of generating more informed understandings. Throughout my interviews and focus group discussions with high school dropouts, a population often labeled "at risk," I heeded Macedo's (1998) warning:

> If the 'at risk' educators do not acknowledge the colonial legacy that informs their relationship with the oppressive conditions of the 'at risk' reality, they will become at best paternalistic missionaries or, at worst, literacy and poverty pimps who make a living from the human misery with which they are in ideological complicity. (pp. *xxxi-xxxii*)

By positioning myself within the research I understand the importance of acknowledging my own subjectivity and plan to work toward what Sandra Harding

(1991) calls "strong objectivity" (pp. 149-152). Understanding strong objectivity requires an examination of the connection between science and knowledge. Such an examination provides opportunities for more honest research. Harding (1991) states:

> Political and social interests are not 'add-ons' to an otherwise transcendental science that is inherently indifferent to human society; scientific beliefs, practices, institutions, histories, and problematics are constituted in and through contemporary political and social projects, and always have been. (p. 145)

Harding sees that cultures have implicit agendas and make assumptions that remain filtered through their own situatedness (1991). Strong objectivity creates space for silenced voices, invisible lives, detested identities and all "Others" not represented within conservative society and traditional scientific discourse and whose needs, desires and justifications remain unmet (Harding, 1991). Since dropouts may be deemed Others, strong objectivity provides a vehicle for better understanding their position.

Concerns that abandoning "the conventional notion of a value-free, impartial, dispassionate objectivity that guides scientific research and without which... one cannot separate justified belief from mere opinion, or real knowledge from mere claims to knowledge" (Harding, 1991, pp. 138-39) leads to cultural relativism leaning toward judgmental or epistemological relativism, is expressed by both feminist and the scientific community. If each person's judgment represents equally valid notions about the world, then how can science avoid becoming a quagmire of disrupting voices all clamoring for personal and ideological agendas? Harding (1991) contends that what presently passes as scientific thinking reflects "weak objectivity" because it ignores not only the implications for its own situatedness, but also the concerns and needs of Others. If in fact weak objectivity represents a subjective position itself, then how can strong objectivity relieve

this tension? Utilizing standpoint theory supported by strong objectivity, Harding (1991) postulates a position that offers hope.

> [She] criticizes conventional sciences for their arrogance in assuming that they could tell one true story about a world that is out there, ready made for their reporting, without listening to women's accounts or being aware that accounts of nature and social relations have been constructed within men's control of gender relations (p. 141).

Although Harding speaks of the need to listen to women's accounts and of being aware that accounts of nature and social relations have been constructed within men's control of gender relations, I assert the need to listen to students' accounts and the need to be aware of nature and social relations that have been constructed within public schools' control of social, economic, political and cultural relations. I attest to the need to listen to high school dropouts regarding their perceptions of school policies and practices that may have aided in foreclosing their educational opportunities.

Agreeing with Harding and other critical theorists, I reject the dichotomies between researcher and practioner, theory and practice, and objects and subjects. As a public school worker and mother my lived experiences, situated within my specific cultural and historical confines and affected by interactions with students, faculty, and parents, become part of the research. I acknowledge my own situatedness within the research effort.

By listening to students often silenced by oppressions inside and outside the classroom; by seeking to uncover covert hegemonic practices within schools and society; by heeding the warning to critically reflect on my own ideological tendencies; and by unraveling ideologies embedded within school practices that may foreclose opportunities

for a democratic project within public education, my research has the potential to begin a dialogue for hope.

Action as Inaction

> To combat the conflation of inaction with not acting, we must make very clear that inaction generally is tantamount to action, that to do none of the acts we could do to oppose oppression is to act on the side of the oppressors, that is, to collaborate with the oppression. Only if our ethics makes this clear will it become apparent that inaction supporting the status quo--and thereby tacitly endorsing the violence that underlies it, is subject to moral condemnation. (Bell, 1993, pp. 34-35)

Agreeing with feminist philosopher Linda Bell and believing that school policymakers' "actions" are indeed often "inactions" that support oppression, this project works to uncover social, economic, political, religious, psychological and cultural factors that remain absent from the contemporary discourse surrounding preventive tactics aimed at creating safe schools. Action that is antagonistic to the lives of students may be deemed worse than inaction, since doing "something" may create more harm than good. Actions must be tempered with critical considerations for all students and must not be conceived of as solutions to problems that remain silent, yet target sectors of the school population.

Conceived of as an antidote for school violence, zero tolerance policies that expel students without a second chance are shortsighted, as well as antagonistic to some students who project images outside the traditionally accepted social norms. Students who react to these policies and other inequities embedded in their lives by dropping out of school may represent a less violent population. In contrast, other students who choose to express their anger through violent acts, such as school shootings, may experience similar emotions, but choose active rather than passive resistance to what they view as

intolerable conditions. Dropping out of school may be a peaceful response to an otherwise psychologically unacceptable situation. That is, dropping out of school may be the best solution for some students who find the context of school disruptive to their own sense of self. Teen suicide may represent a third approach to a "sense of hopelessness and powerlessness [that has been attributed to] an oppressive disciplinary policy that includes no warnings or second chances" (Gaines, 2000, p. 117). Teen suicides are on the rise and by the 1990s, 400,000 young people were attempting suicide yearly (Gaines, 1990, Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998).

> The 1990 youth-suicide rate was twice that of 1970 and three times that of 1960. During the 1970s and 1980s, the percentage of pre- and early-adolescents taking their own lives increased at a higher rate than middle- and late adolescents. In the five-year period between 1980 and 1985, the suicide rate for 10 to 14-year-olds more than doubled. Today, 5,000 teens take their own lives each year, while another one-half million make unsuccessful attempts. In a report issued by the Center for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Study of one twelve-month period, 250,000 high-school students engaged in a suicide attempt that required medical care. (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998, para.54)

If these statistics are correct and if some teen suicides may be potentially linked to a "sense of hopelessness and powerlessness [that has been attributed to] an oppressive disciplinary policy that includes no warnings or second chances" such as those of zero tolerance, then a critical review of these policies and practices is in order (Gaines, 2000). Such sobering statistics demand analysis. Integrated studies of young people utilizing multiple methodological perspectives are needed (Holtz, 1995; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998). School violence prevention policies and practices that embrace zero tolerance must not continue to avoid scrutiny.

Steinberg and Kincheloe (1998) contend that academic research focusing on young people in the last half of the twentieth century has been shaped by an ongoing adult and parental fear of losing their ability "to shape the culture in which their children lived, thus, losing control of their sons and daughters" (para.55). Since the dominant culture supports adult values they remain uncontested. Their support is viewed as unproblematic since "mainstream scholars have often seen conflict between young people and their parents as evidence of youth dysfunctionality" (para.55). Such a "functionalist perspective" grounded on order insists that youth adhere to strict disciplinary codes and that "schools maintain the equilibrium of the status quo" (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1998, para.55; Paul, 1994; Lewis, 1992; Griffin, 1993; Polakow, 1992).

If we continue to marginalize youth by dismissing their dropout behavior as evidence of their "dysfunctionality," opportunities for reconceptualizing school policies and practices that may prove disruptive to the lives of students will be foreclosed. However, by investigating underlying agendas fueling current disciplinary practices aimed at combating school violence as well as listening to students affected, directly or indirectly by such practices, new possibilities of understandings that have the potential for ameliorating current negative trends in public education that often go unquestioned will be opened for discussion.

CHAPTER II

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

Scratching below the surface reveals multiple factors as well as contradictory assumptions framing current thinking on school violence prevention policies and practices. If one is to effectively and equitably provide public education to all students, one must be alert to underlying predispositions and trends that have the potential to forestall an agenda of social justice. Issues surrounding race, class, gender, school reform, religion, culture and politics inform the current debate and to ignore them would be foolhardy.

Curriculum theorist Michael Apple (2000) addresses these concerns and draws our attention to a fundamental problem facing contemporary education. Acknowledging that "many of the rightist policies now taking center stage in education and nearly everything else embody a tension between an emphasis on 'market values' on the one hand and a neo-conservative attachment to 'traditional values' on the other," provide opportunities for enlightenment (p. 114).

> From the former perspective, the state must be minimized, preferably by setting private enterprise loose; from the latter perspective, the state needs to play a strong role in teaching *correct* knowledge, norms, and values. From both perspectives, this society is falling apart, in part because schools don't do either of these tasks. (2000, p. 114).

Such contradictory messages further aggravate the complexities required to design policies and practices that effectively and equitably work to prevent school violence. To what extent these perspectives help policymakers justify current policies and practices informing school violence prevention and their acceptance by the general public requires

analysis. Apple (2000) argues that current trends in education reveal that the Right has achieved dominance and that the social democratic goal of extending equality of opportunity has become weakened and lost public appeal.

> The 'panic' over falling standards, dropouts, and illiteracy; the fear of violence in schools; and the concern over the destruction of family values and religiosity have all had an effect. These fears are exacerbated, and used, by dominant groups in politics and the economy who have been able to shift the debate about education and all things social onto their own terrain—the terrain of traditionalism, standardization, productivity, marketization, and industrial needs. Because so many parents are justifiably concerned about the economic and cultural futures of their children in an economy that is increasingly conditioned by lower wages, capital flight, and insecurity, rightist discourse connects with the experiences of many working-class and middle-class people. (Apple, 2000, p. 115)

Public school policies and practices are reflecting this conservative shift through increased regimentation; increased surveillance of students and faculty; and increased standardization. By scapegoating public education as the source of societal woes, the populace cocoons itself from issues that require more integrative thinking. Public school policymakers respond with zero tolerance policies and a return to more traditional practices. Remaining unscathed and prone to taking the moral high ground, the Right has penetrated contemporary thought influencing public education. Apple (2000) explains:

> Behind much of the conservative restoration is a clear sense of loss of control over a number of things: economic and personal security, the knowledge and values that should be passed on to children, what counts as sacred texts and authority, and relations of gender and age in the family. The binary opposition of we/they becomes important here. 'We' are law abiding, 'hard-working, decent, virtuous, and homogeneous.' The 'theys' are very different. They are 'lazy, immoral, permissive, and heterogeneous.' These binary oppositions distance most people of color, women (especially 'feminists'), gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, and others from the community of worthy individuals. (Apple, 2000, p. 155)

The "theys" may also be high school dropouts. By better understanding how the current political climate has fueled public attitudes toward schools and students, we can

better understand the rationale behind policies and practices aimed at preventing school violence. However, understanding how these binary oppositions work within the framework of public education is only a beginning. Confronting our own assumptions with a willingness to reconceptualize the goals of public education may provide some relief. Listening to recent high school dropouts concerning their perceptions of their high school experiences within this current political climate may prove enlightening.

Whether taking a conservative or liberal stance on the issues surrounding school violence prevention and its policies and practices, one must acknowledge that each of these issues do not operate in isolation, but intertwine to create hidden agendas and false assumptions that work against the best interest of public schools as well as society. This chapter works toward demystification and repositioning the current debate.

School Violence and Prevention Tactics

Defining what constitutes school violence remains problematic. Delinquent acts may be associated with school violence and, as such, deserve investigation. Troy Adams (2000), Associate Professor of Sociology at Eastern Michigan State University, helps clarify the term, stating that "the concept of delinquency in schools deploys a legalistic connotation upon those within a specified age range who take part in certain events on school grounds" (para. 4). However, exactly which events constitute delinquency and/or school violence depends upon who is doing the defining.

Contrary to popular belief, schools themselves are relatively safe (Skiba & Peterson, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Spina, 2000). In 1998 there were approximately 20 million middle- and high-school students in the United States, yet fewer than a dozen of these students

committed homicide on school grounds. "Nationally, youth violence comprises only 13% of the violent crime and 8% of murders reported by the FBI" (Spina, 2000, p. 4). Such statistics are not meant to downplay the importance of securing safe schools, but rather to highlight how disproportionate the public response is to what has been called an "epidemic of violence in schools."

Though still lacking a concise definition, school violence may reflect societal norms that appear to accept violent acts as part of our culture. Blaming youth for violence becomes easier than taking responsibility for a culture that is accepting of violence, as well as social and economic inequities that breed anger, alienation and hopelessness. Spina (2000) contends:

> It is the dominant adult society, with its elected officials casting the most stones that commits the most crimes against the most people and refuses to take responsibility for them. It is safer to blame youth who can't vote and whose voices remain unheard. (p. 5)

The "Band-Aid" approach to school violence that includes stricter discipline mandates; enforced dress codes; increased surveillance; zero tolerance policies that expel students for drug or weapon possession; as well as other behavior deemed potentially dangerous, create feelings of false security and may sabotage efforts to identify underlying assumptions and attitudes that perpetuate violence. Living in a culture that admires "quick fixes" to problems, it is understandable that schools and communities feel pressured to do "something." However, responses that treat the symptoms without addressing the underlying causes of violence may not only be ineffective, but may also lead to increased student alienation.

Student Alienation

Alienation as a construct is closely associated with Marx's thinking and the effects of capitalistic society on human beings. Bertell Ollman (1971), in Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society, explains the theory of alienation as "an intellectual construct in which Marx displays the devastating effect of capitalist production on human beings, on their physical and mental states and the social process of which they are a part" (p. 131). Within schools students are dominated by those in power, by economic constraints, by political structures, and by their own thought processes (Ollman, 1971; Skiba & Peterson, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c).

Disciplinary measures that disengage students from the school community through expulsion or suspension, as well as practices and policies that create barriers to positive student-teacher relationships, have the potential to increase a sense of separateness, a splintering of students' sense of self into a number of disparate parts. "The whole has broken up into numerous parts whose interrelation in the whole can no longer be ascertained" (Ollman, 1971, p. 135). Liberals, on the other hand, may explain alienation as the denial of basic rights such as denial of autonomy or equality of opportunities (McGary, 1999). Especially within the realm of enforcing school violence prevention policies and practices, especially zero tolerance policies with its mandatory suspension and expulsion, such an interpretation involving the denial of basic rights and the connection with student dropouts appears useful. Skiba and Peterson (1999c) explain:

> Our concerns about long-term effects of zero tolerance multiply when we look more closely at one of its central components: school exclusion. In the 1980s, national concern over children termed 'at risk' led to extensive investigations of the causes and correlates of dropping out. Consistently, school suspension was found to be a

> moderate to strong predictor of a student's dropping out of school. Over 30% of sophomores who dropped out of school had been suspended, a rate three times that of peers who stayed in school. (para. 23)

I agree with Skiba and Peterson that "the relationship between suspension and dropping out may not be accidental" (1999c, para. 24). "In ethnographic studies, school disciplinarians report that suspension is sometimes used as a tool to 'push out' particular students, to encourage 'troublemakers' or those perceived as unlikely to succeed in school to leave" (1999c, para. 24).

Additionally, racial factors create unique experiences related to alienation that are often missing from the discourse. Howard McGary, professor of Philosophy at Rutgers State University, extends our understandings and interpretations of alienation and highlights the need to address the experiences of nonwhite people.

> According to the new account of alienation that is drawn from the experiences of nonwhite people, alienation exists when the self is deeply divided because the hostility of the dominant groups in society forces the self to see itself as loathsome, defective, or insignificant, and lacking the possibility of ever seeing itself in more positive terms. This type of alienation is not just estrangement from one's work or a possible plan of life, but also an estrangement from ever becoming a self that is not defined in the hostile terms of the dominant group. (McGary, 1999, p. 8)

A process of dynamic social interactions defines our identity. If such interactions continue to confirm our self-doubts and negative self-image, then providing equality through economic maneuvers aimed at equal distribution of wealth and power or assuring equal opportunities and the opportunities to have our concerns and opinions heard will remain insufficient. The new explanation of alienation "concentrates on the fragility and insecurity of the self caused by the way people who are victims view and define themselves [and] even if external constraints were removed, the self would still be

estranged because it has been constructed out of images that are hostile to it" (McGary, 1999, p. 9).

I would argue that to a certain extent the experiences of women and homosexuals within out society are not impervious to this type of alienation. To what extent potential high school dropouts may also experience this type of alienation is relevant to this project.

Within my discourse on school violence prevention practices and policies and their connection to school dropout behavior, understanding alienation in its multiple forms becomes extremely important. Alienated students may not only increase the potential for being the cause of school violence but are also prime candidates for quitting school before graduation. To what extent public schools may be complicitous with increasing and sustaining students' feelings of alienation as well as the potential for violent acts, requires attention.

Systemic Violence Within Public Schools

Understanding the complex nature of school violence demands an investigation of the institutions whose policies and practices may encourage violent acts. Redefining school violence as systemic violence, researchers Juanita Ross Epp and Ailsa M. Watkinson (1997) enrich our understandings:

> Systemic violence is any institutional practice or procedure that adversely impacts... disadvantaged individuals or groups by burdening them psychologically, mentally, culturally, spiritually, economically, or physically. It includes practices and procedures that prevent students from learning, thus harming them. This may take the form of conventional policies and practices that foster a climate of violence, or policies and practices that appear to be neutral but result in discriminatory effects. (p. 4)

Such a definition of violence "transcends the conventional focus on students as victims and perpetrators and looks to wider structural forces" (Adams, 2000, para. 9). In this context violence might include such things as differential funding, tracking, and disciplinary practices such as zero tolerance. In other words, "disciplinary practices can be viewed as interrelated with and part of the cause of violence, and not simply a response to it" (Adams. 2000, para. 9).

Discipline in school results from breaking rules and thus "is both an antecedent and an expected outcome of predictable behavior" (Adams, 2000, para. 11). Decontextualizing how some disciplinary practices may be viewed as a form of violence jump-starts the discussion. Adams (2000) notes:

> The problem, however, is that when, for whatever reason, students are not conforming, the traditional response from teachers and school administrations has been to use a form of violence (called punishment) as a disciplinary practice in an attempt to bring about this conformity....In short, school violence and discipline are mutually constitutive of the problem and need to be considered in relationship to each other in any serious discussion on either topic. (para. 12)

How discipline and school violence "are mutually constitutive of the problem" and may influence dropout behavior is extremely relevant to this research project.

The Evolution of School Disciplinary Practices and Policies

Examining the evolution of disciplinary practices in public schools over the last forty years provides insights regarding how social, political, and cultural factors operate to support trends in school discipline. Adams (2000) agrees that "current disciplinary practices do not exist in a vacuum but are part of the developing sociological landscape" (para. 14). The baby-boom generation, those born between 1946 and 1964, dramatically changed the disciplinary procedures in public schools. Social, political and cultural

events such as the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War protest movement, and the women's movement, coupled with increases in school size and school construction, produced radical changes in school discipline (Adams, 2000).

> Traditional disciplinary methods such as corporal punishment did not have the immediate effect they once had, nor did they seem to deter would-be or chronic offenders. The advent of the baby boom, flourishing public educational facilities, swelling school enrollments, and increased student unrest meant that new disciplinary techniques had to replace the corporal punishment of the past. One of the main practices to which school administrations resorted was the suspension and expulsion of students. (Adams, 2000, para. 14)

During the 1960s and 1970s school expulsions and/or suspensions became the discipline of choice since removing large numbers of disruptive youth was a quick fix, offered protection to the majority of the student body from the offenders, and provided administrators a modicum of control (Adams, 2000). The increase in school dropouts during the 1970s may be linked to the use of suspension and expulsion since "students who are routinely disciplined by being suspended are more likely to drop out of school altogether" (Adams, 2000, para.16). In addition, suspending students who dislike school and "are alienated from the educational experience and see compulsory education as a massive detention camp may manipulate administrators to render themselves officially released" (para.16). Besides placing students already at risk on the streets, "evidence has been found that links exclusion (suspension-expulsion) to students' thoughts of self-defeat [and thoughts of being] powerless against an omnipotent school system or isolated and disenfranchised" (Adams, 2000, para.16). Furthermore, other researchers confirm the ineffectiveness of punitive discipline practices such as suspension (Damico & Roth, 1993; Raebeck, 1993).

A shift in public opinion regarding the rights of individuals to receive an education changed the tide of disciplinary practices and out-of-school suspension (OSS) was replaced with in-school suspension (ISS). Adams (2000) notes that "partly in response to the many lawsuits filed against school districts for their alleged capricious actions and violations of due process, the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s saw the growth and popularity of ISS programs" (para.19). Although ISS might be considered more positive than OSS since students received no credit for their academic work during their suspension, ISS still presented many problems. Students assigned to ISS are allowed to complete academic work in isolation from their regular classrooms, thus not receiving zeros for missed assignments. However both ISS and OSS deny students access to classroom instruction that often results in academic failure (Andrews, Taylor, Martin & Slate, 1998). Furthermore, the quality of ISS programs vary greatly; some reflect a genuine effort to continue the student's educational program, while others represent a holding tank for disruptive students and offer the teacher a break from student misbehavior.

Researchers Short and Noblit (1985), who evaluated ten ISS programs that had been identified as effective by both educational officials and juvenile justice personnel, found ISS to be problematic for several reasons. These researchers assert that these programs were punitive in nature and lacked both a behavior modification and an academic component. Other researchers have also found ISS to be ineffectual since students assigned to ISS became further alienated from the school community, failed to complete

the assigned work, and became more at risk for dropping out of high school (Costenbader & Markson, 1994; Nevetsky, 1991; Sullivan, 1989). Adams (2000) states:

> Many students who are placed in ISS programs are there because their teachers lack appropriate mediation skills. It is only recently that teachers began undergoing conflict resolution and mediation training. Therefore, some students find themselves skidding into ISS classrooms because of the inability of their teachers to cope with students who come from diverse social backgrounds that often are at variance with the background of middle-class teachers. (para. 21)

Remembering that disciplinary practices reflect the social, political and cultural landscape of the times, the trend during the 1980s and 1990s toward zero tolerance practices and policies as a means to prevent school violence reflects a neo-conservative agenda that also fueled the "back to basics" movement and the reliance on standardized tests to demonstrate school efficiency and accountability. David E. Purpel and Svi Shapiro (1995) explain that the back to basics movement reflected more than a concern with ensuring basic literacy and numeracy, but countered what was conceived as liberal or secular humanism that had "fomented licentious attitudes and permissive values that needed to be staunched" (p. 12). The welfare state that had developed in this period, the Right announced, was responsible for the decline in the traditional virtues of independence, rugged individualism, self-reliance, and competitive zeal (Purpel & Shapiro, 1995). "Both a national and an individual decline, it was argued, was traceable to the liberalism of the 1960s that had corroded time-honored American virtues of hard work, patriotism, and the commitment to self-improvement" (p.12). Furthermore, "the concern with equality (translated sameness), the Right argued, had suffocated the central American value of freedom" (Purpel & Shapiro, 1995, p.10).

> Respect and obedience needed to be learned, and very often the 'old-fashion' way was best....Drugs, vandalism, apathy, and disruptive behavior required less psychological analysis and sympathetic understanding than uncompromising insistence, backed up by corporal punishment if needed, on the upholding of social standards and norms. (Purpel & Shapiro, 1995, p. 12)

In spite of warnings issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics in an article entitled "Corporal Punishment in Schools," the Georgia Department of Education continues to support this form of punishment as a disciplinary measure (2000). "The American Academy of Pediatrics believes that corporal punishment may affect adversely a student's self-image and school achievement and that it may contribute to disruptive and violent student behavior" (Corporal Punishment in Schools, 2000, para.1). It is in this milieu we find current school disciplinary procedures that aim to prevent school violence through zero tolerance policies.

Zero Tolerance Policies

The time was ripe for public schools to embrace "tough love," and zero tolerance policies and practices were eagerly embraced. Writing for the National Review, John Derbyshire (2001) suggests that popular support for zero tolerance reflects a backlash against liberal politics.

> Popular support for zero-tolerance laws and rules is in large part a reaction to the follies of our liberal elites. Why do citizens want rigid, mandatory, bureaucratic rules for dealing with transgressions? For the same reason we want three-strikes laws and capital punishment: because we have learned that if we rely on soft-headed ideological judges, parole boards, and school administrators to do the right thing, we will be disappointed. The results delivered by zero-tolerance rules may sometimes be wacky; the results delivered when our liberal elites are left free to exercise their powers of judgment are positively dangerous. Zero tolerance is one more response to the moral crisis of our time: to the collapse of authority, to the turning away from customary and traditional practices and beliefs, to moral relativism and its tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner attitude to crime; to all the furrowed-brow, equivocating, guilt-addled, apologetic dross of modern liberalism. (para.5)

Besides identifying the "follies of our liberal elites" as a factor, Derbyshire also asserts that race played an important part in the establishment of zero tolerance policies in public schools.

> This being America, there is also the matter of race, with all the associated rancor and delusions. Zero-tolerance policies in schools came about partly because the schools faced lawsuits charging that principals disciplined students unequally based on race and other factors. In this regard, the subsequent results have been dismally predictable: By the late 1990s, with zero tolerance well entrenched in schools nationwide, complaints were being heard that these boilerplate, inflexible policies also led to discrimination! By 1997, the nation's schools were blanketed with zero-tolerance policies; yet, in the 1997-98 academic year, of the roughly 87,000 students expelled from their schools, about 31 percent were black, even though blacks make up only 17 percent of enrollment. (2001, para.6)

Examining to what extent our culture supports the need for zero tolerance policies in public schools opens up discussion around increasingly complex issues. Derbyshire (2001) recognizes a cultural paradox since zero tolerance for threats, drugs, weapons, and sexual harassment coexist within a culture outside of schools that would not have been tolerated thirty years ago. Derbyshire sees the "bureaucratic inflexibility of zero-tolerance policies…[as] one symptom of a more general problem our hedonistic, atomized society faces" (para. 8). Examining the similarities between zero tolerance and total tolerance within our culture, Derbyshire contends that the abdication of authority is common to both.

> On the one hand, there is the determination to avoid exercising any kind of rational leniency about petty infractions of discipline, lest one's judgment betray one into 'discrimination' or--much worse--fail to detect the very occasional adolescent psychopath. On the other hand, there is the unwillingness to be 'judgmental' about any expressions of individual belief or taste--except those derived from organized Christianity. (2001, para.7)

Although we may think the issues surrounding zero tolerance are modern day problems, Derbyshire (2001) compares our present dilemma to the Confucianism and Legalism philosophies of ancient China.

> The Confucians believed that human beings were fundamentally good, and that society could be regulated by internalized moral rules. Good manners, clear conscience, moral leadership, and a respect for customary ways of doing things—concepts wrapped up in the word li-would guarantee social order, according to the Confucians. The Legalists, in contrast, believed that human selfishness was too strong a force to be contained by anything but the fear of strict laws and savage punishments, rigorously and impartially applied. Only the firm, inflexible application of written law, fa, would keep society stable. (para. 9)

No doubt we need some of each (li and fa) to maintain our society. Unfortunately, I agree with Derbyshire that the "zero-tolerance follies [indicate that] we have lost the balance between li and fa" (para.13). It seems that we have embraced Legalism, "the application of inflexible, pettifogging punitive codes to all social infractions without judgment or wise consideration" (para. 13). Efforts aimed at restoring balance remain challenging. The support of zero tolerance policies indicates we have a long road ahead.

Working to understand the historical, political, cultural and socio-economic forces driving school disciplinary policies and practices designed to prevent school violence helps demystify them. However, within this analysis we must not ignore effects of the media as an underlying force in the establishment and enforcement of zero tolerance disciplinary policies and practices. The media coverage of school shootings in the 1990s alerted the public to school violence and pressured schools to get even tougher with offenders. Listening to the opinions of school workers regarding the use of zero tolerance policies highlights the current debate. School workers' opinions differ regarding the ethics of zero tolerance policies within public schools. The cover story in the February

2002 issue of National Education Association Today, "Is zero tolerance a good idea for school discipline and safety?," outlines the differing opinions of two veteran public school teachers. Ann Banks, social studies department head at South Garland High School in Garland, Texas and a teacher for over twenty-eight years, supports zero tolerance policies. Banks thinks that schools should support zero tolerance for serious infractions and that students must learn that rules are to be followed. Furthermore, Banks contends "if our minor rules were enforced consistently, fewer students would break the major ones, because more students would realize that there are consequences to their actions" ("Is zero tolerance a good idea for school discipline and safety?" 2002, para. 7).

On the other hand, Richard Ehret, Sr., a social studies teacher at Whitmer High School in Toledo, Ohio, who has taught for twenty-three years, questions the rationale behind zero tolerance. Ehret states that those supporting zero tolerance think that it teaches students to follow school rules in order to avoid serious consequences. This approach is intended to help prepare students for the "world out there" which will have no tolerance for law-breakers. Ehret disagrees:

> Let's examine the world. If a person gets in trouble with the law and is brought to court, the judge usually is not restricted to a mandatory sentence. The judge can consider mitigating circumstances. We have all read about cases where mandatory sentencing brought about a miscarriage of justice. I don't think we want to bring injustice into our schools. (Is zero tolerance a good idea for school discipline and safety? 2002, para. 9)

Comparing zero tolerance policies within schools and the judicial system uncovers additional problems. Ehret asserts:

> School officials, like judges, must be free to judge students by their motives, mitigating circumstances, and other factors that influenced the behavior. In a critical decision about a student's future, no pertinent information should be excluded from

> consideration. But under zero tolerance, if you violate the policy, you are out. How is anyone supposed to get a fair hearing in such a case? (2002, para.10)

The effects of the media in drumming up support for zero tolerance policies in schools reflect a knee-jerk reaction that is generated by fear. Ehret contends that "events such as the Columbine school shootings or September 11" support this reaction (para.11).

> We got hit, we got scared, and we're not gonna take it anymore. In the case of September 11, we are so intent on getting the terrorists that we are even willing to legislate away the Bill of Rights and its guarantee of due process of law for everyone including foreigners. What good is our nation to us without our freedoms? (para.12)

Understanding how political, social and economic factors play a role in the maintenance of zero tolerance policies helps demystify their existence. Adams (2000) further analyzes the move toward zero tolerance in the last several years.

> Discipline moved away from more humane methods toward zero-tolerance, a get-tough approach reminiscent of sixteenth-century draconian practices. The zero-tolerance approach has taken off in response to the more violent nature of school disruption. Zero tolerance has two major dimensions: detection and punishment. The detection aspect involves surveillance, which includes everything from adult hall monitors, police, and professional security guards to cameras, metal detectors, locker searches, and other measures more commonly seen in prisons. (para. 22)

Punishment is swift and uncompromising, usually resulting in expulsion or long-term suspension. Analyzing to what extent these disciplinary actions encourage students to drop out of school is critical to the discussion.

Returning to the pre-1970s policy of exclusion, zero tolerance requires suspension or expulsion for a variety of offenses, such as possessing a firearm or drugs. However, students have been expelled for offenses much less violent. Asserting that "zero-tolerance does not mean zero common sense" (ACLU Press Release, October 2, 2000, para.7), Gerry Weber, Legal Director of the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia,

defended Ashley Smith who was suspended for ten days from Garrett Middle School in Cobb County for carrying a weapon: a small Tweety Bird key chain which was attached to her Tweety Bird wallet. The ACLU is "demanding a public hearing to allow input from parents on a sensible and clear weapons policy and to implement an interim policy which includes warnings and confiscation as alternative to suspension" (ACLU Press Release, October 2, 2000, para.5). Following the media coverage of Ashley Smith's case, Debbie Seagraves, Executive Director of the ACLU in Georgia, said that "other students have now come forward, which affirms that this is a flawed policy which must be changed" (para.3). Although Georgia is not alone in the controversy over zero tolerance policies and practices, this article points to the inherent problem when school officials "apply their own, sometimes absurd standards to claim toys and non-dangerous items are weapons" (para.6). All public school classrooms in which students have access to sharpened pencils may be deemed a classroom in which weapons are present.

Perry A. Zirkel (1999), writing for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, states that "with the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and the Columbine tragedy in 1999, the tide continues to flow in the direction of 'zero tolerance' policies" (p. 1). Judith A. Browne, senior attorney at the Advancement Project, a policy and legal-action organization, agrees that "the zero tolerance craze has fostered a take-no-prisoners approach to school discipline that disregards a student's individual circumstances and previous discipline record" (2001, p. 138). Browne states:

> In 1998 more than 3.1 million students were suspended from schools nationwide, many for nonviolent infractions. While zero tolerance may be an acceptable tactic against school weapons and drugs, it is inappropriately used to exclude too many of our children, among them ones with little or no propensity toward violence. (p.138)

In a December 6, 1999 article in Time, John Cloud, Sylvester Monroe and Todd Murphy assert that "by definition, zero tolerance erases distinctions among student offenses" (p. 52). Citing the national crackdown on Alka-Seltzer since 1996, Cloud states that "schools in four states have suspended at least 20 children for possession of the fizzy medicine" (p. 52). Furthermore, suspension or expulsion under zero tolerance policies have recently included a seven-year-old boy in Cahokla, Illinois who had a nail clipper at school and a 10th grade student at Surry County High School in Virginia who dyed her hair blue (Cloud, Monroe & Murphy, 1999).

> Welcome to the American school after Columbine. It can be a place brimming with suspicion, where in the past few months school officials have seen a nail file as a knife and blue hair as an omen of antisocial, possibly even violent behavior....It may seem silly to go after a kid whose only crime is manicuring during school hours. But how do you know whom to treat sympathetically at a time when 11-year-olds commit murder? (Now 13, Nathaniel Abraham was convicted last month in Michigan of shooting a stranger in the head.) And how do you decide which kids are just morose and creative and which ones are plotting to kill? A zero tolerance approach ends the guesswork. (p. 51)

Unfortunately, the choice of disciplinary practices and the extent to which they are enforced are mired in the political, social and cultural milieu of the times, rather than reflecting the best practices for ensuring safe schools for all students. In addition, disciplinary practices also reflect socio-economic trends within communities, and as such may antagonize social justice.

> The use of specific disciplinary techniques seems to parallel economic divisions, which, in turn, are associated with race. Like so many other characteristics of schools that are dependent upon economic resources such as the quality of school buildings, the availability of modern teaching equipment, up-to-date textbooks and reading materials, and the quality of instruction, there is an implied or embodied philosophy of discipline that co-varies with the school's economic status. Simply put, lower economic schools with large numbers of minority students are more likely to exclude

> students from school rather than to place them in ISS or provide alternative education programs. (Adams, 2000, para.33)

Agreeing with Adams and acknowledging that race does not determine a student's behavior but does determine how they are disciplined, Browne (2001) contends that current zero tolerance policies, including school suspension, unfairly target Black students.

> Nationally, Black students represent only 17 percent of public-school enrollment, but 32 percent of suspensions. Twenty-five percent of all Black students were suspended at least once over a four-year period.... Black students are regularly put out of school for nonviolent conduct that is termed disrespectful, disruptive or disobedient. These subjective assessments leave room for bias. (p. 138)

Investigating to what extent zero tolerance policies affect students' decisions to drop out becomes integral to improving schools and working toward the goals inherent in a democratic society.

Adams (2000) provides an evaluation of the zero tolerance approach to discipline and cites six reasons that illuminate its problematic nature:

1. Expelled students are often the ones most in need of educational opportunities and alternative programs.
2. Zero tolerance violates a student's right to a public education, as well as due process.
3. Zero tolerance policies do not promote democratic principles and fail to educate students for participation in a democratic society.
4. Zero tolerance practices disproportionately punish minority students.
5. Zero tolerance policies often expel students for minor offenses such as tardiness, class cutting, tobacco use, and insubordination. (Adams wonders if teachers are now using zero

tolerance as a means of classroom management rather than employing constructive strategies to resolve classroom conflict).

6. No research data suggests that zero tolerance policies reduce school violence.

Adams (2000) adds that a study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that, after four years of implementation, zero tolerance policies had no appreciable effect on reducing violence. In fact, those schools where zero tolerance was deployed were deemed less safe than those without harsh policies, thus suggesting that certainty of punishment provides no assurance safer schools will be created. Yet schools continue to embrace zero tolerances as a disciplinary measure to prevent school violence. How these measures affect the school climate and may encourage school leaving remains of critical importance.

Perry A. Zirkel (1999), writing for the National Association of Secondary Principals, warns school policymakers to use discretion in the employment of zero tolerance disciplinary actions that require expulsion:

> While being sensitive to the community's zero tolerance for threats to school safety, such as student possession of weapons and drugs, school leaders need to avoid going overboard in developing and enforcing expulsion policies.... Thus, rather than a severe knee-jerk reaction, school officials should carefully consider each case, particularly where state statutes establish strict boundaries. (para. 29)

Medicalization of Disruptive Youth

Adams explains that the 1990s saw an increase in the medicalization of students deemed potentially violent:

> Students with behavioral problems are being diagnosed as having a medical predisposition. These conditions often include attention deficit disorder (ADD) and, closely related to it, attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). According to the

> American Psychiatric Association (1994), these conditions are generally marked by 'a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity that is more frequent and severe than typically observed in individuals at a comparable level of development.' (Adams, 2000, p. 177)

Behavior deemed inappropriate for normal classroom inclusion has the potential to be categorized and treated in multiple ways. It has been my personal observation as a teacher and school counselor that more economically advantaged youth are diagnosed ADD and/or ADHD, whereas more disadvantaged youth with similar behaviors are classified as EBD, a special education classification denoting a severe emotional problem. I do not know to what extent this personal observation has been documented, but it is worthy of future investigation.

As ADD/ADHD diagnoses increase, neither the school nor the disruptive child's parents are held accountable for the child's behavior; the child misbehaves because he or she has a medical condition. Adams (2000) asserts that such an assumption has serious implications. The problems of a student being misdiagnosed or over-diagnosed must be considered since symptoms associated with ADHD and ADD are likely to be exhibited in children who come from dysfunctional and abusive families (Adams, 2000). The use of pharmaceutical treatment has dramatically increased; national statistics show that by 1987 an estimated 750,000 youngsters were on stimulant treatments and the numbers are rising (Adams, 2000). This trend toward medicalization of students may represent an alternative method for dealing with youth deemed potentially disruptive and possibly violent.

School Violence and School/Class Size

In addition to problems associated with disciplinary measures aimed at preventing school violence, the goal of creating safe and drug free schools that provide equal access to educational opportunities for all students remains challenging. The federal government spent in excess of $82 million on educational research and another $566 million on safe and drug-free schools during the 1999 fiscal year alone (Federal Assistance Monitor 1998). Although more research is needed, some important findings have emerged. Gary Gottfredson and Denise Gottfredson's (1985) extensive research on school violence reveals a critical link between school size and school violence. Reducing school size and increasing instructional resources, thus reorganizing instruction so that teachers deal more closely with a smaller number of students, has a positive effect on school climate. The recommendations for reducing school size are echoed by researcher Mary Anne Raywid (1997) who noted an empirical link between school size and disruption. Raywid found that fewer discipline problems, lower dropout rates, higher student participation levels, and steadier academic progress were associated with smaller schools and fewer students in each class. In addition, researchers V. K. Costenbader and S. Markson (1994) found that school size also affects student suspensions and dropout rates. Larger schools with over 2000 students reported that 46% to 50% of dropouts had been suspended one or more times, whereas schools with less than 500 students reported 16% to 20% of dropouts had been suspended one or more times (Costenbader & Markson, 1994).

There is ample evidence that the relationship between school violence and discipline is more complex than we often assume. I agree with Adams (2000):

> Focusing on the technology of discipline as a quick fix to problems plaguing schools does not address the deeper malaise affecting the wider system [and that] only by placing school violence in its broader social and historical context, and recognizing that violence and discipline may be both problem and solution, are we likely to move beyond the continual media-orchestrated debates, toward a lasting robust policy. (para.47)

How to make schools safe and yet not compromise social justice is a formidable challenge.

Making Schools Safe

Feminist ethics provides a valuable framework for understanding the interconnectedness of students' lives to social, economic, cultural and political factors that support a culture of violence. Recent school shootings attest to the reality of violence in schools, but missing from the discourse are the interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts of students affected by society's attitudes on gender and sexuality. Researchers Klein and Chancer (2000) examine the omission of gender from high-profile school violence cases by revealing "an unexplored culture of violence embedded in everyday relations of gender and sexuality" (p. 129). Several recent school shootings that gained tremendous media attention were committed by White males, ages eleven through eighteen, who expressed rage by aiming "bullets at girls who rejected them and/or at other boys who attacked their masculinity by implying they were homosexual" (p. 129). "Misogyny, gay-bashing, and violence" represent underlying causes of such behaviors rather than "the media, lax gun-control laws, working parents, and pure chance" (Klein & Chancer, 2000, p. 129). A critical discussion of school violence must concede that it is more than simply "individual pathology or media mimicry, but a response to a poisonous

gender ideology that must be neutralized and pluralized to allow both girls and boys to experience their emotional potential" (Spina, 2000, p. *xviii*).

In P. C. Duttweiler's (1997) article "Gay and Lesbian Youth at Risk," a series of compelling statistics reveal the extent of homophobic sentiments in public schools, as well as the devastating effect they have on our youth. According to a 1993 Report of the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth 53% of students reported hearing homophobic comments made by school staff. James Sears (1992), in "Educators, Homosexuality, and Homosexual Students: Are Personal Feelings Related to Professional Beliefs?" found that 80% of prospective teachers and 66% of guidance counselors reported negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian people. The United States Department of Justice (1987) states that homosexuals are most frequently the targets of hate crimes. Researchers Hetrick and Martin (1987) found that 80% of gay and lesbian youth experienced severe social isolation. Teen suicide is a significant problem for gay and bisexual adolescents. The United States Department of Health and Human Services Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide Report found that gay and bisexual adolescents committed 30% of all teen suicides (Gibson, 1989).

Deborah M. Roffman, who has taught human sexuality education at the Park School of Baltimore since 1975 and is the author of Sex and Sensibility, remarks:

> The unwelcoming if not outright hostile school environments in which LGBT youth find themselves exact a high toll; sexual minority youth are known to be at greater risk for a variety of social, emotional, physical, and educational hardships. (2000, para.2)

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Teachers Network (GLSTN) published a report entitled "Just the Facts on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students and Schools" that further

documents the extent of the problem. Biographical accounts of gay students highlight the enormity of this important issue.

Jamie Nabozny, a high school student in Wisconsin, dropped out of school in his junior year after enduring repeated verbal humiliation and physical attacks. "After one especially degrading incident, Jamie complained to the principal. Jamie was told, 'Well, you know, Jamie, boys will be boys. And if you're going to be so openly gay, you have to expect that kind of stuff'" (Duttweiler, 1997, para. 1). On November 19, 1996, Jamie Nabozny was awarded $900,000 in punitive damages from his school district for failing to protect him from harassment and physical harm (Nabozny v. Podlesny, 1996; Price, 1996; Duttweiler, 1997; ACLU Newswire, December 15, 2000). This landmark federal court judgment against school administrators for not providing equal protection for a gay student suffering from violence within the school may send a wake-up call to public schools throughout the United States.

In Georgia, Cobb County's Pope High School is being sued by former student Noah Saunders, an openly gay student who graduated in 1998 (ACLU Newswire, December 15, 2000). Having experienced ongoing harassment throughout his high school career with little administrative intervention or protection, Saunders understands the need for greater awareness in the public schools.

The ACLU of Georgia recently piloted a program called "Make Schools Safe" that works to increase school safety by offering teachers and administrators training on how to respond to homophobic remarks, classroom questions from students about gay issues, and parents angered by discussions of sexual orientation in public schools (ACLU

Newswire, December 15, 2000). Holding schools liable for not protecting gay students may wake up school officials to the importance of this program.

Opponents of the program assert it is really an effort by gay activists to get the "gay agenda" into the classroom. In response, the ACLU organizers stated that "this isn't Gay 101...It's not 'promoting' or 'condoning' homosexuality to say that there are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered youth in your midst, and you have the responsibility to protect them and let them learn" (para.20). Beth Littrell, ACLU coordinator of the program, adds:

> Part of what the program aims to do is point out that verbal threats to students almost always lead to some sort of physical harassment of varying degrees [and] the threats can also create such a hostile school environment that kids can't learn, whether they drop out or not. (ACLU Newswire, December 15, 2000, para.15)

Expanding our understandings of school violence prevention to include programs that increase awareness and toleration (perhaps even appreciation) of individual differences would be a step in the right direction. Recent research findings by Jane A. Page and Delores D. Liston (2001) support the need to increase awareness among pre-service teachers regarding homophobia in schools. They assert that teacher education programs need to provide experiences and activities that prepare future teachers for the task of combating homophobia within the school setting. However, social, political and cultural factors may work against the success of such programs. For example, some organized religions consider homosexuality a sin. Omitting gender and sexuality from a careful investigation of school violence perpetuates social injustice and provides obstacles for more complete understandings. In Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence, Bell (1993) contends:

> Feminist ethics simply cannot condone others turning their backs and leaving victims of oppression and violence to improve their own lot. Rather, the violence, the oppression, and the indifference that support them must be challenged by appealing to an ideal of a world in which...[we can] make possible for them a better lifestyle. (p. 37)

If we choose to ignore Bell's position and react to potential school violence by enforcing disciplinary measures without addressing the need for "individuals [students, parents, community members and school personnel] to accept responsibility for their own actions and lifestyles and for the ways actions and lifestyles involve virtually everyone in the complexities of oppressive systems" (Bell, 1993, p. 37), then we are complicitous with the problem. Agreeing with Bell that "a feminist ethic must be both critical of what is and ever mindful of what might be [and that it] must work out consistent ideals for which humanity should strive" (p. 55), current efforts focusing on preventing school violence without acknowledging the need to understand the problems faced by gay, lesbian and bi-sexual students appear misguided.

School Reform and School Violence

School reform efforts are closely aligned with concerns over school violence since safe schools are also deemed effective schools and both work to project images of accountability and efficiency. An inquiry of current school reform practices calling for back to basics and insisting on higher standards is necessary for a more complete understanding of the issues driving practices aimed to prevent school violence. The role school reform efforts play in marginalizing students who cannot muster the cultural capital to pass graduation tests, who become alienated from a school curriculum that removes the "frills" (arts, music, drama and humanities) in order to concentrate efforts on

courses that match the objectives on standardized tests, as well as the implementation of stricter disciplinary codes that create fear and alienation in both students and adults, must be part of the discourse requiring an analysis of school violence prevention policies and practices and school dropout behavior.

The current debate over school reform creates antagonism on multiple levels. Competing voices expressing concern over the absence of morality and family values, projected lack of skilled workers for future economic security and prosperity, as well as the intellectual, moral and ethical void being created within public education, signal that United States' schools are still in trouble. Maxine Greene (1989), renowned philosopher and educator, claims:

> Those preoccupied with military dominance and those concerned about trilateral management of a global economy; those interested in using schools to repair character deficiencies and those interested in using them to upgrade competence and skills [are promoting a school reform agenda for] learning minimal competency skills and the requirements for dead-end jobs [which will be] awaiting perhaps the majority of our youth. (pp. ix-x)

Current school reform efforts embedded within the back-to-basics movement that are dependent upon standardized testing and upholding zero tolerance disciplinary measures to prevent school violence, create little hope for a critically informed public capable of creating and maintaining democratic ideals.

Concerned about the lack of democratic ideals within current school reform efforts that are often fomented by the Right, critical theorist Joe Kincheloe (1999) connects questions about White supremacy, history and education. Kincheloe contends:

> Exploiting public amnesia yet again, right-wing leaders portrayed a pre-1960s, pre-egalitarian educational reform America where educational standards were high, American education was viewed as the best in the world, and because of such

> educational excellence U.S. economic supremacy was beyond question. Indeed, the Nation at Risk report issued in the spring of 1983 can be viewed as a recovery document outlining the impossibility of seeking educational quality and equality simultaneously. Racial difference in this context becomes a destructive force intent on destroying our (White) values and standards--racial difference in education, as manifested in the racial desegregation of schools, destroyed the quality of American education. (Kincheloe, 1999, para.38)

This analysis opens up new areas of concern for equality and democracy as it expands our understanding of multiple forces driving current school reform. As right-wing leaders announce "it's high time... we go back to the basics, to that Little House on the Prairie school with its drill, repetition, and focus on traditional values," Kincheloe contends that "in education the recovery of Whiteness meant a return to the little red schoolhouse" (para.38). Issues of racism as well as economics, remain pertinent to an investigation of current school reform efforts.

By cutting across political ideologies, religious convictions, philosophical orientations and ethical judgments, a consensus is exposed that school reform is needed. However, tensions from competing groups provoke heated debate with a noticeable absence of critical analysis informed by ethical considerations. Patrick Slatterly, a curriculum theorist concerned with educational ethics, helps re-position the current school reform debate. In "Understanding Political-Religious Resistance and Pressure" (1995), he asserts that "we must recognize that education wars are raging" (para.10). Not confined to debates over political ideology alone, Slatterly explains how the Right is "waging a holy war to save the soul of a Judeo-Christian nation that it considers to have fallen into the quagmire of sin and idolatry" (1995, para.10). Current bans by religious groups on questionable school library books, fiery debates over the teaching of evolution and strict

adherence to "abstinence-only" sexuality education attest to a growing conflict. Separation of church and state remains hotly debated, as some religious crusaders attempt to bring back school prayer and post the "Ten Commandments" on classroom walls. Like all forms of extremist thinking, the religious Right conveys a desire to dominate and control the current discourse, rather than provide ways of reconceptualization. Historian Eugene Provenzo (1990) describes a viable compromise:

> The public schools should not deal with the ultra-fundamentalists as a threat to public education, but simply as another special interest group in the culture. Accommodations, compromise and empathy are essential to both sides. In dealing with the ultra-fundamentalist perspective, we must avoid countering with a version of the ultra-fundamentalist perspective, i.e. being absolutist, intolerant, and exclusive....The ultra-fundamentalists have the right to promote their beliefs and to maintain their rights, but not to impose their vision of culture and education on the majority of American schoolchildren. (pp. 97-98)

Protecting the rights of others is an ethical position grounded in feminist theory. Nel Noddings (1992), noted authority on feminist theory and curriculum, maintains that decisions affecting education must originate from caring attitudes that reflect receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness. David E. Purpel (1989) contends "there is an urgency not only to be critical but to seek affirmation, commitment, and advocacy [with the goal of facilitating] love, justice, community, and joy" (p. 123), within the educational arena. Obviously, ethics and morality must be partners in school reform, as well as with school violence prevention and school dropout prevention programs that are truly inclusive and affirming of the worth and dignity of all peoples. However, the dangerous terrain that must be tread in order to understand the secret agendas behind current school reform and violence prevention may require some cynicism. Slatterly (1995) warns:

> Those proposing education reform often use pseudo-religious and patriotic rhetoric in order to give their agenda the appearance of a divine mandate or a manifest destiny. This pseudo-religious language closes discussion rather than initiating dialogue. On the other hand, reform proposals that reject theological reflection reduce social change to politically rigid ideologies also discourage dialogue. A stalemate between the extremes is inevitable. Rigid social agendas are impotent in the face of larger political-religious conditions. Teachers and administrators become trapped in gridlock and cannot implement controversial innovations. (para.16)

Believing the purpose of education is to serve the needs of all children over the needs of special interest groups, be they religious or political, requires an ethical position that embraces care and respect. To do otherwise is to sabotage the educational process and hold our children hostage. Understanding, empathy and affirmation require communicating with a wide variety of persons and personalities. "Too frequently, people isolate themselves within their own social, political, religious or ethnic enclaves where frustrations, prejudices and ignorance can be perpetuated" (Slatterly, 1995, para.12). Tolerance of diverse ideas and beliefs opens the dialogue.

While not diminishing the impact of religion on current school reform and violence prevention, the political underpinnings supporting this debate are important and demand attention. Frank Smith asserts that "the underlying problems in education. . . are essentially political, not educational, and the only resolution must be political, at many levels" (cited in Shapiro, 1998, para.20). Acknowledging the political nature of education in the United States requires a citizenry less blind to inherent social, moral and economic inequities, as well as one more aware of "hidden agendas" plaguing education. Uncovering the ideological agendas informing this debate provides fertile ground for re-interpretation and re-imagination. However, Slatterly (1995) warns:

> Does this mean that all educators, students, parents and board members must become engaged in political and theological studies? Absolutely yes! Legislators, state department of education officials, school administrators, consultants, publishers and boards can no longer afford to simply promulgate school change in a politically isolated, value-neutral or theologically censored cocoon. The practice of delegating reforms to certified experts without consulting students, teachers, parents, politicians, religious groups and other stakeholders in the education system is severely problematic and counterproductive. Rational approaches such as behavioral objectives, accountability programs and mastery curriculum will no longer be effective. (para.12)

Following Slatterly's rationale, a deconstruction of why the culture of the United States supports the current reform movement and violence prevention tactics it spawns, is necessary. Examining the role of the business community in education, the myth of meritocracy and "rugged individualism" as well as the need for multicultural education, creates a platform of empowerment and a counter-hegemonic tool for re-thinking and re-structuring public education in the United States.

Corporate America and Public Schools

Learning that is separated from the life of the learner creates an atmosphere of alienation in which the educational process is separate and distant. Both teacher and student exist on a plane ruled by textbooks, tests, and a curriculum devoid of personalization. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian philosopher and educator, called this "banking education," in which the student is a passive recipient of the teacher's knowledge. In the introduction to Freire's (1998) Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage, Stanley Aronowitz describes how this system is propagated within current educational practices and how "the banking or transmission theory of school knowledge, ... standing in the way of critical consciousness, has returned with a vengeance" (p. 4). Within this atmosphere of "vengeance" school reform and

violence prevention advocates feel justified in blaming the student for not measuring up to professed standards, while blaming the teacher and school system for producing a "defective" product.

Though incomplete, the schools as factories metaphor helps explain the current mentality that sees schools as places that mold students into acceptable citizens. Shapiro (1998), critiquing school reform in "Public School Reform: The Mis-measure of Education," explains:

> Critical observers of schooling in this country have long noted how public schools have been shaped by industrial images: classrooms as factories, students as raw materials, teachers as workers, the pedagogic process as one of inputs and outputs subject to behavioral and technical manipulation. Today, under the pressures of both the White House and the state house, the concern to fit schools to such a vision has rarely seemed so apparent. And rarely have more 'progressive' visions of education seemed so marginalized. This pressure has been fomented by the sense of panic about falling school standards that has suffused the public discourse on education since the publication of the 1983 'Nation at Risk' report. (para.10)

Susan Ohanian (1999) in One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards, agrees that the standards of the late 1990s developed from the fury over the publication of "A Nation At Risk." This work "declared that our rotten schools produce a rotten workforce and, hence, we have failed in international competitiveness" (Ohanian, 1999, p. 139). Considering why such panic exists uncovers the complicitous relationship existing between corporate America and public education. Lack of faith in the United States' educational system to produce "world class citizens" prepared to meet the economic challenges dictated by big business is primarily fueled by fear of lost profits and an obsession with international competition. No less a factor is the in-grained Protestant work ethic. Disguised as concern over falling test scores, the school reform

movement and the standards it spawns eagerly embrace a partnership with corporate America doomed to erode the possibility of liberatory education within the ideals of a democracy. Deconstructing this partnership, Svi Shapiro (1998) states:

> The key concern at the center of the proposed changes, however, is the effort to ensure that public schools more fully reflect and conform to the needs of business, and that the criteria used to judge business success or effectiveness are more completely and consistently employed in public education. No one has expressed this more often and more persuasively than President Clinton, who has argued that the most important reason for school reform is the 'need to be competitive in the 21st century.' (para.7)

Alfie Kohn notes that "the emphasis [at school and work] is on results, on turning out a product, on quantifying improvements on a fixed series of measures such as sales volume or return on investment" (cited in Shapiro, 1998, para.7). Students as both consumers and products attest to the finding that "we have entered an era where, to an unparalleled degree, the language and thinking of business shape the thinking and vision of education" (1998, para. 7).

To be competitive means to engage in competition, not only in the workplace but also in the classroom. "As the language of 'performance goals' more and more dominates the public debate on schooling, so the business concern with output and productivity comes to define our vision for school success" (Shapiro, 1998, para.7). Believing that numbers count, schools and businesses are striving to reduce learning to a percentile, a statistic, devoid of human meaning. "At school, as in the workplace, success is understood only in the most immediate and crude terms of empirically verifiable and quantifiable data, especially as schools become focused on tests that measure student performance in ways that are standardized and intellectually reductionist" (1998, para.7). Getting the business community out of the schoolhouse would provide an opportunity to re-focus efforts

toward school renewal. Writing for Educational Leadership (1997), J. Hesse agrees, "The political-business alliance is the wrong group to lead educational reform. These people are not education experts, yet they are convincing the public there are easy solutions to the problems of public schools" (para.4).

Using cutting satire and critical theory, Ohanian (1999) blasts big business for their callous disregard for students who are seen primarily as "employees-in-training" (p.140). Consistent with this view, Shapiro (1998) adds:

> The self-interested ethic of the marketplace becomes the ethic of the classroom. It is a short distance from this to what Charles Derber has called the culture of 'wilding'— a culture whose driving force is an unbridled concern with increasing one's own share of the pie. (para.13)

Examining this hidden curriculum by deconstructing the self-interested agendas of the business community as it further invests in educational policy reform may offer some clarity. However, competition and individualism, the backbones of mainstream United States ideology, find nesting places within the business-education partnership. Escaping a cultural and historical past that is grounded in competition requires both renewed faith in respect for the individual and an awareness of ethical implications regarding equity and justice.

The Myth of Meritocracy and "Rugged Individualism"

Maintaining the myth that all students have equal opportunities for success and can "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" plays nicely into the business mentality, but fails to account for the perpetuation of poverty that runs rampant in our inner cities and forgotten rural communities. Arguing that with the right "prescription" for educational reform, all students can be successful and score well on standardized tests is a shameful

lie. Ohanian (1999) uses humor to diffuse the obscenity of believing that not only students but also teachers can reap success within our current trend toward standardization. "Politicians are selling snake oil when they insist that if teachers just pull up their socks and get standards, General Motors will sell more cars than Toyota, and all the people formerly employed in the aerospace industry will find jobs" (p. 114).

Less verbose but equally concerned, Linda Darling-Hammond (1997), in The Right To Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools that Work, contends that the educational system must be held responsible for ensuring equal opportunities for all students. Arguing for standards-based systemic change that begins with clear definitions of curriculum goals, Darling-Hammond understands that "the knotty issues... must be worked out to ensure that new standards spur greater accomplishments rather than merely reify existing failures" (1997, p. 226). In addition, successful schools are those that "model humanity and decency, that cultivate appreciation, and that support learning about things that matter to the people in them" (p. 31). Unfortunately, Darling-Hammond concedes education "can be, and too often is, conducted in a way that deadens and demoralizes... both teachers and students" (p. 31). Though setting standards signals a nation's concern and emphasizes the value it places on learning, "what students have the opportunity to learn is typically a function of where they live, what their parents earn, and the color of their skin" (p. 264). Comparing the United States with other developed countries underlines the existing inequities. Darling-Hammond explains:

> Despite its rhetoric about equality, the United States tolerates disparities in school funding and in access to good teaching that are far greater than those in other developed nations... Although the United States came sooner than many others to the

> task of educating a wide range of students in public schools, it has yet to meet the challenge of providing equal access to quality education. (1997, p. 264)

Regardless of educational practices, the likelihood that school reform has the potential to provide equal opportunities to all students seems doubtful. Willfully ignoring Darling-Hammond's insights or Ohanian's verdict that the economy remains the oppressor constitutes a lapse in judgment and worse, an unethical position. Blaming the victims of poverty and social injustice for failure to become "world class citizens" provides a simple answer to a complex problem. Creating simple answers for problems that demand soul-searching solutions is not new. Slatterly's (1997) analysis contributes to our greater understanding:

> Social and political discontent historically has accompanied education reform. The school change process in the 1990s, however, is dramatically different. First, media sensationalism often reduces complex curriculum issues to sound bites and judgments based on isolated incidents. Second, philosophical and theological reflection is denigrated in favor of inflammatory rhetoric and apocalyptic threats, leading many educators to retreat from public discourse. Third, moral and spiritual bankruptcy pervades the culture. Personal greed, senseless violence and calculated revenge too often are more prevalent than concern, commitment and caring. (para.15)

Explanations for why school reform, standardization tactics and violence prevention initiatives all seem blind to issues of social justice and seek simplistic solutions for complex social problems may help intellectually but do little to address the crippling poverty and racism that find easy access into the lives of American children. The positive correlation between parents' wealth and their educational attainment and that of their offspring is fully documented and indisputable. "In the face of the overwhelming reality that school success is more dependent on a child's social class than on any other single factor, placing the onus on the efforts of the individual teacher or student is a massive

exercise in cultural denial and ideological confusion" (Hesse, 1997, para. 20). McLaren (1989) adds:

> Neoconservatives choose to ignore or misinterpret recent research which indicates that one of the greatest determinants of academic success is parental income....The myth of equal opportunity therefore masks an ugly truth: the educational system is really a loaded social lottery, in which each student gets as many chances as his parents have dollars. (pp. 223-224)

Cutting deeper, Ohanian (1999) criticizes corporate America for insensitivity to social and economic issues that plague society. Chastising corporate America, Ohanian states:

> It is morally bankrupt to cooperate with politicians and corporate CEOs in preaching 'world-class standards' while burying the real problems of political malfeasance, corporate greed, and the shocking number of children living in poverty under a cloud of semantic obfuscation. (p. 39)

Ignoring the plight of the disadvantaged, the current school reform movement seems to indicate that higher standards will produce better skilled workers since all students have equal opportunities for achieving educational excellence. Extending the debate, I could propose that arbitrarily enforcing zero tolerance policies will automatically make schools safer. When such ludicrous statements are accepted as fact they reflect both ignorance and insensitivity.

Noddings (1992), in The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education, frames an ethics of care that requires an understanding of the historical, social and political situatedness of education. Renewed efforts to develop methodology and curriculum connected to the lives of students and teachers can disrupt the antiquated factory model. Critiquing the tendency of schools to remain embedded in standardized testing and to believe that a technocratic approach will improve education, Noddings argues that present school reform efforts present little hope for revitalizing education.

Without addressing the multiple realities and multiple voices of students, education fails to meet students' needs and lacks an ethics of care. These efforts require more than implementing a new curriculum or requiring graduation tests in order to receive a high school diploma; they require an alteration and a reconceptualization of the way education is fundamentally conceived (Noddings, 1992). Within these parameters of change, the dependence on quantitatively assessing educational goals becomes problematic and continues the cycle of blaming the victim. "While a steady public drumbeat calls us to connect education with competition and individual success, schooling seems ever more remote from what John Dewey called 'the making of a world' that is democratic" (Hesse, 1997, para.20).

Connecting School Violence Prevention and School Reform

Working to more fully understand the public discourse shift to the ideological Right within current educational trends, and "how this discourse shift supports a new authoritarianism and a sustained attack on both the welfare state and the foundations of democratic leadership and life," Purpel and Shapiro (1995), in Beyond Liberation and Excellence: Reconstructing the Public Discourse on Education, reposition the debate (p. xi). Giroux commends Purpel and Shapiro's concern for linking educational reform with concrete strategies for addressing the "new pluralism" of public education. Understanding that the "politics of educational reform becomes part of a politics of pragmatic possibility attentive to both the reduction of injustices and suffering and the need for new alliances," Giroux comments that Purpel and Shapiro's insights produce "a new politics of connectedness in which the production of knowledge, social identities,

and social relations incorporates as a defining principle such categories as justice, equality, struggle, and democracy" (Giroux, 1995, p. *xi*). Purpel and Shapiro (1995) note the need for reconceptualizing discipline within our current political climate:

> Our agenda for education must affirm the validity and, indeed, the dire necessity of discipline as a way of being human in the world. The Left's inability to incorporate the importance of human discipline into their educational project has allowed the Right to monopolize an issue of enormous public concern. Yet, our condition as a national and international community cries out for an alternative, socially sensitive, humanly transformative notion of discipline, not the rejection of discipline among the young as an educational goal, but its redefinition. (p. 193)

Purpel and Shapiro rebuke discipline as a practice "concerned with unreflective and unthinking obedience toward authority or as a mindless conformity to institutional rules" (p. 193). Education reform initiatives that ignore the role school disciplinary policies and practices play in creating school climates that either support or negate positive human relationships do little to increase educational achievement and may work against such goals.

An ethics of care demands that public schools serve the needs of individuals, not special interest groups. Slatterly (1995) agrees "there is no one program--liberal or conservative--that is ideal for all classrooms and all students. Therefore, the focus of school change must shift from ideologically rigid programming and/or cultural conformity to the recognition of individuals" (para. 12). School reform and school violence prevention efforts both fail to understand the complex nature of schooling, as well as the importance of social, economic, political, cultural and religious factors driving such efforts. As school curriculum becomes more sterile and less apt to consider the desires and needs of students, as teachers become less than "intellectual professionals"

and teach to the tests, as more blame is directed toward students for their intellectual and moral deficiencies, youth culture becomes an easy scapegoat for society's failings. Acknowledging individual differences as well as cultural affiliations provides opportunities for achieving a democratic society.

Although our country has a long and sad history of marginalizing those deemed outside the dominant culture, it is not too late to rethink our position regarding school reform and school violence prevention. If the dominant culture shapes the classroom environment and perpetuates racism, sexism, and class elitism within the system, then public schools must be places that offer a counter-hegemonic to such oppressions. Henry Giroux (1981, 1983, 1996, 1997) explains that public education offers the possibility for democratic practices but is mired in reproducing social, racial, gender and class inequities. Multicultural education, informed by critical self-consciousness or Freire's (1998) concept *conscientization,* provides a means to expose existing mythologies, especially those pertaining to oppression. Known for her "passion for pluralism," Maxine Greene (1988) in The Dialectic of Freedom describes the "need for 'wide-awakeness' with the hunger for community, the desire to know with the wish to understand, the desire to feel with the passion to see" (p. 23). As we embrace the Twenty-First Century it is time to acknowledge our pluralism and to work toward educational practices that address ethnic, racial, class and gender inequities. Care, commitment and concern for all students must be the cornerstone of school reform and violence prevention practices.

Embracing the wisdom of noted scholars provides fertile ground for establishing policies for school renewal that are compatible with a democratic agenda. Sadly, the

current climate embedded in an ethos of competition, capitalism and oppression appear to be fueling school reform practices. Slatterly (1995) reminds us "change will only occur in an environment that transcends ideological polarization and instead promotes an integrated vision that respects all persons and philosophies... [He] envisions a milieu wherein innovative, progressive and ethical school change is possible and vital" (para.19). Optimism for a re-imagined future for American schools is necessary. Slatterly however warns, "Hatred runs deep in the United States, perhaps ingrained in the national character. Injustice, terrorism, racism, sexism, homophobia and religious polarization make it necessary for educators to investigate the relationship between ethics and education" (para.15).

Ethical considerations must remain of paramount importance in order to counter political and religious agendas detrimental to the educational process. The current school reform movement that encompasses school violence prevention practices seems to ignore the need for multicultural education and has returned to a back to basics mentality that may deny individual differences. Slatterly (1995) agrees that "education is for naught if these issues are ignored [and] when injustice is not addressed, schooling loses its prophetic edge" (para.18).

Current school reform movements, calling for more standardized tests, including graduation tests, have left many students unprepared to compete. Since "safe" schools are considered "effective" schools, violence prevention tactics are mandatory for the implementation of current school reforms. Such a union produces environments that alienate some students from the school community. Academic, emotional and cultural

antagonisms provide a viable impetus for some students to drop out. Hypothesizing that this marriage is antagonistic to students deemed outside the "norm," I maintain that issues around each become pertinent to a full investigation of student dropout behavior. School reforms coupled with school violence prevention policies that ignore social, economic, religious and psychological factors provide few opportunities for marginalized students to find success. To what extent schools may "push out" students, overtly or covertly, who might otherwise detract from increased test scores or who pose preconceived threats of school violence must not be precluded from the discourse. Dropping out of school may represent one alternative to an otherwise intolerable situation.

Socioeconomic and Racial Implications

Many school violence prevention tactics spawned through school reform efforts appear blind to issues of economic deprivation and racial injustice. These tactics seek simplistic solutions for complex social problems. Henry Giroux (1995) illuminates the problem:

> The war waged against the possibilities of an education wedded to the precepts of a real democracy is not merely ideological. Against the backdrop of reduced funding for public schooling, the call for privatization, vouchers, cultural uniformity, and choice, there is the often-ignored larger social reality of material power and oppression.... Most disturbing about these social problems is that they have a decidedly racial overtone. Nearly half of all Black children live below the poverty line, while the unemployment rate among Black males is nearly double that of their White counterparts. While Black bodies are policed and disciplined in and out of the nation's schools, conservative and liberal educators define education through the ethically limp discourse of achievement, standards, and global competitiveness. (p. *x*)

Ohanian (1999) in <u>One Size Fits Few: The Folly of Educational Standards</u>, comments that "in 1995, a third of all children in the U.S. lived in homes with incomes of less than $25,000 [and] one in five children was in a home with an income below $15,000"

(p.115). The 1999 ERIC Report "By the Numbers: Social and Economic Trends" reveals the percentage of children living below the poverty line in 1996 included 10% of Whites, 40% of Blacks, and 40% of Hispanics. The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics affirms that the poor are getting poorer while the rich are getting richer. The difference between the proportion of children in high-income families and those in extreme poverty was 10 percentage points in 1980 and 16 percentage points in 1996 (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). In addition, the child poverty rate of 20% in the United States is far higher than in countries such as Sweden, Belgium, Denmark and Finland, and the infant mortality rate is the fourth highest of all industrialized countries (Spina, 2000, pp. 6-7). Poverty must not be ignored in a thorough investigation of the underlying causes of school dropouts.

Poverty and Prisons

Socioeconomic factors need to be addressed as we grapple to understand the matrix of issues driving school violence prevention policies and practices and their connection to school dropout behavior. The effect of poverty on the lives of students needs to be considered in conjunction with educational initiatives designed to make schools safer. Understanding the link between poverty, violence and youth culture helps both to re-conceptualize current practices that often blame the victim and to expand our awareness of societal implications.

Being of minority status increases the probability of living in a life of poverty. Moreover, "more than three-quarters of youth newly admitted to state prisons were minorities" (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999, p. 209). California has imprisoned a higher

percentage of its youth than any other state and, over the last 20 years, "450 out of every 100,000 juveniles have been incarcerated" (Spina, 2000, p. 22). "Black and Latino youth are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than Whites [and] one out of three young African American men (ages eighteen to thirty-five) are in prison or on parole" (p. 22). With the largest percentage of its population behind bars than any other country, the United States dramatically increased its prison population between 1980 and 1994. "The number of inmates in state and federal prisons and local jails increased three-fold, from 329,821 to more than 1.8 million, including over 95,000 youths" (Spina, 2000, p. 22). The "war on drugs," closely linked to school violence prevention, has contributed heavily to the increase in youth arrests. "The percentage of inmates serving time for nonviolent drug offenses has more than doubled since the early 1980s, to 61 percent in the federal prisons and 30 percent in the state systems" (p. 23). To what extent these statistics may indicate a political shift to the Right calls for future investigation.

Parental incarceration has devastating effects on children. School personnel are often oblivious to the problems encountered by families facing this hardship. Presently, "more than one in nine school-age children has one or both parents in prison [and] if present policies continue this number will soon reach one out of four" (Spina, 2000, p. 23). The problems will only escalate as women become the fastest-growing segment of the prison population. "Of the 80,000 women now imprisoned, about 70 percent are nonviolent offenders and 75 percent have children" (Spina, 2000, p. 23). The dramatically increased incarceration of women may reflect changing attitudes toward females in our society,

attitudes possibly embedded both within Christian fundamentalist religious attitudes and changing political agendas.

School policies aimed at reducing school violence must take into account the problems faced by children whose parents are incarcerated and begin to understand the culture of violence that permeates many of their lives. Increases in youth crime and the trend to treat their offenses as adult crimes continue to escalate.

State and Federal juvenile justice bills have called for increased prosecution of children as young as 14 in the adult Federal system without judicial review; for easing restrictions on confining children with incarcerated adults; for allowing the death penalty for children as young as 16; and for mandating states to prosecute more children in adult courts (ACLU Press Release, June 3, 1997). "The National Center for Juvenile Justice reports that the number of youth age ten through seventeen who are arrested and incarcerated for violent crimes could more than double by the year 2010 if current rates continue" (Spina, 2000, p. 23). School violence prevention policies that ignore these alarming findings provide scant relief for youth caught in the cycle of poverty and whose futures may include incarceration.

Criminalization of Youth

A look at the history of school violence and the criminalization of youth by Crews and Counts (1997) reveals "juvenile delinquency has existed for as long as juveniles have existed and school disturbances and violence have existed for as long as schools have existed" (p. 23). Adams (2000) asserts that "in every era, American school children, especially teenagers, have been unruly and destructive" (para.2). He explains:

> As late as the 17th century, those 'children' we now call teenagers were considered adults. And preteens swore, drank, had sex and even dueled with guns. If school violence wasn't a problem back then, it's only because few children went to school. (para.2)

Citing this quote does not minimize my concern over school violence but rather puts the issue into a historical perspective. Even though the term "school violence" was coined during the 1960s, fear of crime in schools did not peak until the 1970s and continued to escalate through the 1980s and 1990s. School violence and the criminalization of youth do not occur in a vacuum. Schools mirror society and significant changes in schooling reflect changes in behaviors and attitudes of society (Crews & Counts, 1997). "The United States educational system as a whole may be a cause of school violence" (p. 17).

The criminalization of youth finds support within zero tolerance disciplinary policies. Even though increased criminalization is not working and "a meta-analysis of systematic assessments of 'tough' delinquency programs and institutionalization found that these types of programs, such as 'shock incarceration' and 'scared straight,' have produced higher, not lower, levels of recidivism" (Spina, 2000, p. 24), they continue to be supported by the public. Many youth are now given tougher sentences than adults convicted of the same crime (Spina, 2000). Adams (2000) agrees:

> 'School crime' seems to be an umbrella term denoting that the offenses committed can be punishable by adult criminal standards, which is reflected in the recent trend toward treating juveniles as adult offenders. It suggests greater severity of punishment and an erasing of the modern concept of childhood. (2000, para.5)

Society seems blind to the findings that "get tough policies ignore the fact that the socialization of the prison system, where violence, extortion, and rape are routine, often promotes a career in crime and little else" (Spina, 2000, p. 24). Mark Kappelhoff,

Legislative Counsel for the ACLU's Washington National Office, adds that "it is simply unconscionable to house children with adults in a civilized society [and] we cannot continue to prepare for our children's futures by committing vast sums of money to build shiny new prisons in the shadows of decaying schools" (ACLU Press Release, 1997, para. 2 & 11).

Attitudes toward youthful offenders are mirrored by attitudes toward youth deemed dangerous to schools. Skiba and Peterson (1999c) assert:

> Whether and how to provide services to students who are suspended and expelled may be our next pressing national discussion [since] without such services, school personnel may simply be dumping problem students out on the streets, only to find them later causing increased violence and disruption in the community. (para.27)

Skiba and Peterson describe the problem:

> As we exclude ever higher proportions of children whose behavior does not meet increasingly tough standards, we will inevitably meet many of those disruptive youths on the streets. In choosing control and exclusion to deal with school disruption, even as we refrain from positive interventions, we increase the likelihood that the correctional system will become the primary agency responsible for troubled youths. Ultimately, as we commit to school discipline, we may also need to resign ourselves to increasingly joyless schools, increasingly unsafe streets, and dramatically increasing expenditures for detention centers and prisons. (1999c, para.33)

Zero tolerance policies in public schools find ample support within the mindset of those supporting criminalization of youth and both appear oblivious to the stark realities of students who live in poverty and experience violence. To what extent our own admiration of violence contributes to the problem demands attention. Spina remarks:

> The problems of violence, whether in schools or society, are inseparable from the roots of violence in American society—a cultural icon inextricably linked with history, entertainment, and economics. We admire the vigilante, glorify the gangster, and idolize the gunslinger. Unless we come to grips with our past we cannot understand our present and envision the possibilities for reclaiming our future. (2000, p. 25)

Racism and White Privilege

Racism is a systemic disease that oppresses students, schools, families and society. It is no stranger to public schools and is closely aligned with violence. Although individual and group efforts have had some success combating racism within society, anti-racism projects will not be effective until the institutions that foster and perpetuate racism are dismantled. As Adrienne Rich (1979) explains, one cannot tear down the master's house using the master's tools. Dialogue that honestly interrogates the multiple factors involved in perpetuating racism necessitates understanding and common language (Rich, 1979). Although a thorough analysis of racism and White privilege is beyond the scope of this project, recognizing how each works within public schools to affect current trends informing school violence prevention practices and policies and their effect on school dropout behavior is critical.

Hoover and Spencer (1999) explain racism as a combination of prejudice and power existing in three multiple forms: cultural racism, internalized racism, and institutional racism. In order to more fully understand racism in all its complexity, an analysis of "Whiteness" with its power and privilege intact becomes critical. Kincheloe (1999) raises our awareness of these issues in his article, "The Struggle to Define and Reinvent Whiteness: A Pedagogical Analysis." By viewing race as a social construction, a definition of Whiteness remains embedded within multiple perspectives that can be "invented, lived, analyzed, modified, and discarded" (Kincheloe 1999; para. 10). Kincheloe states:

> Whiteness, thus, is not an unchanging, fixed, biological category impervious to its cultural, economic, political, and psychological context. There are many ways to be White, as Whiteness interacts with class, gender, and a range of other race-related and cultural dynamics. (1999, para.10)

Although Kincheloe concedes that an adequate definition of Whiteness remains elusive, he states "observers agree that it is intimately involved with issues of power and power differences between White and non-White people" (para.1).

> Situationally specific, Whiteness is always shifting, always reinscribing itself around changing meanings of race in the larger society. As with race in general, Whiteness holds material/economic implications--indeed, White supremacy has its financial rewards. (Kincheloe, 1999, para.1)

Hegemony and Ideology Supporting Racism

The dominant group (White, male, heterosexual) maintains societal power and individual privilege through hegemony and ideology. Peter McLaren (1989) explains that the dominant culture is able to exert power over subordinate classes or groups not through the use of force but rather through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites (such as schools). Social practices refer to what people say and do; social forms, like school boards, give legitimacy to social practices; and social structures represent constraints that limit personal freedoms and appear outside of the individual's control. McLaren alerts us to the problem:

> Hegemony is a struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression.... Hegemony is a cultural encasement of meanings, a prison-house of language and ideas, that is 'freely' entered into by both dominators and dominated....Who needs to use force when ideational hegemony works this well? (pp. 173-76)

Ideational hegemony provides a framework for understanding racial identity formation within the realm of White privilege where Black is represented as the polar opposite of

White (Haymes, 1996; Kincheloe, 1999). "The darkness-light, angel-devil discursive binarism (like other discursive constructions) has reproduced itself in the establishment of racial and ethnic categories" (Kincheloe, 1999, para. 12). Within this "discursive binarism," Whiteness becomes defined as everything that Black is not; Whites gain knowledge of themselves as "the racial barometer" by which other groups are measured (1999, para. 12). Such representations affirm the superiority and power of Whiteness over non-Whiteness to the extent that Whites are viewed as rational, productive, and orderly vis-à-vis non-Whites as chaotic, lazy, and primitive (Kincheloe, 1999). Understanding how racial identity formation operates within discursive binarism to establish and maintain White privilege fosters a heightened awareness. However, to assume that this understanding is complete may accentuate racist views we seek to disrupt. Kincheloe (1999) warns of the dangers in essentializing since "to speak of White privilege unproblematically in a pedagogy of Whiteness ignores the reality of diversity in Whiteness" (para. 13).

Although White privilege cannot be denied, some White people are more privileged than others. Recognizing the diversity within the White population "makes sweeping generalizations about them dangerous and highly counterproductive to the goals of a critical pedagogy of Whiteness" (para. 13). Furthermore, Kincheloe recognizes:

> Not only is race an unnatural category, but its cultural boundaries are constantly negotiated and transgressed as individuals engage the forces and discourses that shape them.... Because the meaning of Whiteness in late twentieth century societies is volatile, a pedagogy of Whiteness must walk a Wallinda tightrope between racial essentialism on one side and a liberal color-blindness on the other. Proponents of a critical pedagogy of Whiteness understand that the only antidote to racial essentialism is not a fatuous embrace of racial erasure. (Kincheloe, 1999, para. 16-17)

Remembering that racism is a combination of prejudice and power existing in multiple forms, White privilege provides the power structure to either support or disrupt ideologies that maintain racism. Ideology supports hegemony and works to maintain oppression. McLaren (1989) explains that "hegemony could not do its work without the support of ideology" (p. 176). The term ideology encompasses more than political ideologies of communism, socialism, anarchism, rationalism, or existentialism. It also refers to "the production and representation of ideas, values, and beliefs and the manner in which they are expressed and lived out by both individuals and groups" (1989, p. 176). Ideology reflects what we consider natural and common sense; what we accept as the way things ought to be and never questioned. Furthermore, McLaren asserts "ideological functions which barricade themselves within the realm of commonsense often manage to disguise the grounds of their operations" (p. 178).

Kincheloe (1999) states that "the White privilege of universalizing its characteristics as the 'proper ways to be' has continuously undermined the efforts of non-Whites in a variety of spheres" (para. 3).

> Self-loathing among individual members of minority groups, as they internalize the shibboleths of the White tradition—'I wish my eyes were blue and my hair blond and silky' alienate non-Whites to the point that they sometimes come to live 'outside themselves.' (Kincheloe, 1999, para. 3)

Perpetuating meritocracy as common sense provides opportunities to dismiss racist claims. "Under the ideological guise of arguments such as America must learn to live with inequality, right-wing proponents rally around cries of reverse racism" (Kincheloe, 1999, para. 36). Such responses may be viewed "as basically an insidious effort to reestablish White hegemony" (para. 36). To what extent these views may operate within

public educational realms is concerning. Deconstructing the hegemonic and ideological underpinnings of racism and White privilege within public schools will enhance our efforts to understand the forces driving zero tolerance policies and practices aimed to prevent school violence and to recognize their potential negative influence on school dropout behavior.

Expanding our discussion of White privilege and racism, Mcintosh (1988) reconceptualizes genderism and racism by examining the parallels between male privilege and White privilege. Denial of each reaffirms their power and their need to maintain invisibility. Those who accept unearned privilege experience a state of tension and uncertainty, an incongruity with a fair and just self-image. The myth of meritocracy helps maintain the denial of both White and male privilege and encourages blaming non-Whites and women for their own disadvantaged state. Examining the parallels between male privilege and White privilege within public schools may increase our awareness of issues affecting student dropout behavior.

Understanding the futility of arguing for an oppression hierarchy, all oppressions (racism, sexism, genderism, abelism, ageism, anti-Semitism, classism, and homophobia) must be viewed as inextricably linked. All oppressions share a defined norm supported through economic power, institutional power and cultural norms. Dismantling a single oppression without attempting to dismantle the others limits success and renders it incomplete (Pharr, 1988). Though it is important to tease out the individual components of racism, sexism, classism, and genderism from other oppressions, each is interdependent so that dismantling one topples another. Racism, sexism, classism, gender

bias and other forms of oppression all find support through ideology and hegemony. In this context, hegemony and ideology help support our culture of violence.

Institutional Racism

Institutions that maintain hegemony and ideology, thus helping support our culture of violence, include judicial systems, police, schools, religion, and the military. Since our founding fathers (not mothers) were White, male, and Christian, it is assumed this group has prior claim to the system and all others (women, Blacks, gays and other marginalized groups) must fight for inclusion (Spina, 2000). By blaming the victims for their misfortunes, the system is able to divert attention away from the real culprits (institutional and economic power) and has the power to maintain racist, classist and sexist attitudes that attribute failure to personal shortcomings (Spina, 2000, Hoover & Spencer, 1999). Those individuals who are able to "make it" in the system often turn their backs on others less fortunate. Internal oppression exhibited as horizontal hostility evolves as the once oppressed now side with the oppressor, thus incorporating racist and/or sexist attitudes toward one's own group (Spina, 2000, Hoover & Spencer, 1999). This internalized oppression successfully divides those being oppressed and encourages a lack of cohesion and a desire to align with the oppressor. Blocking solidarity of oppressed groups maintains the status quo and assures that these individuals will remain oppressed. Hegemony and ideology provide fuel for the fire.

Acknowledging racism as well as other oppressive forces within educational institutions, provides greater understanding of forces driving the implementation of policies and practices aimed to prevent violence that may encourage school leaving. The

environmental and socio-economic factors contributing to violence are often rooted in institutional racism that fosters a "free-floating anger" (Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1996, p. 154). Rather than viewing the youth who experience racism on a daily basis as being deficient, the response of violence in this context is "normal and appropriate" (Prothrow-Stith & Quaday, 1996, p. 154). Designing programs that exclusively focus on eliminating violence reflects our drive toward pragmatic solutions. By denying the need to investigate the underlying causes of anger that often precede violence, policymakers assume that stricter school violence prevention policies and practices alone will solve the problem. Finding ways to redirect anger toward more potentially productive actions (by developing an awareness of the cultural context in which anger and violence are spawned and reproduced) provides a framework for new understandings and better-informed practices. Bell provides further insights:

> Too often the status quo is presented and accepted as just the way things are and must be. This presumption of inevitability is a serious obstacle to change. Any effective challenge to this presumption is therefore itself revolutionary: it weakens a key support to the status quo, the assumption that there are no alternatives, hence that present social structures are unchangeable. (1993, p. 66)

Reconceptualizing school violence and the practices and procedures used to secure safe schools may awaken possibilities for overcoming ideological thinking and the hegemony it produces. Such reconceptualizations may also increase our understandings of why students drop out of public school.

Racism and School Dropouts

Issues of racism are closely linked to school dropout behavior. As of 1996 the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) reported that the percentage of those

between 16 and 24 who were not enrolled in school and had not completed high school included 7.3% Whites, 13.0% Blacks and 29.4% Hispanics. "In New York City alone, 66 percent of all students who attend high school fail to graduate" (Spina, 2000, p. 8) This "failing" population represents 80% Latino, 72% African Americans, and 50% Whites (Spina, 2000). As the demographics of Georgia become more diverse barely half the children entering ninth grade earn a regular diploma four years later, giving the state one of the worst high school graduation rates in the nation (Salzer, April 29, 2001, p. 1). As our population becomes more diverse, these numbers continue to rise. Spina asserts:

> Teachers, 'low standards,' and/or lack of discipline are not to blame. Social class (and by extension racial identity) is the greatest predictor of who drops out—or gets 'pushed out' of school. The failure of schools and society to recognize that this behavior is not just reactive but proactive guarantees that these problems will continue... dropping out is not merely the result of alienation but is an assertive rejection of the system and what it represents. (2000, p. 8)

Racism is "the elephant in the room no-one sees" and by ignoring its existence we increase its power.

Denying White Privilege

Kincheloe (1999) attests to the emergence of a White identity crisis and "the anger that accompanies it are manifestations of the growing realization that White power is declining in light of dominant demographic trends" (Kincheloe, 1999, para. 34).

> When power declines, its wielders guard their interests more zealously. Understanding that they will no longer constitute a majority of the U.S. population in the twenty-first century, Whites appreciate the challenges such a reality will present. (Kincheloe, 1999, para. 34)

As the demographics of the United States change, the success of anti-racist projects becomes even more critical. Understanding White privilege and the role it plays in public

schools is crucial to addressing social inequities that may foreclose educational opportunities for some students.

Spina (2000) sees racism as the "weapon of choice" that allows the ruling class to keep the working class divided (p. 9). A "divide and conquer" mentality perpetuates racism by providing the rich "a cheap way (both financially and morally) to continue to possess and control a disproportionate share of the national wealth, [thus letting poor Whites] be distracted from paying attention to how badly they are being discriminated against by the class system" (2000, p. 9), since there is always a group to marginalize. Kincheloe adds:

> Historically, poor Whites have undoubtedly reaped the psychological wages of Whiteness, but talk of White economic privilege in the late twentieth century leaves them with a feeling of puzzlement increasingly expressed as anger.... It is difficult to convince a working class White student of the ubiquity of White privilege when he or she is going to school, accumulating school debts, working at McDonalds for minimum wage, unable to get married because of financial stress, and holds little hope of upward socioeconomic mobility. (1999, para.12-13)

Solidarity is the key for battling the ever-present social injustices embedded within our society and public schools. Debunking the myths, retelling the pasts of all peoples, and working toward sharing power and resources will begin the process of dismantling all types of oppressions. The challenge is great since racism is so deeply internalized that (most) Whites are oblivious to its existence.

Colorblindness

> Not seeing race is predicated on not seeing White as a race...Ignoring racial construction of Whiteness re-inscribes its centrality and reinforces its privileged and oppressive position as normative. Thus, Whiteness becomes a non-race; invisible to those that would seek to analyze race and racism, thereby giving it more power, more privilege, and more impunity. The non-racialization of Whiteness restricts the

> ability of minorities to point out racism and gives the dominant White culture more freedom from criticism in the practice of racism. (Spina, 2000, p. 9)

Pretending to be "color-blind" is another means of marginalization that fuels racism within society and educational practices. Kincheloe (1999) explains "the color blind construct, the new discourse of White victimization and its rhetorical reversal, works only if we assume that being White is no different than being any other race or ethnicity" (para. 30). Denying White privilege means that "dangerous historical memories must be erased in a way that severs the connection between White people's contemporary privileged social location with historical patterns of injustice" (1999, para. 30).

> With such concepts "Whited out" Whites can be represented as the victims of racism just as easily as the National Enquirer can claim that Bill Clinton made love to an alien. Such a socio-historical amnesia allows the Supreme Court to assure us that White racism at the end of the twentieth century is rare, found among a few White supremist organizations and a small number of racist Black militants. (Kincheloe, 1999, para.30)

By acknowledging racism and White privilege, schools and society are better equipped to identify inequities that might go unnoticed. Obstacles for overcoming "colorblindness" and supporting White privilege are supported by the culture of power. Scholar Lisa Delpit (1995) in Other People's Children: Cultural Conflicts in the Classroom identifies five aspects of "the culture of power" that support white privilege within schools and society. The five aspects of power reveal that:

> 1. Issues of power are enacted in the classroom.
> 2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a 'culture of power.'
> 3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
> 4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
> 5. Those with power are frequently least aware of, or least willing to acknowledge, its

> existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (Delpit, 1995, p. 24)

Denying White privilege and the culture of power that accompanies it perpetuates racial inequities. Delpit (1995) recognizes that "we do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs" (p. 46). In order to combat racial inequities within schools and society we must be willing to see ourselves "in the unflattering light of another's angry gaze" and thus challenge our beliefs, empathize with the plights of those less privileged, and begin a dialogue for greater understandings (p. 47). To do otherwise is to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to serious problems that demand attention.

Current trends that encourage Whites to blame immigrants and poor ethnic minorities for economic problems as well as increased school violence, more school dropouts, and failing schools are mean-spirited (Spina, 2000). Such trends divert attention away from economic inequities and racism. Blaming the victims of poverty and racism for their plight reflects callousness often disguised as patriotic fervor and a Darwinian approach to life that encourages "survival of the fittest" as the American way. Opening up a dialogue focused on race as well as poverty provides opportunities to rethink many school violence practices and policies that marginalize students and may encourage them to leave school.

Closely tied to issues of racial and economic politics are religious politics. Joel Spring (1997) asserts "this combination of racial and religious politics had a profound effect on Republican politics regarding schools" (p. 2). Spring asserts:

> The traditional Democratic southern power structure was built around racist policies including the segregation of public schools. Many Whites were alienated from the national Democratic Party because of its support of civil rights and therefore joined the Republican Party. (1997, p. 2)

The "southernization" of the Republican Party spawned well-organized evangelical Christian organizations including the Christian Coalition headed by Ralph Reed and the Moral Majority founded by Jerry Falwell. Ostensibly concerned more with morality than economics, these organizations implore the government to bring their agendas into the forefront of public education. I agree with Joel Spring: "The religious right has launched a crusade to save American education" (1997, p. 2).

Christian Fundamentalism and Public Education

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for redress of grievances. (First Amendment, Constitution of the United States as cited in Spring, 1994, p. 259)

How and for whom the First Amendment guarantees freedom remains contested terrain. Mired by legal battles, interpersonal disputes between individuals, and intrapersonal conflicts within individuals, conflicting interpretations of this amendment have created much chaos. Affected by the social and cultural milieu of the times, the tides have shifted back and forth between liberal and conservative interpretations, leaving many citizens unsure and wary. However, a conservative interpretation appears to be gaining ground.

President George W. Bush's initiative that proposes to give tax dollars to religious organizations provides evidence that the separation of church and state, guaranteed by the

First Amendment, is in jeopardy. "This new Bush initiative represents a faith-based prescription for discrimination," states Laura W. Murphy, director of the ACLU's Washington National Office (ACLU Press Release, Jan. 29, 2001, para. 2). Employment discrimination protection would be eroded. Since religious organizations are exempt from many civil rights laws, there are no restrictions on how religious organizations might incorporate their religious doctrine into the delivery of social services (ACLU, Jan. 29, 2001). Democrat Congressman Bobby Scott from Virginia understands that "religion can often bleed into other categories, like gender, sexual orientation and race [and] if you can discriminate on religious grounds, it doesn't take much imagination to discriminate in other ways" (ACLU Press, 2001, para. 7). It is unclear to what extent public schools may be affected by the Bush plan. However, it appears that what might have been considered religious extremism is becoming mainstream. Opportunities for increased discrimination based on race, religion, gender and sexual orientation may soon have a foot in the door.

Regardless of current political alignments taken by policymakers, the public schools maintain a consistently conservative position, even though the media often paint teacher union members as liberals. Larry Cuban (1993), in How Teachers Taught: Constancy and Change in American Classrooms 1890-1990, provides insights:

> The occupational ethos of teaching breeds conservatism, that is, a preference for stability and a cautious attitude toward change. This conservatism is anchored in the very practice of teaching, in the people who enter the profession, in how they are informally socialized, and in the school culture of which teaching itself is a primary ingredient. (p. 18)

My personal experiences as both teacher and school counselor in public schools in southeastern Georgia confirm the trend by many school personnel to bring Christian

religion back into the classroom. An informal survey I conducted among faculty and staff at a local elementary school in 2000 demonstrated that an overwhelming majority support school prayer and the posting of the Ten Commandments in classrooms. The teaching of evolution was not supported, and the most critical issues facing public schools were identified as "the lack of religion" and "discipline." Even though this survey was informal and part of a course project, the results confirmed my own experiences in public schools in Georgia. The extent to which these opinions become practices within the classrooms of individual teachers remains unknown.

My concern over the strong association of fundamental Christianity and public schools in the South does not negate my conviction that some Christian beliefs, such as forgiveness, kindness, and generosity are compatible with the goals of public education. However, when educators assume students are all homogeneous in their beliefs, multicultural agendas that are vital to combating inequities in schools become compromised. As a nation that is moving toward new demographics with a diverse population, the need to be inclusive becomes vital.

Going beyond the issue of the separation of church and state is the growing influence of fundamentalist religious organizations and the policies being formulated within public education. Whether we consider the selection of textbooks, the banning of library books and curriculum topics, the control of information regarding sexuality, the toleration of harassment of those with different sexual orientations, or the influence on school board discipline policies, Christian fundamentalism has infiltrated our school systems.

Defining Christian Fundamentalism

In order to enhance understandings and avoid misinterpretations, the importance of defining terms cannot be underestimated. J.D. van der Vyver's article, "Religious Fundamentalism: Human Rights," contextualizes religious fundamentalism:

> The concept of religious fundamentalism is in the eye of the beholder. What one person regards as legitimate exposition or practice of religious obligations, others perceive as the manifestations of unbecoming extremes. And, of course, 'fundamentalism' can signify different things to different people. (1996, para.1)

Working toward clarification, van der Vyver (1996) asserts that "as commonly understood, fundamentalism is associated with certain trends within a particular religious community" (para. 2). Stereotypical positioning must be avoided since a "precise definition of fundamentalism within these general confines seems impossible" (para. 2). Furthermore, "one can at best single out certain trends in religious thought and practice that signify a tendency toward fundamentalism" (para. 2). Saliba (2000) in "Modernity vs. Fundamentalism" maintains that fundamentalism is "a global response to the modern secularist culture [and it] cannot be ignored or dismissed as an innocuous passing fad" (para.1).

Religious historian Sam Hill (1998) examines how fundamentalism "has brought with it significant disruptions to the traditional religious order and has challenged Southern culture as no other social movement this century" (para. 2). Defining religious fundamentalism in the United States as a form of Evangelical Protestantism comprising about 15 percent membership of that major branch of Christianity, Hill states that fundamentalists are committed to evangelization and the cultivation of personal piety:

> Fundamentalists take their cues from the Bible and its teachings, honoring no other sources and reference points. They have no interest in consulting other authorities or opinions, nor do they entertain any interest in cooperation with other Christian groups. There is only one truth, and only one approved epistemic tool. All others are wrong, whatever they may claim about themselves; they are ultimately deceptive and evil, and doomed to divine condemnation. Compromise is thus a vice, not a virtue, in the moral universe of the fundamentalist. (Hill, 1998, para. 4)

Though all are encouraged to join the "exclusive circle of true-believers, [disregarding that] what makes for a certain theology of inclusion proves to be an incompatible social policy when a democratic vision prevails" (Hill, 1998 para. 21), must not be ignored as these tenets bleed into the public schools. The infiltration of fundamentalist thinking in society and public education presents a formidable challenge to those concerned with social justice. Working to understand to what extent this thinking has affected policies and practices designed to prevent school violence, as well as creating an atmosphere within public schools hostile to some students, becomes part of my analysis.

Although having roots in the South and maintaining a provincial spirit, Christian fundamentalism "has shifted from being an informal, strong cultural hegemony to being a crusade to conquer the region and the nation" (Hill, 1998, para. 23). Hill contends that Southern culture has been supplanted with a more important agenda: believing the "right way" and upholding the doctrines of Christian fundamentalism.

> The old tribalism of Southern life, a product of its history and its heritage, has been dissipated by the recent developments in these central and stalwart denominational organizations. It is being replaced by a new tribalism that represents a coalition of the right-thinking, the correct-minded, and the doctrinally and ethically pure. Briefly stated, the old base on which unity and identity rested that was social-cultural-historical has given way to a new base that is ideological, theological, and ethical. (Hill, 1998, para. 24)

As Christian fundamentalism spreads throughout the nation its influence remains strongly felt in public schools in Georgia. Deconstructing the term "Christian fundamentalism" within the context of public schools reveals interconnections with literal biblical interpretations as well as authoritarian practices and beliefs. Understanding the Christian fundamentalist position and its relation to public education provides both new insights into the strong support given to current school violence prevention policies, and how these policies and practices may compromise high school graduation for some students.

Within this debate it is important not to marginalize Christian fundamentalist culture and thus undermine a commitment to respect diversity and inclusion. The challenge is great.

History of Religion in Public Schools

The history of formal schooling in Europe and America has its roots in religious institutions that promoted teaching students to both study and to proselytize their gospel. "Knowledge was a body of beliefs, facts, procedures, and opinions that largely went unquestioned" (Cuban, 1993, p 15).

From colonial times to the present, religion has sought to play a critical role in the education of children and young adults. Examining historical trends within a social and political context offers some understandings of the current efforts to bring religion back into the classroom. Narrowing the examination to three prominent areas: school prayer; debate over the teaching of evolution; and the Civil Rights Movement provides an initial overview of the role of Christian religion in public schools.

Although the debate regarding the role of religion in public schools has spanned two centuries, the publicity surrounding Madayln Murray O'Hair's case signifies national awareness of the issue. The practice of Bible readings and prayer recitation in public schools made headlines when O'Hair, avowed Atheist, brought suit against the United States government.

> In late 1959, Madayln Murray (O'Hair) entered a son in public schools in Baltimore, Maryland, only to discover that he would be forced to participate in reverential Bible readings and unison prayer. The only 'relief' that the public school system would offer to an Atheist child was that he could sit in the hallway while his peers prayed. She therefore began the legal proceedings which would culminate in the United States Supreme Court decision on school prayer in Murray v. Curlett. (American Atheist, 1998, para.19)

The Supreme Court may have removed school prayer; however, in the 1950s "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance and "in God We Trust" was added to the back of our paper money (Lee, 2000, para.10). Current efforts to bring school prayer back raise serious legal and ethical problems. Looking at the historical roots that inform the secularization of public education offers insights.

The religious wars that continue to tear countries apart merit serious international concern. However, the "Bible Wars" in the United States also have a history of violence and disruption. Even though our country was supposedly founded on the principle of religious freedom, the disputes between Roman Catholics and Protestants regarding the education of children prove otherwise. The Roman Catholic Church fought to have all religious matter in the curriculum removed when the religious instruction their children were being exposed to appeared oppositional to their beliefs. Responding in kind, the Protestants agreed to secularize the schools (American Atheist, 1998). "During the

nineteenth century, then, both Protestants and the Roman Catholics feared the influence of secular education on the faith and morals of the young people, but each, equally, feared the theological supremacy of the other more" (para. 3). Though issues of school prayer appear most controversial, the fight against science education must not be ignored.

The most noted battle between religion and education centered on the teaching of evolution in the public schools. "William Jennings Bryan during the entire decade of the 1920s stumped the country demanding that anti-evolution laws be adopted to protect the nation's public schools from any doctrine which was in conflict with the biblical, Genesis story of creation" (American Atheist, 1998, para. 14). Tennessee and Mississippi agreed with Bryan while Clarence Darrow, fighting more against the religious fanaticism represented by Bryan than for evolution, challenged the position (American Atheist, 1998). Even though the verdict in the trial was "guilty," textbook manufacturers began deleting all mention of evolution while an anti-evolution law was passed immediately in Arkansas (American Atheist, 1998). Other states soon followed.

> By 1933 the books of the nation were not alone evolution-free, they were almost science-free. The word 'evolution' was not even seen in the indices. A poll in the 1940s revealed that one-third of the teachers of our nation feared to be identified with evolution or real science. Schools began to focus on the excellence of their drill teams, teachers cowered, refusing to lose tenure; parents did not monitor their children's education, refusing to become involved. And, our nation sank into scientific ignorance. (para. 15)

Science education did not get relief until 1957 when the U.S.S.R. launched Sputnik into space. "Biological science organizations woke up, looked at textbooks, and demanded upgrading. What little science we have in our schools today, we owe to the U.S.S.R." (American Atheist, 1998, para. 16).

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, besides having a significant effect on Black education, had a profound effect on White Southern Christian fundamentalism. Joel W. Martin (1998), writing for The Journal of Southern Religion, suggests that "along with other significant spiritual and social factors feeding the new fundamentalism, the Civil Rights Movement helped create the conditions in which it could flourish" (para. 7). By offering "White Southerners authoritative readings of the Bible, affirmative statements about the power of Christian belief, and vigorous assertions of 'traditional' moral principles, fundamentalism's confident claim to truth and certainty reassured seekers living in confusing times" (para. 14). Longing to restore their self-image as a people of moral courage, White Southerners found a way to restore their dignity by embracing Christian fundamentalism. Martin contends:

> Fundamentalism further appealed to White Southerners by appropriating the rhetoric and tactics of the civil rights movement itself. As Elvis appropriated Black music, fundamentalism encouraged Whites to think of themselves as the true heirs of King! Engaging in acts of civil disobedience in answer to the higher law, Whites opposed abortion, promoted school prayer, and nailed the Ten Commandments to the walls of courtrooms. (1998, para. 14)

Southern Christian fundamentalists' opposition to the integration of public schools appears impotent compared to the surge in both solidarity and political awareness the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement provided (Martin, 1998).

> They expanded the network of 'Christian' schools and embraced home schooling, opened 'Christian' bookstores and a host of other 'Christian' businesses. Such trumpeting would have appeared self-righteous, silly, or redundant in an earlier age. In the post-modern South, it enacted a contradiction: professing faith publicly, these signs revealed skepticism about the culture at large. The South used to be Zion; now it is just another section of the fallen world that threatens the true believers. It must be avoided or conquered. (para. 15)

Today the clout of Christian fundamentalists regarding a variety of policies and practices within public schools cannot be denied. Current efforts by Christian fundamentalist organizations to exercise pressure on school boards to bring Bible study into the classroom is detailed by evangelist Bob Simonds:

> Our current efforts will be greatly expanded. Getting the Bible curriculum in all 30,000 high schools (now in 300); and also our 'Christian/American Culture' course in all high schools are priorities....God seems to be expanding our borders of operation. (1998b, para. 22)

To what extent these courses are already in place locally needs further investigation. However, the impact of Christian fundamentalist thinking within public schools cannot be denied. The current climate within public schools appears to be returning to the past.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Christian Fundamentalism

According to Altemeyer (1988), Christian fundamentalism is highly correlated with right-wing authoritarianism and as such, becomes a dangerous threat to freedom. In Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Altemeyer explains that right-wing authoritarianism represents an orientation rather than a set of acts and "the mood of a populace can create a climate of public opinion that promotes totalitarian movements" (Altemeyer, 1988, p. 3). Furthermore, "right-wing authoritarians are predisposed to control the behavior of others through punishment: they advocate physical punishment in childhood and beyond; they deplore leniency in the courts and believe penal reform just encourages criminals to continue being lawless; [and] they are strong advocates of capital punishment" (1988, p. 5). The support of zero tolerance practices and policies may be viewed as an extension of right-wing authoritarianism; indeed "whether such policies work or how they affect the lives of students may be less important than

providing harsh punishment for offenders as a form of generalized retribution for a generalized evil" (Skiba & Peterson, 1999c, para. 30). Skiba and Peterson explain:

> Indeed, the popularity of zero tolerance may have less to do with its actual effects than with the image it portrays. Writing in the Harvard Educational Review, Pedro Noguera argues that the primary function of harsh punishment is not to change the behavior of the recipient, but to reassert the power of authority. Seemingly random violence poses a profound threat to schools and to the authority of those who administer those schools. In the face of an apparent inability to influence violence in schools, harsh measures are intended to send a message that the administration is still in charge. Whether it is effectively received or actually changes student behavior may be less important than the reassurance that sending it provides to administrators, teachers, and parents. (Skiba & Peterson, 1999c, para. 28)

How these predispositions affect school violence prevention practices and policies that may contribute to decisions to leave school helps demystify their support. Besides the enforcement of zero tolerance disciplinary policies, many schools in southeastern Georgia continue to support corporal punishment.

Although corporal punishment in schools is "forbidden in Europe, England, Japan, Puerto Rico, the nations of the former USSR, Canada, and other countries, it is still legal in almost half of the United States, especially Southern states" (Spina, 2000, p. 230). At home or at school, corporal punishment is staunchly supported by "Anglo-American Protestants proffering theological and moral justifications for inflicting pain on children" (2000, p. 239). The connection between corporal punishment and child abuse remains blurred, yet the reality that more minority and poor White children receive "lickings" than do White middle-class children is easily documented. Finding kinship with Christian fundamentalists, those supporting corporal punishment in public schools seek "an Old Testament harshness" in their approach to controlling student behavior (Altemeyer, 1988, p. 5). Such sentiments help explain support for zero tolerance policies as well as an

overwhelming agreement that the biggest problem facing American schools is lack of discipline. Skiba and Peterson (1999c) agree that zero tolerance policies with their "indiscriminate use of force without regard for its effects is the hallmark of authoritarianism, incompatible with democracy" (para. 32). The potential connection to school dropout behavior expands the concerns.

Altemeyer (1988) understands that "the right-wing authoritarian generally believes in God's law [and] thinks that the biggest reason there is so much conflict among humankind is that people are ignoring this law" (p. 5). By extension, the reason for school violence is the lack of religion in public schools and the need to recognize "God's law" within these institutions. Dan Lee (2000) examines the popular contention that school violence and other social dysfunctions including juvenile delinquency, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, crime, and divorce all increased as a result of the United States Supreme Court decision to remove prayer and Bible recitations from public schools. Using public records, Lee (2000) analyzes the findings of critics who often cite the early 1960s as the turning point in American culture that "kicked God out of our schools" and weakened our collective morality. Lee asserts that crime rates in the United States registered a new all-time high in 1959, some 69% higher than a decade earlier, and that ironically was accompanied by a 25% increase in total church membership from 1950-1959. Concerns about youth violence also pre-date the removal of school prayer from classrooms: "The United States adjudicated 200,000 juvenile delinquents in 1940, which increased to 280,000 by 1950 and swelled to 700,000 by 1958" (Lee, 2000, par 15). Although "crime scares are often generated by crime statistics that are very questionable and often

distorted by the media" (Crews & Counts, 1997, p. 89), the forces clamoring to bring religion back to the schoolhouse must gain an historical perspective on the issues. Spina (2000), in "Revisualizing Responses to Violence in Schools," remarks:

> In the name of violence prevention, students have been required to...participate in a daily 'meditation' (often a euphemism for prayer) time...[and schools have attempted] to post the Ten Commandments...Despite the wisdom contained in the commandments, the Judeo-Christian tradition has never been known to prevent violence.... Despite injunctions against adultery, stealing, and killing, for example, many of these crimes have been committed in the name of God throughout history in wars instigated by 'religious' fervor and greed. (p. 231)

Blaming school violence on the lack of religious involvement, a code for Christian involvement, ignores the hidden context of violence. The connection between right-wing authoritarianism and Christian fundamentalism provides fertile ground for decontextualizing the way discrimination and exclusion are embedded within their philosophies. Altemeyer (1988) explains that "within each religion, authoritarians tend to be 'fundamentalists,' wishing to maintain beliefs, teachings, and services in their traditional form and resisting change and 'liberalization'" (p. 6). Furthermore, Altemeyer contends "authoritarians reject the idea that people should develop their own ideas of what is moral and immoral, since this has already been determined by authorities" (p. 6). School workers who share these fundamentalist views must find it difficult, if not impossible, to leave their personal ideologies at home though they are in disagreement with many of the tenets of social justice and legal restrictions separating church and state.

Freedom of choice is a cornerstone of democracy, yet right-wing Christian fundamentalists deny the right of the individual to decide moral issues. Right-wing authoritarians, and by association Christian fundamentalists, reject the proposition that

social customs are arbitrary, believing instead that alternative ways of doing things are wrong. Besides limiting freedoms around ethical and moral issues, a collapse of individual freedom related to gender becomes clear as "authoritarians endorse the traditional family structure in which women are subservient to their husbands" (Altemeyer, 1988, p. 6). The hope that all female students, including pregnant female students, will be given equal access to educational opportunities remains doubtful.

Right-wing authoritarians are not necessarily conservatives, implicit in conservatism is the desire to preserve the status quo, to maintain social stability, and to preserve tradition (Altemeyer, 1988). On the other hand, authoritarians are individuals who are highly submissive to established authority while being highly aggressive toward sanctioned targets. Students whose behavior is deemed to be outside the norm become primary targets. Within public schools these attitudes may prove detrimental to students from differing cultural backgrounds, differing religious beliefs, or differing sexual orientations.

I agree with Altemeyer that "the struggle to understand right-wing authoritarianism has failed as surely as our society has failed to control authoritarian influences on our lives" (1988, p. xvii). Although the search began with Adorno (1950) and the publication of The Authoritarian Personality that identified a pre-fascist personality, it appears that a vast potential for the acceptance of right-wing totalitarian rule in countries like the United States and Canada exists. The danger of these beliefs being transmitted to students throughout the land by public schools that profess neutrality, yet through their policies and practices uphold beliefs inconsistent with a democratic agenda, creates an imminent

crisis. We will either be a nation bent on inclusivity or a nation narrowly defined by those who profess to know more about us than we know about ourselves. As adults we have some choice; as students we may easily become victims of oppression.

Secular Humanism as the Antichrist

One's view of the world relies on complex interconnections that are ingrained within the family and community and are nurtured through socio-cultural experiences. Worldviews consistent with Christian fundamentalism contradict several principles pertinent to public education and social justice. Encouraging students to believe they have the power to make decisions that affect their lives and that a positive self-concept is integral to their success, public education, embracing what some Christian fundamentalists call secular humanism, works toward "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1968). Within this orientation schooling concerns itself with personal fulfillment and provides a context in which individuals' unique identities are developed (Maslow, 1968, Pinar et al, 1995). Christian fundamentalists "hold to a literal interpretation of the Bible" and [sic] a belief that man is inherently a sinner requiring redemption (Marzano, 1993/94, p. 10). Denouncing current educational efforts to link a positive self-concept and freedom of choice with improvements in educational attainment, Jay Adams, the Christian fundamentalist author of The Biblical View of Self-Esteem, Self-Love, and Self-Image, explains:

> One wonders how many years people will be led astray, led away from discipleship for Christ, which requires losing their 'selves,' because they were told 'feel good about yourself' rather than being told that there is a criminal inside who needs to be put to death daily. (Adams, 1986, as cited in Marzano, 1993/94, p. 10)

Some Christian fundamentalists evolve into "ultra-fundamentalists [who] believe that their worldview should be the dominant one in American culture [and are] intent on stopping the spread of other, contrary worldviews" (Marzano, 1993/94, p. 9). Their means of "fixing" both schools and society is to bring fundamentalist Christian religion back into public education.

Christian fundamentalists assert that promoting religion in public schools may be the antidote for moral corruption and the inspiration for re-establishing family values. Armed with the power of religious authority, the religious Right (bolstered by organizations such as Citizens for Excellence in Education) presents a serious threat to freedom and equality while influencing educators to re-frame established educational practices and policies. Gaining power through school board elections and thus increasing their political clout, the religious Right wishes to replace current public school curriculum with a more "Christian-friendly" curriculum.

Steve Simonds, president and founder of Citizens for Excellence in Education and author of "How to Elect Christians to Public Office," warns: "Get organized for battle. This is a spiritual battle" (Marzano, 1993/94, p. 8; Simonds, 1998b, NACE/CEE Website). Eric Buehrer, past executive vice president of Citizens for Excellence in Education, contends that "Christian parents need to teach their children to arm themselves against the presence of demons on school campuses" (Buehrer, 1990, as cited in Marzano, 1993/94, p. 8). Simonds (1998a) agrees:

> God has given CEE incredible victories in our efforts to save our Christian children in public schools—and thereby guiding CEE to save America's public schools from atheism, homosexuality, the occult, drugs, children having children, abortion, brainwashing and crippling psychology. (para. 5)

Some fundamentalists feel it is too late to redeem the public schools, instead they call for a mass exodus by the faithful. Organizations such as Exodus 2000, Rescue 2010, and the Separation of School and State Alliance are urging parents to embrace home- or church-school. Koerner, writing for U.S. News & World Reports, states:

> The movement evolved out of efforts in the 1980's and early '90s to elect fundamentalist Christians to local school boards....over the last two decades around 37,000 members of Rescue 2010 ran for school-controlling public offices where they could shape policy. (2000, p. 54)

Although objections to public schools center on the absence of prayer and the inclusion of sex education, those condemning many of the current policies and programs fully support stricter discipline and a "back to basics" mentality that would remove art, music and drama from the curriculum.

Though constitutionally banned, the marriage between religion and public schools has not been annulled. One cannot deny a crisis now exists. Whether public schools are able to separate theocracy from democracy remains debatable. Slatterly (1995) in "Understanding Political-Religious Resistance and Pressure, [agrees that] in the United States, the highly charged conservative political-religious atmosphere has polarized communities and terrorized educators" and finds that "this atmosphere is characterized by an intimate relationship between the radical political right and fundamentalist religious groups, and by the political left's antagonism toward these religious alliances and resistance to theological sensibilities" (p. 266).

One must acknowledge that antagonisms exist on both sides and that the conflict embeds itself not only in opposing worldviews, but also in the difficulty of understanding the "Other." Marzano (1993/94), in "When Two Worldviews Collide," explains the

dilemmas faced both by those who adhere to the goals of public education and those who think the public schools are conspiring to promote anti-Christian beliefs. Viewed as the embodiment of secular humanism and a religion unto itself, some Christian fundamentalists believe public schools embody the "antichrist." Pat Steveson, a televangelist and mouthpiece for the Christian Coalition, asserts "the humanism that is being taught in our schools, media, and intellectual circles will ultimately lead people to the Antichrist, because he will be the consummate figure of humanism" (Steveson,1989, as cited in Marzano, 1993/94, p. 8). Understanding that no ideology is value free, the debate continues to rage over how much control religious groups should have over public educational policies.

Alan Singer (2000), in a recent article in Phi Delta Kappan entitled "Separation of Church and State Protects Both Secular And Religious Worlds," warns us of the dangers of expanding the role of religion in public education and states:

> These positions threaten long-established American legal precedents that protect religious freedom; they can be used to justify government aid to religious schools; they provide ammunition to groups that wish to restrict human sexual and reproductive freedom; and they undermine efforts to promote respect for cultural diversity and for the rights of homosexuals. (para. 23)

The desire by some Christian fundamentalists to control curriculum and school policies and the trepidation of educators not to aggravate already hostile factions beg the question of religion's place in our American educational system. Greater sensitivity to multicultural issues, especially those connected to religious freedom, would alert public school workers to hidden agendas that have the potential to undermine democratic goals within the educational process. Heightening awareness begins with self-reflection and

empathy as well as availability of information pertinent to understanding the effects that Christian fundamentalism may have on policies and practices within public schools.

Psychology and Culture

> The popular belief that time (history) and science are steadily advancing in a continuum of *progress* contributes to our reluctance to recognize the road not taken, and our deliberate resolve to deny its existence. As a result of this commitment to 'progress'—to the future—the impetus for scientific and therefore, psychological efforts became not simply to understand the nature of a phenomenon, but to predict its behavior. History is replaced with futurity. (Spina, 2000, p. 183)

The efforts of researchers, educators and other social science workers to identify the traits of a student predisposed to violence or at-risk of dropping out of school have become commonplace. In an attempt to make meaning of senseless school shootings, psychologists are often employed to find the cause and to identify the potential student violators (Brier, 1995, Farrington, 1991). Lists of warning signs have been published by many organizations and individuals, including the Summary Report of the American Psychological Association on Violence and Youth (1993); U.S. Department of Education's Early Warning—Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools (Dwyer, Osher & Warger, 1998), and "Creating Safety: Identifying and Helping the Potentially Dangerous Student" (Divinyi, 1999). Although useful information may be garnered from these and other publications, the attempt to categorize students is alarming. Spina (2000) notes that "the National School Safety Center in California provided a list of warning signs [for potentially violent students] which included mood swings, a preference for violent television, use of drugs or alcohol, frequent use of bad language and cursing, depression, antisocial behavior, and a fondness for guns and blowing things up" (p. 178). To what extent these traits describe typical adolescents in crisis, as well as potential

school dropouts, is interesting but extremely problematic. Spina (2000) understands that "profiling based on race is likely to be curtailed by public pressure... [but] profiling [students] for criminal tendencies [and for being at-risk for dropping out of school] ... is becoming increasingly common" (p. 178). Psychology's tendency to "focus on behavior as if it were independent of its socio-historical context is, in large part, a result of its adoption of the scientific model and its partnership with hegemony" (Spina, 2000 p. 179; Milgram, 1963).

Sandra Harding's book Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? provides opportunities to reframe our thinking about science and knowledge and the means to begin from the lives of those marginalized by society (1991). Harding critically examines the role of science within society and the contention that knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, is socially constructed (Kuhn, 1962) and the product of historically situated views on gender, race, class and politics. Assuming objectivity and value neutrality science hides behind a shroud of disguises, while the mindset devising the research focus and methodology is predominately White, middle class, heterosexual and male (Harding, 1986, 1987, 1991; Fox Keller, 1985; Reed, 1978). The knowledge derived from this research cannot be objective or value-free, but rather remains embedded historically, socially and politically in the lives of those in power (Harding, 1986; Haraway 1991; Fox Keller, 1985). By acknowledging that those who practice science are not immune from these same forces, opportunities to support a liberatory agenda for seeking less false assumptions has the potential to revitalize science.

To more fully understand the connection between school violence and dropping out of school, we must dissect many of the tenets associated with child and adolescent psychology as well as the emergence of the concept of adolescence itself. Many of the models (e.g., Piaget, Kohlberg) used to determine "normal" child and adolescent development are based on White, male, middle- and upper-class samples, but are universally applied (Spina, 2000, p. 189). By creating diagnostic categories we depersonalize the other while normalizing our attitudes and behaviors toward these students. "Low income, darker skin, and language differences become synonymous not only with impaired social judgment and poor academic achievement due to 'limited intelligence,' but also pathology, deviance, and blame" (Spina, 2000, p.190).

Closely linked to psychology is the tremendous concern being expressed over youth culture. Fashion statements including body piercing and tattoos; video games and films that glorify violent acts; music that includes sexually explicit lyrics and encourages defiance of the law have all been blamed for school violence as well as other "anti-social" behaviors attributed to adolescents. "Blamed for drug use, exploding crime rates, teenage pregnancy, spiraling cigarette addiction, and a host of other social and economic problems, youth are repeatedly scapegoated by politicians, the dominant media, and numerous liberal and conservative intellectuals" (Giroux, 2000, p. 93). Rather than critically examining and trying to understand popular culture as statements about the ways youth view themselves and a society that finds them distasteful and dangerous, adults call for more censorship and harsher penalties for those who cross the boundaries of "acceptable" behavior.

By understanding culture as "the medium of public discourse and social practice through which children fashion their individual and collective identities and learn, in part, how to narrate themselves in relation to others" (Giroux, 2000, p. 93), society would open up new possibilities for understandings and empathy. Instead many youth are "warehoused in educational institutions where rigid discipline and defunct knowledge are coupled with a cultural addiction to excessive individualism, competiveness, and Victorian moralism" (Giroux, 2000, p. 95). Within a critical analysis of the factors affecting attitudes toward school violence and the decision by students to abandon the public schools popular youth culture must not be ignored.

Critical theorists Shirley Steinberg and Joe Kincheloe (1998) in their article "Privileged and Getting Away With It: The Cultural Studies of White, Middle-Class Youth," contend that "young people live in a new world [and] the world of hyperreality shapes and reflects youth's subjectivity in ways that could not have been imagined fifty years ago" (p.1). By critically analyzing popular youth culture, including popular youth icons that are celebrated within the media, a better understanding of adolescent subjectivities may emerge. Rather than marginalizing and/or ignoring popular youth culture, perhaps public schools should engage in critical studies that provide opportunities for adults and youth to gain a better understanding of how and why the media has the power to mold youth subjectivities. Embedded within such a critique would be an acknowledgement and analysis of power.

Power, according to Steinberg and Kincheloe (1998), emanates from sources other than Whiteness. They recommend "expanding the study of privilege beyond Whiteness to

other axes of power such as patriarchy, class elitism, religion, and geographic place, to name only a few" (p. 127). By understanding power and its relation to the formation of subjectivity through expanding the role of privilege beyond Whiteness and searching for interconnections to other power structures within culture and society, valuable insights are possible (Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1998). Since the majority of school shootings have been committed by White middle-class males, the need to investigate the role of White privilege and power as well as other axes of privilege and power within the discourse informing school violence prevention is critical. I contend that such studies have the potential to provide valuable insights informing the contemporary discourse on school violence; school violence prevention polices and practices; and school dropout behavior.

Conclusion

By critically analyzing social, economic, political, religious, cultural and psychological factors informing a critical discourse framing school violence prevention policies and practices in schools and society, a greater awareness of the complexity and interconnectedness of the problem emerges. Besides working to increase understandings as to why these policies have been formulated and enforced, this framework sensitizes us to the lived experiences of some high school students who find the context of schools embracing zero tolerance impossible to negotiate. By seeking to comprehend the perceptions of high school dropouts regarding school violence prevention policies and practices and to evaluate the extent to which these policies and practices and the climate

they created either overtly or covertly contributed to their dropout decision, valuable information that supports an agenda of social justice may become available.

The discussion of factors informing school violence prevention policies and practices and the effects these may have on creating a climate antagonistic to some students thus encouraging dropout behavior, always remains incomplete. One must remain alert to the need to be tentative and to acknowledge that other factors not yet conceived may contribute to the problem. In addition, caution in regard to dualistic thinking that fosters a good versus bad or right versus wrong position and thus (may) limit a transformative agenda to further promote social justice remains imperative. Within a rigorous academic research project assumptions must remain guarded and possible hypotheses amenable to revision. Being receptive to unforeseen factors, aware of personal biases, and open to possible misinterpretations provide a safety net for more honest research efforts. The theoretical framework will pave the road toward these goals.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Those who would separate politics from morals must fail to understand both.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Critical and feminist theories provide the necessary framework for uncovering (partial) truths and grappling with (mis)understandings that might otherwise go unnoticed. Kenneth Sirotnik (1991) adds, "To be *critical* an inquiry must ...challenge directly underlying human interests and ideologies. ...It is based upon a commitment to *social justice*—to the ideals of justice as *fairness*" (p. 245).

Ethics cannot be ignored within our inquiry process. Sirotnik contends that "what is Good is precisely the question" (p. 254). As I examine the effects of school policies informing disciplinary practices and procedures of zero tolerance, Sirotnik reminds me that "regardless of relative conceptions of goodness from Plato to Hitler to Habermas, we are not without a contemporary consensus of values, historically grounded, that rise above the special interests of individuals and groups" (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 254). Ethical considerations intertwine within the goals of social justice and remain at the core of critical and feminist inquiries. Since "human inquiry is of consequence to human beings, justice is at the core of our inquiries as well" (p. 254).

I concur with Sirotnik (1991), who states that "the generic questions to be asked at every opportunity are: Is this the way we want things to be? And what are we going to do about it?" (p. 254). As an educator things are not the way I think they should be and I am committed to do something about them. I do not presume that I will find all the answers

but perhaps, I can alert policymakers to problematics existing within current school prevention policies and practices within public schools. I fully understand that "critical inquiry never really ends [and that] it is the process of organizational renewal itself" (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 252).

Problemization

Understanding why we believe the way we do and how those beliefs affect our actions requires a social, political, historical, cultural, and even psychological analysis that may leave us still unsure. Asking why school violence prevention policies and practices that may be potentially destructive to the educational process and at odds with achieving social justice are being so wholeheartedly embraced by society demands attention. In order to address the question I must begin an archeological dig that allows me to go beyond how schools represent themselves, to underlying assumptions about science, students, and society that are embedded within issues of race, class, religion, culture, politics and gender.

Freire and other critical theorists speak of problemization as the antithesis of "problem-solving." Experts determined to stop school violence have taken a problem-solving approach (supported by scientific research findings) that distances them from the lived experiences of students and reduces the problem to difficulties that are amenable to stricter discipline and more control within school. Emeral A. Crosby (1999), principal of Pershing High School in Detroit, Michigan laments:

> In the face of this multitude of problems, those in authority react with stricter punishments, armed hallway guards, metal detectors, and forms of repression meant to stem the tide. The rules become more mechanical, rigid, and impersonal. The students

> are known by their I.D. numbers and the personalities of teachers are effaced by the need to maintain order at great cost to everyone in the school. (Crosby, 1999, para. 30)

In order to better understand school violence, school policy makers would be advised to problematize school violence and to engage in conversations that generate a critical consciousness capable of uncovering oppressive social forces operating within schools and society. Thus, all previous assumptions about the problem remain questionable; previously thought "problems" may be the wrong ones to be addressed; and "solutions" appear equally shortsighted. Stricter discipline; enforced dress codes; use of metal detectors; and zero tolerance for "weapons and drugs" may not prove to be the solutions to the problems of school violence since the questions being asked are not the ones that need to be asked. We need to look beyond what is represented as causes of school violence in order to uncover factors that encourage students' internalized and externalized anger. By uncovering the causes for students' sense of hopelessness and alienation from the school culture and society we provide opportunities for improving public education. In addition, we need to rethink present assumptions about high school dropouts and to investigate why current school violence prevention practices and procedures remain intact, despite their often detrimental effect on students and school climate.

Positivism and Truth

An additional fundamentalism within the present ideology (as opposed to theory) driving school discipline procedures is a belief in truth as the guiding principle in deciding moral and ethical considerations. Those who proclaim to know the truth become deaf and blind to other truths. Asking "whose truth" and "who benefits" helps

dis-empower hegemony and reveals ideological underpinnings (Apple, 1979). By discounting the truths of others--those marginalized by the dominant culture--oppression gains a foothold and ways of overcoming oppression become immobilized. Embedded within this philosophy is "a 'scientized' position or embrace of positivistic objectivity and determinism [that] continues to dominate U.S. rhetoric and policy on violence, as exemplified in the popularity of 'tough' deterrents (i.e., punishment) which promote solutions they cannot and do not deliver" (Spina, 2000, p. 26). The mindset that drives current school violence prevention tactics appears to derive its authority from positivism.

Positivism claims objectivity and relies on scientific inquiry to support its assumptions about truth. School reform efforts and school violence tactics are built on these paradigms and they often refuse to acknowledge other truths. Spina (2000) notes:

> Positivism refers to a paradigm, or belief system, that claims objectivity, truth, and certainty exist in science and that scientific knowledge is irrefutable and universal. Positivists, contrary to more critical thinkers, do not consider science a social construction that reflects a particular ideology....Positivism, by definition, rules out asking questions about domination and agency. (pp. 25-26)

Critical Self-Consciousness

By refuting positivism a counter-hegemonic to oppressive practices within schools becomes available. Freire wrote that whatever truth is being expressed it must consider the well being of humans foremost. By questioning assumptions about truth Freire contends that we can counter oppression by resisting ideological thinking that goes unquestioned. One must remain cautious since denying ideological thinking thus creates a new ideology. Freire (1998) warns us that rather than "putting an end to all ideologies, one might be open to all ideologies" (p. 117). However, such an undertaking requires

"*conscienzation*--or critical self-consciousness as well as a critical awareness of underlying agendas--especially those which serve the capitalistic gains over the needs of all humans" (Freire, 1998, p. 117).

However problematics exist. Purpel and Shapiro (1995) address issues important in confronting ideological thinking:

> If ideology emerges out of interests and benefits, then the role of an education based on critical rationality is severely restricted. If, on the other hand, our dominant values and beliefs emerge out of misunderstanding and misinformation, then we must confront the limitations of critical rationality to change that consciousness. In either case, we must accept the problematics of trying to change very deeply held beliefs and values through rational persuasion. Whether such beliefs are rooted in evil, ignorance or deprivation, we need to address the role of consciousness in the educative process. (pp. 118-119)

McLaren (1989) suggests that "we must take the *experiences* and voices of students themselves as a starting point [and that] we must confirm *and legitimate the knowledge and experiences through which students give meaning to their everyday lives*" (p 235). Questioning with an open-mind and always having the welfare of humans foremost, positions a critical analysis of all ideologies, including my own. Questioning one's own agenda becomes paramount to this discourse since the act of questioning is in itself a type of ideology. Freire explains:

> It is exactly for this reason that I, as a teacher, ought to be aware of the power of ideological discourse, beginning with the discourse that proclaims the death of all ideologies. In truth, I can only put an end to all ideologies by proclaiming a new ideology, even if I am not aware of the ideological nature of my proclamation. (p 117)

Within my research I problematize school violence prevention policies and school dropout behavior, using *conscienzation* to uncover ideologies informing these issues. Within this process I am determined to remain alert to my own ideological tendencies, as

well as to those of my interviewees. Problematizing is a necessary component of research grounded in critical and feminist theories.

Critical Theory

Critical theory provides an opportunity to understand the world through multiple perspectives; to guard against an arrogance that closes possibilities; to remain hungry for achieving social justice; and to look for the sources of power and control that inform our lives. Ideological commonality is enmeshed within educational philosophy and cultural beliefs about the nature of knowledge. It is within these beliefs that we may uncover some of the tensions and hidden relations of power that condemn many current school reform practices to failure. In Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and The Contradictions of Economic Life critical theorists Stephen Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) point out:

> The educational system, perhaps more than any other contemporary social institution, has become the laboratory in which competing solutions to the problems of personal liberation and social equality are tested and the arena in which social struggles are fought out. (p. 5)

By uncovering the "hidden curriculum" within public schools that supports school violence prevention policies and practices the analysis becomes more informative.

The Hidden Curriculum

Critical theory recognizes a hidden curriculum in schools that has been described as "the unexpressed perpetuation of the dominant culture through institutional processes that are covert and insidious, teaching what is assumed to be important by defining standards for the dominant culture" (Wink, 1997, p. 43). Researcher Elizabeth Vallance adds:

> A pervasive hidden curriculum has been discovered in operation. The functions of this hidden curriculum have been variously identified as the inculcation of values, political socialization, training in obedience and docility, the perpetuation of traditional class structure--functions that may be characterized generally as social control. Critics allege that, although this function of social control is not acknowledged openly, it is performed nevertheless, perhaps more effectively than the deliberate teaching of intellectual content and skill, the function in whose name we explicitly justify schooling. (1973/74, p. 590)

Vallance (1980) also describes the hidden curriculum, as "being powerful and elusive, functioning as a reflection of subtle societal forces like attitudes, biases, social rules, and social values that educators may never acknowledge" (1988, p. 466). The hidden curriculum is responsible for the maintenance of class differences, as well as patriarchal and racist attitudes that are harmful to the entire population. Using critical theory to deconstruct the hidden curriculum that supports the implementation of school violence prevention policies and practices such as zero tolerance, becomes a powerful tool.

The Dialectical Nature of Critical Inquiry

As socially constructed beings we can never escape our own experiences, yet we can work toward becoming more aware of our beliefs that are grounded in questionable assumptions. Questioning our own values and beliefs provides a method of deconstructing ideological thinking, thus allowing us to better understand our own ideological thinking and those of others. Incorporating dialectics within the parameters of this research effort offers opportunities for gaining new insights.

According to Sirotnik critical inquiry is dialectical, dialogical and deliberate. Sirotnik (1991) understands that there are no "really value-free philosophies and technologies of inquiry in the first place [and that] critical inquiry is basically dialectical in nature" (pp. 244-245). Sirotnik explains:

> If we interpret dialectical methodology broadly as a knowledge-building process where what is presumably known is continually re-known through questioning, arguing, counter-arguing, reflecting, challenging, contradicting, reconciling, modifying, revising, and so forth, then we can acknowledge and celebrate more formally what educators already do—and could do even better—as they use and generate knowledge in the context of practice. (p. 247)

McLaren (1989) adds:

> The dialectical nature of critical theory enables the educational researcher to see the school not simply as an arena of indoctrination or socialization or a site of instruction, but also as a cultural terrain that promotes student empowerment and self-transformation. (p. 167)

Critical conversations have the power to create knowledge that might otherwise remain unknown. Critical inquiry requires listening to multiple voices that provide opportunities for new understandings and re-conceptualizations through a dialogical approach concerned less with a group of "reflective practioners" and more with a "reflective collective of practioners" (Sirotnik, 1991, p. 247). Critical self-reflection becomes the starting point for critical research. Since decisions based on inquiry may affect all individuals involved within the school community, such decisions must be informed by the thoughts of all members. However, such thoughts must not be unqualifiedly endorsed. Instead, "we must be attentive to their *contradictory nature* and establish grounds whereby these experiences can be questioned and analyzed in both their strengths and weaknesses" (McLaren, 1989, p. 235). Genuine dialogue guided by critical consciousness leads "to a humane transformation of, rather than a passive accommodation to one's world" (1989, p. 235).

Competent Communication

The production of transformative knowledge requires competent communication. Sirotnik warns us that "communication—moreover, competent communication—is the hallmark of critical inquiry and, therefore, probably the greatest stumbling block in critical inquiry" (1991, p. 248). Hoping not to stumble, I have incorporated the ideas expressed by Jurgen Habermas (1979) in his critical theory of communication. These include comprehensibility, sincerity, fidelity, and justifiability. In addition, "these conditions must be facilitated by a process that embodies the essence of social justice" (1979, p. 248). Habermas (1979) adds that all members of the conversation must have (and believe they have) equal opportunities to be participants; to regulate the discourse; to express their beliefs, values, attitudes and interests; and to question the comprehensibility, sincerity, fidelity, and/or justifiability of any part of the discussion.

Feminist Theory

If our actions make the world--then our actions can change the world.

(Linda Bell, 1993, Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence: A Feminist Approach to Freedom)

Although not incompatible with critical theory, feminist theory extends the parameters of the research and provides opportunities for further insights. As women we are not all alike, yet our voices speak of shared experiences that provide a bridge for better understandings and a focus for dismantling oppressions within a patriarchal world. Feminist theorists Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (1998) explain that "feminist theory seeks to analyze the conditions which shape women's lives and to explore cultural

understandings of what it means to be a woman" (p. 1). At times conflicted by our differences and unsure of our similarities, we are united in the belief that our varying degrees of oppression do not reflect an inherent "natural" state of being a woman. I extend these parameters to include that varying degrees of oppression do not reflect an inherent "natural" state of being a high school dropout. Open to a multitude of voices situated in lived experiences, feminist theory works toward deconstructing current beliefs antagonistic to equality and equity within our schools and society.

Feminist theorizing has taken its rightful place as a tool for understanding "women's subordination and our exclusion from, or marginalization within, a variety of cultural arenas" (Jackson & Jones, 1998, p. 1). I would argue that feminist theorizing also addresses issues relevant to students at risk. Feminist theory, though continuously in the making and withstanding internal and external tensions, represents a personalized way of understanding the world and creating plans of action rooted in the goal of social justice.

The fight for both gender equality and equity emerges out of centuries of struggle rooted in social, political, cultural and economic oppressions. Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gillman, Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Daly, Maxine Greene, bell hooks, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer, and Dale Spender represent only a few of the women whose writings have shaped feminist theorizing, yet many others go un-named. Speaking within disciplines of philosophy, ethics, culture, politics, history, and education women concerned about equality and equity for women and other marginalized groups challenge assumptions about knowledge and truth.

Ethics and the Importance of Differences

Understanding solidarity within their differences, feminist theorists support an epistemology that recognizes that knowledge is situated historically, socially, culturally and personally. Sharon Welch (1991) in "An Ethic of Solidarity and Difference" states that rather than denying the existence of differences, equality and respect are obtained by a recognition of differences. The "political is personal" remains the watchword. Listening to the voices of those oppressed continues to be the best way of knowing. Freedom; individual rights and responsibilities; relations to others and to ourselves; and a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being become the values that inform our ways of knowing and being. In other words, feminist theorizing positions axiology as foremost in determining ontology and epistemology. Whether one adheres to philosophical positions compatible with radical, liberal, existential, postmodern, or poststructuralist feminist camps, ethics remains the glue holding all positions together.

Speaking to the importance of ethics in the women's movement, Jean Bethke Elshtain (1991) states that "feminism without ethics is inconceivable [and that] each feminist position makes contact with previous politico-ethical systems, sometimes extending, sometimes repudiating features of those systems" (para. 1). Furthermore, Elshtain asserts that "there is no single ethics or moral theory of feminism; rather, one finds contrasting, overlapping feminisms [and that] feminism from its inception has assumed or exuded an ethic, or several competing ethics, having to do with questions of justice, equality, freedom, and virtue" (para. 2).

Margaret Walker (1998), in Moral Understanding: A Feminist Study of Ethics, advises feminist theorists to use prudence in ethical positionality since "we bear heavy empirical and hermeneutical burdens in making sure we really know what it is that we presume to judge" (p. 208), since a universalizing ethics is yet another form of oppression. Working to avoid feminism becoming a "grand narrative," Linda Bell (1993) in Rethinking Ethics in the Midst of Violence: A Feminist Approach to Freedom , hopes:

> To engage as many different theorists from as many perspectives as possible [and thus] to contribute to the expansion of what is understood as feminist theory so that it ultimately will be seen as an ongoing and very inclusive dialogue, without a 'mainstream' that contributes to the continuing marginalization of many. (p. 14)

Concern over the importance of acknowledging differences within feminist ethical theory and of knowing that "by repressing difference, male ethics assumes away the ethical problem" (Koehn, 1998, p. 8), remains critical. Daryl Koehn, in Rethinking Feminist Ethics: Care, Trust and Empathy, warns feminist theorists to acknowledge the importance of differences. Koehn (1998) states:

> Female ethics...take respect for and attentiveness to possible differences, instead of formal consistency, to be a hallmark of ethical maturity. Female ethics sees no particular virtue in consistency, given that an agent could be a perfectly consistent racist. Respect for difference, however, is ethically important. Without respect for difference, we paradoxically tend to lose any sense of the personal individuality that makes each of us so special and which the male ethicist would have us respect. (p. 7)

Acknowledging our differences and debunking the notion of freedom within equality

Marilyn Friedman (1993), in "Beyond Caring: The De-Moralizing of Gender," critiques ethical positions that universalize moral duties:

> Indeed there is an apparent irony in the notion of personhood which underlies some philosophers' conception of the universalized moral duties owed to all persons. The rational nature which Kant, for example, takes to give each person dignity and to make each of absolute value and, therefore, irreplaceable, is no more than an abstract

> rational nature in virtue of which we are all alike. But if we are all alike in this respect, it is hard to understand why we would be irreplaceable. Our common rational nature would seem to make us indistinguishable and, therefore, mutually interchangeable. Specific identity would be a matter of indifference, so far as absolute value is concerned. Yet it would seem that only in *virtue* of our distinctive particularity could we each be truly irreplaceable. (p. 270)

Analyzing how school violence prevention policies and practices, such as zero tolerance, are mired within a rationale that denies individual differences is important to this project.

Rather than predicating freedom by attesting to our similarities feminist theory strives to create a liberatory agenda by listening to the voices of individuals informed by their own lived experiences. However, we must remain vigilant to voices not yet heard; to those erased through oppression; and to our own blind spots. Walker (1998) warns:

> The catch is that there is no one to scrutinize and assess moral practices but us—either we who enact them or others who do something else. Moral criticism is not only about actual practices of moral judgment, but must itself proceed from some of them. (p. 223)

Feminist Ethics and Epistemology

Questioning the discourse of science and knowledge (also an important tenet within critical theorizing) requires a philosophical position that opens up spaces for voices often silenced. Feminist ethics provides the necessary requirements for such a bold undertaking by reframing our thinking about ideas, beliefs, and practices considered sacred. Feminist philosopher Lisa Sowle Cahill asserts that the primary task of feminist ethics is to define equality, justice, and the criteria of reform in relation to gender differences, human equality, and social organizations.

In "Women and Ethics: A `Seeing' Justice?" feminist philosopher Elizabeth Hepburn (1994) contends that "blind justice" contributes to continued social and political

inequities. Hepburn calls for a framework of ethical decision-making that incorporates traditional methods grounded in rational processes and dispassionate inquiry with methods that celebrate personal commitments and acknowledge emotional cues. Deconstructing zero tolerance within such a philosophical orientation provides opportunities for constructively dismantling oppressive practices within public schools that negatively affect the lives of students. However, rationality and scientific inquiry alone remain the approaches most widely accepted within educational arenas and other approaches are often marginalized.

Utilitarian consequentialism provides the basis for modern scientific thought and demands quantification and pragmatic results (Hepburn, 1994; Johnson, 1999). Asserting that objectivity releases one from personal involvement and produces a more rigorous scientific agenda "is morally problematic, since it breeds moral blindness or indifference--a failure to discern or respond to need" (Hepburn, 1994, p. 4). Blind justice gains a foothold within scientific inquiries that purport to be objective.

Blind justice encourages a "veil of ignorance" that promotes practices, projects, and beliefs incompatible with feminist ethics or feminist epistemology. By embracing the notion of inclusivity, thus demanding "strong objectivity," Harding (1991) understands that "objectivism results only in semi-science when it turns away from the task of critically identifying all those broad, historical social desires, interests, and values that have shaped the agendas, contents, and results of the sciences much as they shape the rest of human affairs" (p. 143).

Asserting that science constructs itself as value-free and embraces a "point-of-viewless-ness," thus existing in a social and political vacuum devoid of subjectivism and cultural relativism, undermines the potential for objectivity. Enforcement of zero tolerance policies and practices qualifies as a form of blind justice and thus contributes to continued social and political inequities within public schools. Hepburn contends:

> In order to acknowledge appropriately human capacities to identify with others and to appreciate a range of perspectives, an integration of reason and sentiment, an ethical analysis is required. Such a style of approach embodies a 'seeing' rather than a 'blind' justice because it depends upon giving attention to particularities as well as generalities. (p. 1)

Understanding how school violence prevention policies and practices may be a form of "blind justice" and impact students' decisions to leave school before graduation becomes part of the analysis.

Standpoint Theory and Situated Knowledge

A fully extended perspective on feminist standpoint theory provides a basis for an ethical position that both respects diversity and values care, but remains grounded in the tenet that knowledge is socially situated and arises in social positions structured by power relations (Harding, 1991; O'Brien 1999). Harding (1991) explains:

> Standpoint theory claims that we can provide good reasons for dividing beliefs into the false and the probably less false (or 'bad' and 'good' beliefs) but that these reasons do not refer to transcendental, certain grounds for belief of the sort claimed by conventional epistemologies or privilege what any group of actual, historical humans say about how they see the world (as misreadings of the Marxist epistemology have assumed). (Harding, 1991, p. 169)

Griffiths (1995) supports Harding's position and states:

> None of the feminist epistemologies assume or argue that the perspective of individual human beings can be superseded by the 'objective view from nowhere' or by a 'God's eye view.' All of them assume that the self or subjectivity is a starting point--though

> almost all of them go on, quickly, to point out that individual 'experience,' 'perspectives,' 'consciousness,' or 'position in a discourse' are only the first step in a collective enterprise of formulating a (feminist, usually) perspective. (para.18)

Harding (1991) acknowledges that the central issue is not about scientific claims distorted or suppressed by propaganda or ideology, but rather about the achievement of power through the application of knowledge. Power becomes the indicator of knowledge. Foucault (1980) extends the notion of power and knowledge by explaining how the mechanisms operating within scientific discourse create inequities and distorted truths. Those who decide what constitutes knowledge have the ability to know more about us than we know about ourselves; to define what is normal and abnormal; appropriate and perverse; sane and insane; or believable and unbelievable. If one has knowledge then one also has power over those "uninformed." One thus has the ability to control and determine what constitutes truth (Foucault, 1980; Fillingham, 1993). Understanding the power of knowledge to generate "truths" and thus to appropriate power over the lives of individuals, uncovers moral nightmares for those deemed inferior based on gender, race, sexual orientation, or class. Students within public schools may become prime targets for this type of marginalization and abuse. Attuned to power dynamic within the community Bell (1993) asserts:

> We are always already living in some historically conditioned community in which people have vested interests in trying to preserve their positions, status, and income. To assume a clean slate--a state of nature prior to society or some original position in which people are divorced from an outlook thoroughly influenced by class, gender, wealth, and a host of other factors--risks ignoring the very real practical difficulties faced by women, the poor, persons of color, recent immigrants [students], etc. Any ethic worthy of our trust ought to at least try to grapple with the problem of power differentials within the community whom it addresses. (p. 8)

Hegel frames the connection between knowledge arising in social relations that are structured by power relations in his conception of the master-slave relationship (Johnson, 1999, O'Brien 1999). Since the slave and the master occupy specific standpoints in culture and society, their perceptions of reality are distinctly different. This analogy may be extended to better understand how the perceptions of reality held by students and school personnel may be quite different. Harding explains that human activity or "material life" extends structuring by setting limits on human understanding since "what we do shapes and constrains what we can know" (Harding, 1991, p. 120). In other words, standpoint theory grounded in strong objectivity has the potential to equalize the inequities imposed on women, as well as on students marginalized within public schools.

Feminist Methodology

Grounded in feminist theory feminist methodology supports an agenda compatible with social justice. In "Making a Difference: Feminism, Post-Modernism and the Methodology of Educational Research," Griffiths (1995) argues that feminist methodology is not just theoretically significant but vitally important, since educational practices and educational outcomes are damaged by sexism. She insists:

> This is because there is a prevailing sexism both in and out of formal educational institutions: schools, universities, local authorities, governing bodies, government departments, educational publishing, and voluntary pressure groups. Inevitably sexism also distorts how such educational practices and outcomes are understood and researched. This is precisely the concern of feminist epistemology: how to improve knowledge and remove sexist distortions. (para. 1)

Marjorie DeVault (1999), in Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research, contends that feminist methodology signifies "an interest in the interactive processes through which people make meaning in social contexts," as well as an approach that is

"committed to reflexive analysis of the knower as an element of the known" (p. 2). Others supporting "standpoint epistemology" include Seller (1988), Walkerdine (1988), Young (1990), hooks (1994), and Haraway (1991).

Within feminist methodology "oppositional research" represents a conscious-raising project "to both feminist research committed to challenging many oppressions and also research with other kinds of liberatory foundations and aims" (DeVault, 1999, p. 2). I agree with DeVault that "given their ambitious goals, feminist researchers must accept that their efforts will always be only partially successful [since] research, like any human activity, is socially organized and shaped by the institutional context in which it occurs" (p. 2). Feminist methodology acknowledges that "seeking social justice means seeking truths; and feminism, at its core, is the practice of speaking truths" (p. 3). DeVault explains:

> The truths of feminism are smaller, more tailored, and more intensely pointed truths than the discredited "Truth" of grand theory and master narratives. They are truths that illuminate varied experiences rather than insist on one reality; they seem, to many of us, more sturdy and useful than abstract and ostensibly universal formulations. (p. 3)

This research aims to be both epistemologically and methodologically feminist. Using critical theory embedded within a feminist perspective and acknowledging that the personal is political, my concerns for schools, students, and teachers must emerge from an interpretation of my lived experiences, as well as the findings of others who have grappled with these pressing concerns. My critique offers hope for new possibilities and new directions that have the potential to change the climate of the classroom, the school, the community, and the lives of students. By starting from an ethical position that supports freedom and justice for all individuals; by incorporating direct accounts of lived

experiences of high school dropouts; and by understanding my own subjective positionality within the research project these goals are attainable.

Joining Forces

Feminist and critical theories provide the framework for this dissertation. Although each may exert different forces driving the research effort, the combined effect of these theoretical frameworks provides increased opportunities for more complete understandings and more innovative solutions. Critical theory permits an analytical approach to uncover hidden agendas and to deconstruct political, economic, social and cultural factors informing school violence prevention policies and practices within public schools. Feminist theory encourages an intuitive approach to research that sensitizes the researcher to the lived experiences of the participants. Listening to students is crucial to the process; feminist theory recognizes the need to acknowledge multiple perspectives and to embrace the cultural heritages of all peoples. Institutions that fail to adequately address issues of racial and cultural differences are complicitous in maintaining sexism, racism and classism (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 1981, 1983). Feminist theory pronounces that rather than denying the existence of differences, equality and respect are obtained by recognition of differences.

Understanding my own positionality within the project and remaining alert to my own ideological groundings provide opportunities for more honest research. By refuting blind justice; working toward strong objectivity; acknowledging the relationship between power and knowledge; and asserting the need to recognize differences this project aims to uncover the hidden curriculum informing school violence prevention policies and

practices within public schools. Furthermore, by utilizing the tenets informing critical theory and feminist theory this dissertation provides opportunities to reconceptualize school violence prevention policies and practices that have the potential for decreasing school violence. Critical theory and feminist theory provide powerful tools for advancing an agenda of social justice and each contributes needed guidelines for deconstructing social, political, economic, psychological and cultural components of school violence prevention policies and practices within public schools. Listening to high school dropouts in rural southeastern Georgia and working to understand what factors created a negative school climate that informed their decision to drop out remains my goal.

CHAPTER IV

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of several hundred articles and over one hundred recent dissertation abstracts yielded interesting results that related both directly and indirectly to the effects of school violence prevention policies and practices and school dropouts. Examining how zero tolerance policies have gained support through media representations of youth culture; how anti-gun control supporters and death penalty advocates have successfully infiltrated the political arena; and how stricter drug laws are embedded within the same mentality that supports zero tolerance policies uncovers more subtle, yet important connections. Searching to uncover connections between Christian fundamentalists right-wing authoritarianism and support of zero tolerance policies provides further opportunities for gaining better understandings. Investigating to what extent zero tolerance policies covertly promote racial, gender and class discrimination and thus "hide" other inequities within schools, allows for deeper interpretation.

Underlying efforts that support a thorough literature review include a keen desire and determination to find better ways of understanding school dropouts, a population often omitted from contemporary educational research. I would like to acknowledge several classic studies that proved invaluable to this project: Learning to Labor: How Working-Class Kids Get Working-Class Jobs (Willis, 1981), Framing High School Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School, (Fine, 1991), Caring for Kids: A Critical Study of Urban School Leavers, (Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995), and Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools, (Eds.

Weis & Fine, 1993). Readings from these studies provided the initial impetus that continues to guide this dissertation.

Stevenson and Ellsworth's (1993) article, "Dropouts and the Silencing of Critical Voices," triggered my initial interest to interview high school dropouts. Stevenson and Ellsworth articulate the psychological dilemmas faced by both African American and White adolescents as they describe the multitude of problems imposed upon them by the school culture and as they grapple to understand their decisions to leave school. The authors assert that by constructing images of dropouts as deviant schools effectively silence their voices. If the problem is located within the student, then the school bears little responsibility. Stevenson & Ellsworth (1993) shed light on the dilemma:

> Contributing to this perception is a research and policy agenda and a teacher and popular literature on school dropouts that have concentrated on the personal and demographic characteristics of the dropouts themselves. By focusing on students as the problem, this research and the literature it has spawned implies that schools bear little responsibility for students dropping out and therefore can take few actions to reduce the number of dropouts. (p. 259)

I agree that to ignore the need for self-reflection and self-evaluation schools become complicitous with the problem.

Reviews of contemporary studies related to school violence prevention and student dropout behavior produced a tremendous array of materials. Interviews with high school dropouts, especially those describing their perceptions regarding school violence prevention policies and practices, proved noteworthy. Studies that deconstruct social, political, economic, cultural and/or psychological factors supporting current school violence prevention policies and practices proved enlightening. In addition, studies that identify how these factors foster a school climate that encourages school leaving support

this research. Although some studies cited may appear less relevant than others, their inclusion is significant since they may fill important gaps in fully understanding the scope of the problem.

The most relevant articles are categorized around themes related to school dropouts, school reform, and school violence prevention. Articles providing pertinent information regarding zero tolerance policies in public schools are especially noteworthy. The categories are not discrete and each contributes to greater understandings of the other. Interconnections between and among them are significant and are explored in the data analysis section of this research project.

School Dropouts

> I was invisible, man. I sat in those schools for two years. I sat in the back of the room and did nothing. I didn't speak to anyone and no one spoke to me. Nobody said, 'Do your work' or nothing. Then one day I said it, 'Man I'm invisible here.' I got up and walked out the door and I never went back [an Oakland 'dropout' who later graduated from the Oakland Street Academy]. (Epstein, 1992, p. 55)

Listening to students describe their school experiences is critical for understanding how the educational system either discourages or encourages school leaving. Concern over failure to significantly reduce the dropout rate continues and the need to understand the complex issues surrounding a student's decision to leave school remains problematic. After a year of intensive participatory research in a variety of schools researchers from the Claremont Graduate School of Education (1992) concluded that the issues addressed in the majority of national education reports are not the issues of deepest concern to many students and teachers. "Relationships and values were more pressing issues for these students and teachers than national standards" (Epstein, 1992, p. 55). A critical

examination of high school dropouts must not omit the affective domain from investigation. Recognizing feelings of alienation and hopelessness within this population must be part of the discourse.

Elaine Walsh (1999) conducted two related studies in order to provide an overview of risk and protective factors for suicide among adolescents at risk for dropping out of school. Walsh collected data from 801 potential high school dropouts and determined that the negative factors that contributed to suicidal behavior (especially for females) included emotional stress, drug involvement, a sense of hopelessness, and a lack of peer school support. To what extent schools contributed to an individual's risk of suicide remains in need of further study. Considering the dramatic increase in teen suicide, especially among Black males, the importance of determining risk factors for suicide cannot be underestimated (Spina, 2000).

Identifying students at risk for dropping out frames a large body of the current research. Researchers Gary J.Tobin and George M. Suagi (1999) completed a longitudinal research project that involved an archival review of school records for a randomly selected sample of 526 students. The researchers' findings support the use of discipline referrals as a screening device to identify, not only potentially violent students, but also those most likely to drop out. Students referred for fighting in Grade 6 were also referred for similar offenses in Grade 8. Furthermore, Tobin and Suagi report:

> Frequency of discipline referrals in Grade 6 predicted chronic discipline problems in later middle school, which predicted frequency of suspensions in Grade 9. Three or more suspensions in ninth grade predicted school failure. Boys referred for fighting more than twice and girls referred even once for harassing, as sixth graders, were not likely to be on track for graduation when in high school. (Tobin & Suagi, 1999, para. 1)

The connection between discipline problems and student drop out behavior highlights the need for schools to be proactive, not only in identifying those students deemed potentially at risk, but also in providing additional support. Having worked in elementary schools, I argue that discipline referrals at the elementary level may also indicate potential violent behavior in upper grades and potential dropout status. Within this research project disciplinary referrals were examined as a potential contributing factor for leaving school. How school discipline policies may also contribute to a school climate promoting dropout behavior is also extremely relevant. I agree with Tobin and Suagi:

> Punishments, such as detention and suspension, are inadequate responses because they do not teach positive replacement behaviors. Students who have discipline problems should be assessed to determine the functions of their maladaptive behaviors; their knowledge of appropriate replacement behaviors; their strengths; and their social, academic, and personal needs. (1999, para.47)

Unfortunately, school workers often stereotype students with discipline referrals as chronic behavior problems, a reaction that may become a self-fulfilling prophecy that not only increases the likelihood of more behavior problems, but also may seal their fate as potential high school dropouts. Identifying students with disciplinary referrals and placing them in alternative programs may hold some promise in curbing school violence and school dropout rates. However, caution is in order since alternative programs to help students with disciplinary problems are not always in place. Furthermore, the problem continues to be viewed as a deficit of the student involved rather than a possible problem within school practices and policies. Within my research effort the school climate is examined as a potential contributing factor in creating school violence, an approach that

disrupts placing the onus of change and the location of the problem entirely on the student.

Martin, Levin and Saunders (2000) investigated the association between the severity of disciplinary procedures imposed on students resulting from tobacco policy violations and the dropout rate in South Carolina public high schools. Surveying 132 principals to assess tobacco policy and sanctions for violation, they identified a relationship between dropout rates and number of violations before students were suspended from school. Using a "general linear regression models adjusting for SES, ethnicity, and rural/urban status, [the researchers found that] suspension at first violation and expulsion were associated with lower dropout rates" (para.1). Furthermore, "suspension at second violation was not associated with dropout behavior while suspension at third violation was associated with higher dropout rates" (para.1). Drawing the conclusion that strict disciplinary sanctions for violation of the school's tobacco policy helps reduce high school dropout rates may be misleading. Students disciplined for first violation with suspension may be under age for dropping out (usually under sixteen years-old) and, thus are legally unable to drop out. Students cited for a second or third offense might now be over the legal age for dropping out and may now choose this course of action. The age of the students receiving these disciplinary sanctions was not cited and this creates questions regarding the use of severe sanctions against tobacco use as a method for curbing dropout rates. Since cigarette smoking among students must be viewed as a health related issue, imposing "severe sanctions" does little to help address either the underlying reasons for

tobacco use among youth or the need to include ways to help students stop smoking, yet remain in school.

The role of the curriculum and teaching methodology must be examined in an attempt to more fully understand students' decisions to drop out of school. By examining descriptions of learning experiences and the meaning these learning experiences have for 11 creative high school dropouts who had just completed a one-on-one computer assisted multi-media learning experience, Donna Carol Morrison Browning (1999) extends the importance of the curriculum for encouraging students to remain in school. These students, who had been identified by scoring in the upper 84th percentile on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, value personal experience as the most enjoyable and effective means of learning. Their learning styles are ones not traditionally rewarded in classrooms and this points to the need for curriculum reform as a vehicle for engaging potential dropouts. Students' perceptions of the curriculum and teaching methods have been examined within this project and support the need for curriculum revisions.

Investigating the psychological experiences of students after leaving school provides insights regarding their school experiences. Apparently, students' feelings of efficacy after dropping out of school are closely linked to their personal experiences while still attending school. Frieda Rhodelle Campbell-Peltier (1999) investigated the link between normal, restricted, and exaggerated entitlement attitudes about education and behavior after dropping out of high school by interviewing eleven high school dropouts. Although no student exhibited exaggerated entitlement attitudes about education, those who appeared restricted in their attitudes also expressed feelings of self-denigration and

unworthiness. To what extent high school dropouts blame themselves for school failure reflects the power of hegemony. Case studies of abused wives attest to the condition of blaming oneself for the abuse. Investigating how the experiences of high school dropouts within school may exacerbate restricted attitudes about education and entitlement outside of school provides opportunities for future investigation.

To what extent the findings of Campbell-Peltier (1999) relate to the influence of cultural capital on students' experiences within public schools highlights the need to examine the socio-economic status, as well as the need to examine issues surrounding gender and ethnicity. Rebecca Pasco's (2000) study asserts that economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital influence the academic achievement and personal life trajectories of female high school students identified as at-risk. Using the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, Pasco's qualitative study uncovered how different types of capital affected participants' personal and academic trajectories as situated within their unique socio-cultural milieus. According to Pasco educational institutions privilege the knowledge and behaviors of some individuals over others. Furthermore, Pasco (2000) asserts that school policies and practices that limit access to information put at-risk students in a position of educational disadvantage. Such findings support the way ideological thinking fuels hegemony within public schools. The role of "cultural capital" as it relates to students' decisions to drop out of public schools reflects an important component of my research.

Acknowledging that the economic future for school dropouts is bleak, Duhaldeborde (1999) examines job mobility and relates it to gender, ethnicity and GED-status. The racial/ethnic differences in dropouts' job mobility indicate that Hispanics enter into jobs

earlier than their White or Black peers; White dropouts' careers stabilize sooner than Blacks; and the attainment of GED status has the greatest benefit to White dropouts' job mobility. However, dropping out of high school does not mean forgoing a diploma. The attainment of a GED signals not only job opportunities but also enhancement of self-worth. Locally, many high school dropouts make their way to the technical college and take preparation classes in order to pass the exam that awards them a GED. According to a recent news report "the high number of dropouts has led to an increase of participants in Georgia's GED and adult literacy programs [and] the number of eighteen to twenty-four year-olds earning GEDs last year [2000] compared to 1990 has nearly doubled" (Associated Press, 2001, para.5). Since state funding is directly proportional to the number of students enrolled, public high schools have sought ways to curtail the increasing trend of students leaving high school prior to graduation in order to attend the local technical college and obtain a GED. Efforts by the local high school to block this trend have been ineffectual. Why students are choosing to leave high school prior to graduation and attend the local technical college to obtain a GED remains a mystery. Exploring these issues is crucial to better understanding why students drop out.

A large body of literature pertaining to high school dropouts investigates programs designed to curb school leaving. FBI data indicates that juvenile crime peaks between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. and research reveals that students left unsupervised during these hours are at higher risks for problem behaviors, including dropping out of school. This information has initiated public and political support for after-school

programs. President Bush's faith-based initiatives include utilizing public school facilities for after-school programs. Whether or not President Bush's faith-based programs will be more successful than the ones critiqued by Stephanie Weisman (2000) is yet to be known. However, the attrition rate from prevention programs now in place has caused concern. Weisman's (2000) research works to uncover reasons students drop out from these programs and to discover what changes would be necessary to attract and keep students enrolled. Her findings indicate that individuals who associate with peers who use drugs and who have a considerable number of days absent from school are at risk for dropping out of after-school programs. In addition, Weisman (2000) found that a third of the students who left the program cited boredom as the major reason. Other factors included poor site quality; disorganization; a strong focus on state-mandated program components (social skills training, tutoring, and recreation); low program fidelity; high quality procedures; and a focus on rules and management (Weisman, 2000). Apparently, the more the after-school program resembles "school," the more participants find it undesirable. However, when the staff was a student's regular teacher at the school he/she attended and when the discipline system was structured attendance improved (Weisman, 2000). Perhaps developing a relationship with a teacher outside of the classroom offers students feelings of attachment and care that are essential for bonding with the program.

Other community efforts aimed at helping students remain in school involve a school-community truancy coalition. La Verne McCoy-Byers (1999) analyzed the success of such coalitions and found that schools need to form coalitions with community agencies to prevent or suppress truancy. Existing truancy coalitions that focus on collaboration and

communication within their group are most successful. McCoy-Byers (1999) also asserts that both existing and newly formed coalitions should include members considered to be most knowledgeable of the problem. Clearly involving the community is vital to the success of programs aimed at helping students, but the reasons for student truancy also need to be investigated. Missing is the dialogue with students who have insights that might better inform those concerned about student truancy.

Concern over student dropout rates resulting in anticipated welfare and unemployment costs; increased crime rates; lowered tax revenue for the state; and public health care costs have created a frenzy of research efforts. As the federal government demands that public schools "solve" their dropout problem or experience cuts in funding, researchers eagerly work to uncover the components of successful dropout prevention programs. Cori Groth (1998) utilized observations and interviews to discover students' attitudes and perceptions regarding an alternative computer based program called AAA (Advanced Achievement Academy) and the extent to which it assisted students in graduating from high school. The academy, located on the perimeter of a local high-school campus in a southwestern metropolitan city, has been in place since 1994. The program offers computer-assisted instruction in order for students to earn credits toward graduation. I agree with the researcher that computer-assisted instruction offers a viable alternative for students who might otherwise choose to drop out, but I question whether it may also constitute a way of marginalizing students to a second-rate education. The lack of student-teacher relationships that appear important for developing attachment to school may be short changed in such a computer-assisted program. However, students are given

the autonomy to earn credits without having to negotiate with a school climate they may find inhospitable.

Whether or not all programs that single out a certain population become "dumping grounds" for students considered undesirable in the mainstream is disputable. I agree with Groth (1989) that a lack of vision and imagination limits the types of programming being created, but our perception of this "at risk" population also constitutes a limiting factor. This article provides keen insights into the problem of critiquing programs for dropout prevention.

Edwin J. Church (1999) examines why students are leaving selected public high schools and are enrolling in and graduating from Central Kansas Dropout Recovery Centers. Since Church's study also attempts to find out why graduates of CKDRCs originally left school and why graduates of CKDRCs succeeded at the centers, his findings are pertinent to my study. Using qualitative research methods the investigator determined that "student success was positively affected by a caring atmosphere and mutual respect [and that] CKDRC programs are aligned with adult learning theory" (p. iv). Although why students dropout of school remains difficult to answer, the success of CKDRCs appears directly connected to providing a "fresh start, away from the traditional high school setting" (p. iv). These findings have significant implications for planning programs to encourage high school completion and to provide educational settings that enhance student success.

However, when student dropout rates are rising and already represent a large segment of the school population, segregating these students to special alternative programs

becomes problematic. Furthermore, conventional definitions delineating who is "at risk" may be insufficient and may lead to further marginalization. In an article for the Georgia based Athens Daily News entitled "Shameful High School Dropout Rate Needs State's Attention," commentators disrupt conventionally accepted demographics of the high school dropout. Contrary to popular opinion, 60% of those who drop out are not from low-income families and 50% of those who drop out are White (1997). This information further complicates an already complex problem and requires further investigation.

School reform efforts wholeheartedly embrace policies and procedures aimed to curb dropout rates, as well as prevent school violence. Such studies must be included for a more informed analysis.

School Reform

Understanding the forces driving current school reform and the effects these reform initiatives have on students' decisions to drop out of school inform the literature review. In addition, understanding how the curriculum may play a role in school violence helps one better understand the problems faced by students and school officials. The goals of accountability and efficiency driving much of current school reform, especially state mandated standardized testing, appear blind to their potential effects on student behavior. Researchers Terrance M. Scott, Michael C. Nelson and Carl J. Liaupsin (2001) see connections between student academic achievement and school discipline problems. They assert that a predictable pathway exists between poor academic performance and classroom discipline problems. A proactive approach to school violence must address the need to provide effective instruction to all students.

Multiple perspectives concerned with schools and democracy enhance the discussion. The role of democracy in public education concerns Goodlad (1999) who argues that extensive curricular and pedagogical reforms are needed if public education is to take part in our cultural evolution.

In addition to addressing the need to strengthen democracy, Goodlad (1999) asserts the need for public education to recognize impending ecological catastrophes. Rather than separating these two concerns, Goodlad argues that each impact relationships and that each are threatened for similar reasons. Urging deliberate and widespread interventions to combat this cultural crisis, Goodlad states that the battle should begin with reform in public schools. Goodlad (1999) asserts that democracy (how we interact with one another) and environment (how we interact with the world around us) must take center stage in public school reform efforts.

Understanding the ideologies that inform current debates about the goals of public education reveals insights regarding the evolution and adoption of school reform initiatives. Professors of Special Education at the University of Oregon, Robert H. Horner and George Sugai, assert the need for school reform to incorporate school-wide positive behavior support in order to enhance school climate and student achievement (2000). In response to the 1998 mandate by the President to make every school in the nation violence-free, programs that proactively teach appropriate social skills are increasingly in demand. Horner and Sugai (2000) recommend that schools "teach appropriate social behaviors at the same time that they teach math, reading, language, and science" (para. 1). Furthermore, social skills instruction should be school-wide and not reserved for

students deemed at-risk. Conflict resolution and peer mediation are programs that also have been incorporated school-wide in order to address potential school violence. However, the majority of school reform appears to target the need for academic achievement and the acquisition of appropriate social skill development has not received as much attention. Accountability and efficiency remain the watchwords for current school reform efforts and corporate America remains intertwined with these efforts.

Lubienski (1999) seeks to uncover the values informing market-oriented school reform. The relationship between corporate America and school reform informs the current debate over standardization and indirectly relates to current policies enforcing stricter disciplinary codes and school leaving. Eric Stockden (1999) works to understand the intents of public education. He contends that public education should embrace political education in order to encourage democratic citizenship. To what extent current school reform encourages political education in order to nurture democratic citizenship remains questionable and requires future considerations. I agree that contemporary education must still be evaluated according to John Dewey's classic paradigm for American education that included knowledge, power and democracy (Dewey, 1990, 1944).

Trenia Walker (2000) identifies the central dilemmas in public education to be quality, efficiency, equity, and choice. Using findings from "A Nation At Risk" (1983) and current reports from the Clinton Administration sponsored report, "Promising Practices: New Ways to Improve Teacher Quality" (1998), Walker contends that the reports target teachers as the culprit for the lack of quality in education. Concerns about the economic

efficiency of public education translate into the need for educators to use available human and financial resources to maximize student performance. "In other words, educational/student output must justify the government's financial input" (Walker, 2000, p. vii).

Perceptions regarding school climate are closely aligned with students' decisions to leave school. J. Demery (2000), rather than investigating students' perceptions, focused on teachers' perceptions. Nonetheless, his findings are important in understanding the role race and class play on student achievement and how these issues directly relate to marginalization within the school community. Demery investigated the relationship between teachers' perceptions of school climate (academic emphasis, school discipline, and state policy influence) and student achievement by collecting data from questionnaires administered to 646 teachers in 20 elementary schools and 10 middle schools in the second largest school district in North Carolina. His findings suggest that race and socioeconomic status influence teachers' perceptions of school climate and affect school achievement. The relationship between positive school achievement and higher economic status, as well as the connection between minority standing and dropout rates has been echoed throughout the research. Demery's research corroborates these findings since achievement and academic emphasis were stronger in schools with larger White student populations, whereas achievement and academic emphasis were weaker in schools with larger Black student populations (2000). To what extent school climate actually causes achievement to increase and to what extent teachers' perceptions of school climate vary according to the school's racial composition and socioeconomic

status are relevant to this project. Understanding how factors informing race and socioeconomic status affect student achievement and dropout decisions, as well as school violence prevention policies and practices, informs this research.

Demery's (2000) findings confirm how teachers' perceptions of students may reinforce social inequities, thus maintaining ideologies supporting covert and overt hegemonic practices. Joel Spring (1994), in American Education, agrees that "socialization in the school is one of the most powerful means of political control" (p. 11). Whether current school reform efforts, especially those demanding more standardized testing and increased disciplinary measures, enhance the goals of social justice is debatable.

Governor Roy Barnes of Georgia recently signed legislation that will end social promotion in Georgia's schools by 2006 (GDOE Website, 2001). The new law requires students in third, fifth and eighth grades pass standardized tests before being promoted to the next grade. Students who fail these tests will receive remedial instruction and will be automatically retested, perhaps within the same school year (GDOE Website, 2001). Barnes asserts, "It's in high school that social promotion bears fruit [and that] when a child who hits the ninth grade is unable to do high school work and has been pushed along, that's when they drop out" (Associated Press, 2001, para. 12). However, critics of this plan think that it will increase an already high dropout rate in the state. Bob Chase, president of the National Education Association, agrees that "there are unintended consequences of the testing craze that are immoral [since] a lot of children are being held behind in part because of these policies" (Associated Press, 2001, para. 11). Time will tell

if current school reform to end social promotions will curb the rising dropout rate. Unfortunately, for many students it will be too late.

The amount and array of literature on school reform is vast. However, relating how school reform measures in Georgia and the school violence prevention policies and practices it generates and supports operate to encourage school leaving by fostering a school climate inhospitable to some students, remains the primary focus of this research project. The relationship between school reform and school violence prevention policies and practices, especially zero tolerance, and their effect on school dropout behavior requires attention.

School Discipline and Zero Tolerance

There are serious problems with current school violence prevention policies. Hawkins, Farrington and Catalano (1998) assert that "effective schools prevent violence [and that] schools that promote pro-social, cooperative behavior and a culture of learning, are central to preventing violence" (p. 188). Creating such a culture within schools may require alternative ways of managing student behavior. John W. Magg (2001), writing for Exceptional Children, explores the reasons why schools have favored punishment over the use of positive reinforcement for correcting discipline problems. Magg (2001) contends that misunderstandings regarding positive reinforcement as an alternative to punishment have led to its decline as the method of choice in addressing problem behaviors. Unfortunately, many schools initiate quick solutions like a violence prevention program, a conflict resolution team, hallway monitors, visitor sign-ins, metal detectors, or

school uniforms without examining the culture of the entire school as a way to reduce violence (Hawkins et al, 1998, Spina, 2000).

Interventions need to be evaluated from an integrated perspective grounded in social theory. Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) agree that by viewing adolescent violence as existing both within and between individuals, a more comprehensive conceptual framework can be developed that incorporates individual differences, social context, and goal-directed behavior. Elliott, Hamburg, and Williams (1998) explain that violence for adolescents serves specific purposes that reflect the stages of adolescent development (p.56). These stages include social affiliation, mastery, social identity, and autonomy; each being achieved within the contexts of the individual's family, neighborhood, school and peer group. The potential for violence emerges from daily interactions within various social networks. Individuals striving for respect respond to an audience that signifies "a crucial role in the initiation and settlement of disputes" (Elliott et al, 1998, p. 58). Bystanders may encourage violence for their own vicarious pleasure or may raise the ante of a conflict so high that violence becomes seemingly inevitable to the participants involved (Elliott et al, 1998). Having personally broken up many adolescent fights on school grounds, I know the energy needed to stop a fight is directly proportional to the number of onlookers and the status these onlookers hold in the minds of those fighting. A fight between two individuals without an audience is usually much easier to stop.

Elliott et al (1998) contextualize violence as "an important part of the discourse of social interactions, with functional (i.e., status and identity), material, and symbolic meaning (i.e., power and control), as well as strategic importance in everyday social

dangers" (p. 84). Viewed from an ecological perspective, violence shapes adolescents' interpretations of events and actions from early childhood where internalized beliefs about violence and danger in everyday life become scripted, as well as from the constant bombardment of violence from popular culture and urban legend. These findings may prove important for understanding the connections among culture, school violence prevention policies, and school dropout behavior.

Several articles from a variety of sources attest to the problems of zero tolerance as a school violence prevention tactic. Newcomb (1998), writing for Christian Science Monitor, questions the equity of tough, zero tolerance discipline policies in schools because of an apparent double standard for wealth and above average students. Attention must be paid to fairness and flexibility in discipline. Curwin and Medler (1999) agree that the zero tolerance approach is an unfair policy and explain why it is difficult to get support for the elimination of the policy. Skiba and Peterson (1999a, 1999b, 1999c) explore the origin of zero tolerance, the perception that school violence is accelerating, the components of a zero tolerance policy, as well as the negative effects of a punitive disciplinary climate created by these policies. They recommend a model for violence prevention that instructs students in ways to solve interpersonal and intrapersonal problems without resorting to disruption or violence. Connecting zero tolerance policies to the lives of students, Morrison and D'Incau (1997) discuss the characteristics of students who are recommended for expulsion through zero tolerance policies.

S. Duckworth-Loche (2000) examined the perceptions of administrators, counselors, teachers, and students concerning school safety and violence in north Louisiana

secondary schools. Interestingly, administrators perceived that their schools were less safe than counselors, but students perceived their schools were less safe than both teachers and counselors (Duckworth-Loche, 2000). The importance of including students in any discussion regarding school violence is apparent. Heather M. Rintoul (1999) researched school violence by audiotaping teacher/participant interviews and making classroom observations. Rintoul conceptualized the definition of violence to include:

> Any behavior intended to be seriously hurtful or harmful, whether perpetuated by one person on another or directed toward oneself [and that] such behaviors can include physical or non-physical acts of psychological, emotional, physical, economic, spiritual, verbal, and self abuse. (1999, pp.ii-iii)

Defining school violence is important to this discourse since misunderstandings regarding what constitutes school violence create confusion. The findings further suggest that "the more participative and more democratic the school culture, the less violent" (Rintoul, 1999, p. iii).

The Camden City Public School District (New Jersey) was the site for Andrews (2000), who found that over 50% of the 159 student respondents had not experienced violence in their high school within the previous six or twelve months. Interestingly, the most serious problems identified by three participating principals were student tardiness and absenteeism. It is important to note that these two factors are connected to school funding policies. These studies reflect the confusion and complex nature regarding the perception of school violence and the need for enlightened policies and programs to address the problem.

Investigating eleventh grade students' perceptions of the effectiveness of their school district's violence prevention and intervention strategies, Kenneth Porter (1999) provides

valuable insights. Using a survey questionnaire soliciting responses from 281 students regarding 49 school-specific prevention and intervention items, Porter's research is important to this discourse. Although public concern over school safety continues, students in this district found their schools to be safe. However, African American students felt less safe than White and Hispanic students. Smaller classroom sizes, parent/community involvement and Student Assistance Programs were viewed as most effective; whereas in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion from school were deemed ineffective in reducing school violence. "The students view in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion from school as ineffective ways to reduce violence" (p. 116). These findings support other research efforts and have profound connections to school dropout behavior. This study is meaningful since zero tolerance policies support both in-school and out-of-school suspension, as well as expulsion as means of achieving safe schools. Examining how these tactics affect students' decisions to leave school is important to this study.

Issues of racism are closely tied to zero tolerance policies and concerns over school violence. An analysis of student suspensions locally provides evidence that a disproportionate number of students of color receive disciplinary actions. A study conducted by the Oakland, California based Applied Research Center (ARC) claims that zero tolerance policies in schools are biased against African-American students. ARC (2000) cites a U.S. Department of Education report showing that African-American students make up 16.9% of the nation's public school population, but receive 32% of all school suspensions nationwide.

In Decatur, Illinois during November of 1999, Reverend Jesse Jackson publicly denounced the school policy of expelling several Black students for misconduct at a local football game. Not denying that these students' actions were deplorable, Jackson criticized the school system that felt justified in their procedures as part of a zero tolerance policy that permits extreme disciplinary measures be taken for student infractions that threaten school safety. Jackson asserts that zero tolerance is a national concern. In a Chicago newspaper Jackson stated that zero tolerance and the policies it spawns is bigger than just the Decatur Seven (Baron, 1999). Other political leaders concerned about zero tolerance include state Representative Constance A. Howard who thinks that the policy works against Black students. She asserts that from the data they analyzed African-American students are more likely to receive harsher penalties than non African-American students. However, Representative Howard does not think this is intentional, but rather an indication of the lack of sensitivity by school administrators and school boards (Patterson & Man, 1999).

Students' rights become part of the narrative important to understanding the role of school violence prevention and zero tolerance policies within public schools. Shannon Wilson (2000) examines how individualism as a dominant narrative construct denies full subjectivity to individuals who cannot or do not desire to be read through this narrative. She contends that a perception of rights and choice, which is communicated through narratives of individualism, perpetuates social inequities that contradict ideals important to democracy. Furthermore, Weisman (2000) asserts that individuals who exist outside norms established by the dominant narrative (White, male, Christian, heterosexual,

middle-class) are disadvantaged by systems (public schools) that implicitly value these traits. Wilson's study reveals an intriguing connection between Christian fundamentalist views and zero tolerance policies. These findings are important in understanding why school violence prevention practices and zero tolerance policies remain intact, as well as how these policies and practices target certain sectors of the school population.

Understanding how inequities related to race, ethnicity, class and gender are translated covertly into differential treatment dictated by school violence prevention policies and practices is critical. How these factors influence decisions to drop out of school become essential to this research effort. In order to combat these inequities Wilson (2000) suggests that a rhetoric of individualism has the potential to dismantle the imbalance of power and access experienced by various citizens, since individuals would not be judged by their achievements without regard to the degree of privilege that determined their opportunity.

Assuming a "level playing field" for all students appears to perpetuate inequities that are further enforced through disciplinary procedures that appear blind to the needs of individuals outside the norm. Supporters of stricter discipline in schools often cite the lack of religion in schools as the cause of the problems associated with school violence. The United States is the most religious of all the industrialized nations and is also one of the most violent. Gordon A. Crews and M. Reid Counts (1997) assert that in "homes and in communities, approximately every 36 minutes one child is killed or injured by a firearm for an average of more than 14,000 each year" (p. 5). To assume that bringing

religion back to the classroom will curb violence in schools and society ignores many other vitally important factors.

Chapman (1999) also finds faulty correlation between lack of religion and school violence. Bringing prayer back to the classroom and posting the Ten Commandments are often cited as remedies to the problems of school violence, but assuming a correlation between lack of religion and school violence ignores the reality of a culture of violence and the lived experiences of students. This study is especially relevant since Christian fundamentalism plays an important role in establishing the overall school climate in public schools in southeastern Georgia.

Issues related to religion become paramount in attempting to unravel the various factors that support school violence prevention practices and policies. Robert D. Stacey (1999) examined how religious accommodation and secularization have replaced the once predominant Protestant-Catholic concerns in education as a response to the developing relationship between the religious conservative movement and the professional education establishment. Tracing the change to three forces that arose in the 1970s, (a general secularization of the public square, constitutional and judicial pressures, and a substantial curricular reform effort within the education profession), Stacey (1999) contends that the American public education environment has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. These changes may help explain why zero tolerance has gained so much support within the educational arena and also shed additional light on the role of religion within the design and implementation of public educational policies related to

school discipline. Examining religion, morality, and America's public schools, Raymond Roberts (1999) asserts:

> Different philosophical understandings of religion exercise a determinative influence over at least three factors important to the debate over education. These factors are: interpretation of the situation in American education, normative understandings of education, and the range of acceptable educational policy options. (p. 5)

He concludes that the prospects for a consensus on a single theory of religion are limited.

Seeking the opinions of Evangelical ministers, Heffern (1999) interviewed seven ministers in a central Virginia community regarding their perceptions of public education. Besides sharing their personal experiences with public education, the participants focused on the issue of religious liberty contained in the First Amendment and the need to bring resolution to the conflict between public education and its religious critics. The ministers expressed varying opinions regarding the teaching of Christian ideals and the promotion of behaviors that conform to standards endorsed by Evangelicals. Disagreeing that the current application of the religious liberty clauses of the First Amendment protects the religious freedom of Evangelicals, the ministers remain unconvinced of the wisdom behind the separation of church and state.

As the debate around the role of religion in public schools continues the importance of religion as a significant part of human life and culture remains unchallenged. S. Harris-Ewing (1999) examined the attitudes, knowledge and preparation of pre-service teachers regarding the role of religion and religious diversity in public education. The research revealed that teachers were unaware of many legal parameters involving religion in public schools and considered themselves unprepared to meet these challenges. Uncertainty, as well as ignorance regarding the role of religion in public education, is

reflected in the number of litigation cases related to the First Amendment Religion Clause over the past 50 years.

David S. Doty (1999) analyzed litigation cases and final decisions from 1945 into the 1990s to determine whether a written school district policy was at issue. Implementing alternative dispute resolution (ADR) policies offers alternatives to court litigation and this has been successfully implemented by school districts. He feels that such alternatives may work to not only reduce First Amendment disputes in public education, but also have the potential to increase public support and confidence in public schools. Undoubtedly, First Amendment Rights, whether regarding free speech or freedom of religion, are important cornerstones of our democracy. Determining to what extent schools either uphold First Amendment Rights or find ways around them is important for assuring fair and equitable treatment for all involved in public education. Furthermore, to what extent the influence of religion in public schools affects decisions regarding disciplinary procedures deserves attention.

Support for corporal punishment is closely tied to Christian fundamentalism. By interviewing elementary and middle level principals regarding their disciplinary practices from 1966-1996, Linda S. Hix's (2000) work provides historical contextualization. Emerging themes include an increase in collaboration with other professionals, a move away from out-of-school suspension to more frequent use of in-school suspension, and less corporal punishment. Since this study focuses on elementary and middle schools, the findings may not be extrapolated to high schools and current findings have not supported these shifts at the local high school.

A reduction in the use of corporal punishment was not documented by Morales (1999) in her study of K-12 principals in the state of Idaho. Although male administrators favor corporal punishment more than female administrators do, the primary indicator of those favoring this mode of punishment was age and prior experience as a student with corporal punishment. In Idaho a male administrator between the ages of 56 and 65 who works in a K-12 school and who attended a school as a student in which corporal punishment was practiced continues to favor this mode of discipline. Whether a link between the use or nonuse of corporal punishment and school violence has been researched would be interesting and would contribute to a greater understanding of the effectiveness of this means of discipline. Public schools in Georgia legally use corporal punishment as a disciplinary measure. In addition, investigating the use of corporal punishment and dropout rates might also prove valuable for a future study.

Who gets punished and how severely also informs this discussion. Slade Franklyn Helmly (1999) investigated the variables affecting the incidence and severity of disciplinary measures. The study indicates that GPA and parents' educational level were inversely related to discipline incidence. Those who attend rural schools were less likely to be disciplined at school than their peers in urban and suburban settings. If parents' educational level is an indicator, then the role of socioeconomic status and most likely race/ethnicity, must also be considered.

School discipline sometimes includes in-school suspension for infractions not deemed threatening to school safety. The success of this procedure in changing student behavior was investigated by Woosley (1999) who found that combining in-school suspension

with some form of counseling by a teacher or counselor to be the most effective in changing negative student behavior. However, Woosley (1999) laments that in-school suspension at the elementary level is still primarily punitive. I agree and assert that from my experience in public schools current in-school suspension procedures do not effectively deter behavior problems in most students. Woosley (1999) hypothesizes that school professionals either do not read the current literature regarding in-school suspension or lack the funds to maintain a therapeutic program. In either case, continuing a practice that does not change a student's behavior does little to affect positive changes in school climate and may create a school climate inhospitable to some students. If a therapeutic approach were initiated at the elementary level for those placed in in-school suspension, perhaps fewer disciplinary problems would be experienced at the upper levels. It is my understanding that in-school suspension is deemed a punitive measure at the high school level and counseling components are absent.

Researchers Shirley P. Andrews, Paulette B. Taylor, Ellice P. Martin and John R. Slate (1998) investigated an alternative to after school detention by implementing a school lunch detention program for the 1700 students in grades 9 through 12 at a high school in a Southern state. Since failure to appear for after school detention escalates punishment to ISS and eventually OSS, the researchers were interested in determining whether a school lunch detention program would reduce the number and frequency of students being suspended. The researchers compared the number of suspensions during the first two weeks of the fall semester with the number of suspensions during the first two weeks of the spring semester when the school lunch detention program was

implemented. According to Andrews, Taylor, Martin and Slate (1998) "a statistically significant lower frequency of suspension for failure to show for detention occurred when the detention was held during lunch as compared to detention held after school" (para. 12).

> The percentage of students complying with after school detention was 58.3%, and 41.7% failed to show for after school detention. Of the students who were assigned lunch detention, 72.4% complied with the disciplinary action and 27.6% failed to show for detention. (Andrews, Taylor, Martin & Slate, 1998, para.12)

Students perceived the program to be more receptive to their needs and school officials also thought the program assisted students in serving their detentions and avoiding future suspensions. Andrews, Taylor, Martin and Slate (1998) assert that this program may be more effective than current programs that are more punitive in nature.

Concern over school safety has initiated many school policies, including the wearing of school uniforms. Henry Stevenson (1999) investigated the effect of wearing school uniforms on appearance and behavior among youth in public middle and high schools. He found that wearing uniforms did improve attendance and reduce expulsion, but did not improve general discipline problems such as fights, weapon possession incidents, assault and battery incidents, vandalism/arson incidents, suspensions, and school crimes. He concedes that there are no quick fixes for improving student discipline. These findings are pertinent to my study and reaffirm the need to deconstruct social, economic, political, cultural and psychological factors framing school violence and school violence prevention policies and practices in public schools.

In their efforts to improve student behavior schools implement a wide variety of programs. The Honor Level System, investigated by Phillip Joseph Ertl (1999), appears

to have a positive effect on reducing truancy rates and expulsion rates, as well as a positive effect on school disciplinary climate and school climate in general. However, schools that used this system tended to implement more middle school initiatives and measures to improve student's social development. Whether such programs are available to high schools is unknown, but middle school reform appears to be more proactive in their attempts to address school discipline problems.

Another program, The Boys Town Educational Model (BTEM), targets middle school students and incorporates a systemic violence prevention program. The program encourages building relationships with students, teaching a specific social skills curriculum, and maintaining a classroom discipline program that builds on students' strengths and teaches them to take responsibility for their behaviors. McNeese (1999) compared two middle schools over a two-year period and determined that the one using BTEM had a decrease in suspensions, aggression, and disrespect directed toward adults, as well as non-compliant behaviors. Disciplinary policies and procedures devoid of measures to improve the social and emotional well being of student offenders appear to be ineffectual. To what extent these disciplinary tactics affect students' decisions to drop out of school become part of the dissertation research focus.

Margaret Graham Tebo, a legal affairs reporter for the American Bar Association Journal, critiques the legal and "common sense" aspects of current zero tolerance policies by citing several cases that have resulted in lawsuits by parents against school districts. In her article "Zero-Tolerance: Zero Sense," Tebo (2000) understands that school violence is a "hot-button issue," but questions whether strict, inflexible policies constitute the

answer or whether all-or-nothing punishments merely alienate students. Tebo comments on cases that reflect extreme disciplinary measures for seemingly innocuous "crimes:"

> The 'weapon' brought by the six-year-old was a plastic knife in his lunch sack, put there by a grandmother who wanted him to be able to spread his peanut butter. The 'drugs' traded by the seventh-graders were Midol tablets. The 'terrorist threat' by the high schooler was an ill-conceived campaign poster for a student council candidate that attempted to parody the movie Speed. (para. 4)

The rise in litigation resulting from zero tolerance policies attest to the controversy. Tebo (2000) states that even though no current statistics are available on the number of public school students formally disciplined or prosecuted for wrongdoing, a recent informal discussion during a seminar for attorneys who represent children showed a sharp increase in the number of clients seeking counsel over perceived injustices in school discipline.

Alienation between schools and students is growing as the trend increases. Bernardine Dohrn, director of the Children and Family Justice Center at Northwestern University School of Law, asserts that "our whole goal should be to hold onto them until they grow out of it, not look for more and more ways to get rid of kids" (as cited in Tebo, 2000, para. 15).

Reconceptualizing school violence prevention policies to include counseling services for at-risk students to help prevent school violence may help nurture safer schools. Other recommendations include creating high-quality alternative schools to accommodate students who must be expelled; keeping schools open until 6 p.m. for extracurricular programming; using peer juries to hear disciplinary cases; setting up smaller schools

where all students are known to adults in charge; and removing guns from children's environments (Tebo, 2000).

Volz (1999), in an article for the American Psychological Association, targets the media as the culprit in distorting the truth about school violence and spawning the support for zero tolerance policies. "In recent months, for example, endless news reports of alienated student gunmen going on rampages in places such as Littleton, Colorado, and Conyers, Georgia, have played a large role in shaping public opinion" (para. 2). Irwin Hyman, of Temple University, who spoke at a symposium on violence at APA's 1999 Annual Convention (Aug. 20 – 24) in Boston asserts that "the sheer number of media accounts about violence suggests the problem of school crime is much worse than it is" (as cited in Volz, 1999, para. 3). Hyman also thinks that a psycho-educational curriculum teaching healthy coping skills would be an effective way of combating school violence, but that current media hype is resulting in funds being funneled into "ineffective" police efforts. Commenting on how schools respond to the threat of school violence, Hyman argues:

> [It] leads to a proliferation of mostly ineffective and unproven police tactics and punitive procedures [and] this draws vital resources and research funding from effective prevention and diverts public attention from the real causes of school violence. (as cited in Volz, 1999, para.7)

The literature review has yielded hundreds of articles related to school reform, school violence and school dropouts; interconnecting each and informing this research project. Researching the current literature in the areas of interest has been an exhausting enterprise. As I complete the literature review and think that I have made a good effort to uncover valuable articles, more articles are being published. I have presented the

literature thus far uncovered and have cited the major research trends. However, research that directly links the climate created by school violence prevention policies and practices and students' decision to leave school remain missing. In addition, the need to listen to high school dropouts regarding their decision to leave school and to appreciate their perceptions of how the school climate affected this decision remain necessary for better understandings. The research generated by this dissertation will hopefully begin to fill that gap.

CHAPTER V

METHODOLOGY

Critical and feminist theories guide the methodological approach to this project. By interviewing ten high school dropouts and by conducting focus group discussions with these former students regarding their decisions to quit school, opportunities for new understandings are possible. In addition, by exploring whether current school violence prevention policies and practices create an inhospitable school climate antagonistic to some students, thus encouraging them to drop out, new insights relevant to school reform may develop. Additional data is provided by the completion of personal questionnaires that contribute information relevant to social, economic, cultural and psychological factors on the lives of participants. Trying to understand how these factors may have also affected dropout decisions extends the research parameters.

Connecting the various factors that contribute to school violence; analyzing how school violence prevention tactics affect the school climate and the lives of students; and seeking to understand how leaving school may represent one response to these factors frames this research project. Exploring the lived experiences of former students, both inside as well as outside public schools, provides opportunities for greater comprehension and a demystification of stereotypical thinking. Peter McLaren (1989), in Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education, states that by starting with the problems and needs of students themselves the cultural and social forms through which they learn to define themselves become less obscure. McLaren explains that the "primacy of voice" is an important pedagogical concept. It signifies that "all

discourse is situated historically and mediated culturally and derives part of its meaning in interaction with others" (1989, p. 229). I agree with McLaren:

> A student's voice is not a reflection of the world as much as it is a constitutive force that both mediates and shapes reality within historically constructed practices and relationships of power. Each individual voice is shaped by its owner's particular cultural history and prior experience. Voice, then, suggests the means that students have at their disposal to make themselves 'heard' and to define themselves as active participants in the world. (p. 230)

By actively listening to a diverse population of recent high school dropouts; by engaging in dialogical conversations that reflect empathy, caring and trust; and by being highly attuned to power dynamics within relationships the interview process has the potential to reveal hidden truths. I concur with Daryl Koehn (1998) in Rethinking Feminist Ethics:

> If we are to hear those among us who speak in a different voice, we need a different ear. We require a discerning way of listening capable not only of attending to the plurality of perspectives in our human community, but also of assessing their truth and relevance to the good life. (p. 19)

Scapegoating youth as the primary cause of school violence, thus disregarding the culture of violence that permeates their lives, perpetuates blaming the victim attitudes (Ryan, 1976; McLaren, 1989). By dismissing dropouts' lived experiences within the public schools as valuable resources for gathering information capable of demystifying issues pertaining to school violence prevention, contemporary research is less complete. I argue that students have much to teach us about violence, especially how the fear of school violence operates within society and schools. By listening to those disenfranchised by the public school as well as society, we become more attuned to the untold truths and hidden agendas that may interrupt goals of social justice.

With these goals in mind my qualitative research design is guided by the insights of Catherine Marshall and Gretchen B. Rossman. Marshall and Rossman (1995) outline three challenges to qualitative research design that require developing a conceptual framework for the study that is thorough, concise, and elegant; planning a design that is systematic and manageable; and integrating these into a coherent document that convinces the audience the project can be done and will be done. Using these guidelines this research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the social, economic, political, religious, cultural and psychological factors framing violence and school violence prevention policies and practices in public schools and society?

2. What are the perceptions of public high school dropouts regarding school violence policies and practices and to what extent did they overtly or covertly influence students' decisions to dropout?

3. In what ways could school violence prevention be reconceptualized to make schools safer and encourage school completion?

Plan of Action

The plan of action includes specific guidelines and the rationale for the selection of participants, as well as ethical considerations necessary for guaranteeing respect for all those involved in the research process. The development of a personal questionnaire provides needed biographical data. A description of the milieu and the rationale for the site selection provides contextual information to better understand the lived experiences of the participants. Interview questions and focus group discussion themes reflect the

focus of the research and provide opportunities for participants to describe their high school experiences. Individual interviews and focus group discussions reflect the methodological approach that was guided by feminist and critical theory.

Participants

Understanding the importance of sampling decisions to the credibility and trustworthiness of the research project and that poor sampling decisions detract from the quality of the research, I thought careful considerations were in order (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The decision to interview ex-students rather than school workers is grounded in tenets supporting feminist methodology. Such an approach supports the premise that these individuals have unique insights regarding their lived experiences in school and that their perceptions are often omitted from contemporary literature. Mangena Oshadi (1991) in her article "Against Fragmentation: The Need for Holism," explains that feminist methodology adheres to "the idea that human experience is situated [and] speaks to the need to allow those who experience into the process of objectification of their experiences" (para. 5).

Feminist methodology supports participatory research and opposes the traditional idea of the subject/object approach, whereby the researched are defined as the objects. Within this project participants were served by "the knowledge formulated from their own experience since they ... participate in the objectification of such experience" (Oshadi, 1991, para. 5). By listening to high school dropouts and allowing them to "tell their story," this project frames itself within feminist methodological practices that provide opportunities for self-reflection.

All individuals selected to participate in this project attended the same high school between 1998-2000, but voluntarily withdrew before graduation. Participants are no longer enrolled in public high school and have not received a high school diploma. Students considered for participation may currently be attending a local technical college to obtain a GED or may be working toward a "home-school" diploma or certificate.

Limiting participants to students that had attended this high school between 1998-2000 provided consistency regarding school violence prevention practices and policies, as well as other school policies and curriculum practices affecting school climate. Students seeking either a college preparatory seal or vocational seal on their graduation diplomas were included. A prior history of school discipline problems was not part of the selection criteria. However, this information was solicited from participants for later analysis and interpretation. The participants may have dropped out any time during their high school career. Whether or not students "choose" to leave school is debatable. McLaren (1989), explaining how hegemony within public schools is maintained at the cultural level, describes the process by which students are "pushed out" of school:

> We have to recognize that students rarely 'drop out' by reflective choice. More realistically, they are 'pushed out.' In other words, they are placed in a double-bind situation. If they remain in school and desire to be successful, they are forced to forfeit their own cultural capital, street-corner knowledge, and dignity. (McLaren, 1989, p. 215)

To what extent this was the case for my participants is explored within the individual interviews.

Obtaining knowledge of students who attended this particular high school during 1998-2000 but who subsequently dropped was ascertained through personal

conversations with former students and other knowledgeable adults such as school counselors, teachers, administrators, and the local president of the NAACP. During the years 1995-2000 I worked as a middle school teacher within this system and I kept in contact with several of my former students. My 7th grade class of 1995 was the 2001 graduating class of this high school. Contact with these former students alerted me to students who had left this high school prior to graduation and who were not currently enrolled in any other high school. My daughter and son also alerted me to individuals they knew that had dropped out before graduation.

Creating ethnic and gender diversity among my sample was important. The self-identified specific gender and ethnic identities of the participants included: two Black females, one Black male, one Biracial male, three White males, and three White females. Hispanic, Native American and Asian students were not included since they represent less than one percent of this high school's student population. Although social class has been identified as a significant factor in predicting high school completion, this parameter was not included in the selection process. However, socio-economic status information was solicited from the participants for later analysis.

After an initial list of potential participants was developed each was contacted by phone to ascertain their willingness and availability to participate. During this pre-interview potential participants were queried regarding their identification with gender and ethnic categories. The following procedure was followed to randomly select the ten individuals who would become part of the research project:

1. All potential interviewees were sorted into four categories: Black males, Black females, White males, and White females. In order to place an individual into a specific category potential participants were asked to self-identify their ethnic and gender category. Self-identification preserved the importance of acknowledging the social construction of race and gender. Names and phone numbers of potential participants, along with self-identified gender and ethnic identity were placed on index cards.

2. If more than two participants were available in one category (Black male, Black female, White male, White female), index cards were randomly drawn to identify additional participants for that specific category. After four participants had been selected (male, female, Black, White), the remaining cards with identifying information were combined and randomly drawn until ten participants who met the needed criteria were obtained. If a card was drawn for a category that had already been filled it was discarded from the initial selection process.

3. After identifying the participants for the study the remaining index cards were kept on file for possible later inclusion. After completion of the study all cards were destroyed to protect confidentiality.

By following the selection process outlined above potential bias by the researcher in selecting participants was excluded and the names and identities of participants selected and those not selected were protected. Participants who were not selected were contacted by phone and informed that their names would remain on file until the end of the research project and then destroyed. Names that had been selected were then contacted by phone

and advised that material describing the project and an informed consent form would be sent to their homes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are of paramount importance and demand critical attention. Marshall and Rossman (1995) assert, "the qualities that make a successful qualitative researcher should be revealed through an exquisite sensitivity to the ethical issues that are present when we engage in any moral act" (p. 71). Understanding the cultural realities of the participants required expanding my own awareness of their lived experiences, in and out of school. Defining culture as a "multidimensional concept that encompasses the collective reality of a group of people [and realizing that] it is from this collective reality that attitudes, behaviors, and values are formed" (Lee, 1997, p. 17), guided the research process. Working toward openness; avoiding stereotypical assumptions; displaying honest concern and care; actively listening to each participant with empathy; and being non-judgmental provided opportunities for ethically sound procedures. Written permission to be interviewed and explanations of how, when and where these taped interviews would be conducted was also provided to participants. Confidentiality for all participants was respected throughout the research process. Appendix C provides documents supporting the ethical considerations for this research project.

Personal Questionnaire

The personal questionnaire (see Appendix D) was designed to extend the scope of the research data by requesting information regarding family history that included the educational attainments of other family members; perceived socioeconomic status;

personal education attainments; and personal experiences with disciplinary policies within their high school. This information complimented the data gathered through interviews and discussions, thus generating deeper understandings of participants lived experiences. The bulk of the data was generated from individual interviews, focus group discussions, and personal questionnaires.

During individual interview sessions participants were given the option of completing the questionnaire then or completing it at a later date and returning it to the researcher in a self-addressed stamped envelope. Most participants choose to complete the questionnaire during the interview session. In order to better appreciate the "situatedness" of the participants a description of the milieu is necessary.

Milieu

The Georgia County Guide provided the following statistical information describing the county in which participants resided during their time in high school (Boatright & Bachtel, 2001). All participants attended a high school located in southeastern Georgia about fifty miles from Savannah. Currently, the growing population of the community is approximately 50,000 with the median age being 26. As of 1996 the White population was 69.5%, the Black population was 29.6%; and the Hispanic population was 1.2%.

The county has 49.0% of its land devoted to agriculture, but less than 4.0% of the population is involved in farming, forestry or fishing. Other occupations involve management, technology, service, and labor. Both secondary and post-secondary institutions and the regional medical center employ the greatest number of individuals.

In 1997 the per capita income was $17,112, compared to the state per capita income of $23,882. The number of families living below the poverty level in 1993 was 22.4%, higher than the state average of 15.6%. Female-headed families accounted for 44.4% of those living in poverty and children ages 0-17 accounted for 30.1% of those living in poverty. Female-headed families and children living in poverty accounted for 41.6% of all Blacks. The 1996 county index crime rate per 100,000 was 3,562.6 compared to the state index crime rate of 6,104.1; over 95.4% of crimes involved property and less than 4.6% were categorized as violent crimes.

The race/ethnicity of the school communities within this county reveals approximately 40% Black, 59% White and the remaining 1% is evenly divided between Hispanic and Asian individuals (Georgia Department of Education, 2000, Georgia Public Education Report Card). A comparison of the lower White school population (59%) to the community population (69%) reflects increased enrollment in a local private school, as well as several church schools. With over 8,000 students the county has an excess of 50% of its students eligible for free/reduced lunch, thus reflecting the economic depression of the area (GDOE, 2000, Georgia Public Education Report Card). The percent of persons 25 and over who had not completed high school as of 1990 was 32.4% (Boatright & Bachtel, 2001).

Although the county's 2000-2001 dropout rate for the high school my participants attended is reported to be seven percent of the population, the percent of students graduating from this high school in 2001 is reported to be 58% as compared to the state rate of 71.1% (GDOE, 2000-2001 Georgia Public Education Report Card). If 58% of the

students who entered this high school as freshman in 1997 graduated in 2001, what happened to the remaining 42%? Hepburn and White (1990) explain how such discrepancies develop:

> The incidence of dropping out is usually reported as a percentage, popularly called a dropout rate. To understand what a reported rate means we must know what that rate refers to. For example, a 5.4% dropout rate calculated by the Georgia Department of Education for 1986-87 tells us that 5.4% of Georgia students enrolled in grade 8 through 12 were administratively dropped from enrollment during the 1986-87 school year. A 37.3% rate, calculated by the same department, tells us that 37.3% of the ninth graders enrolled in 1983-84, did not graduate from high school in 1986-87. An 18.3 % rate tells us that an average of 18.3% of Georgians ages 18 to 24 had yet to complete high school in 1986 and 1987. (p. 5)

The most recent statistic announcing that almost half of all Georgia public high school students drop out reflects the difference between the number of freshmen who entered ninth grade in 1996 and the number that graduated in 2000 (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2001; GDOE, 2000-2001 Georgia Public Education Report Card). State Superintendent Linda Schrenko asserts that these statistics are misleading since many students take longer than four years to complete high school (GDOE, 2001, 2000-2001 Georgia Public Education Report Card). How much of this extended time reflects assignments to alternative schools or suspensions directly related to policies and practices involving school violence prevention is important to consider. In addition, since all states were compared on the same criteria the fact that Georgia has one of the worst dropout rates in the United States is still reason for concern. Undoubtedly, discrepancies in dropout rates may be attributed to the way percentages are calculated and the lowest rate would be most desirable if one is trying to show the success of dropout prevention programs. I agree with Mark Twain: "There are lies, damn lies and statistics." However,

we must never forget that these statistics reflect the lives of students and are not merely numbers to fuel educational debates.

Interview and Focus Group Process

Sensitivity to multicultural factors as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal issues during the interview and discussion processes, were extremely important. "Methods cannot be conceived as neutral tools--but are rather practices that imply distinctive ways of understanding the world" (DeVault, 1999, p. 22). Respect, empathy, concern and care guided the process.

Marjorie DeVault (1999) in Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research comments that feminist methodology is "committed to reflexive analysis of the knower as an element of the known [and] signifies an interest in the interactive processes through which people make meaning in social contexts" (p. 2). The interview and discussion processes offered opportunities for participants to better understand personal lived experiences and to discover new insights regarding future goals and opportunities. Understanding the relationship between researcher and participants is important in feminist methodology. Oshadi (1991) asserts "the social scientist consciously forges relations with those who are oppressed and disadvantaged" (para. 6).

> Within this approach, the researched finds a `reciprocity' or `mutual' interaction with the researcher who possesses skill and who throws her own experience into the analysis. Such experiences become transformed into objective knowledge. The researcher and the researched must be able to find themselves in the end product of the research. In this context, the knowledge formulated must be of value to those whose experience is reflected therein. Such knowledge goes to facilitate the struggles waged by the disadvantaged. It may not be used by the status quo to continue subjugation, oppression and exploitation. In this sense, knowledge is itself 'liberated.' (Oshadi, 1991, para. 6)

Accepting and understanding my own subjectivity enhanced the interview and discussion processes.

The interview process reflected strategies and skills based on Gerard Egan's approach to interviewing outlined in The Skilled Helper: A Problem-Management Approach to Helping. Egan (1994) outlines skills necessary for effective interpersonal communication that include an "attentive presence [that] can invite or encourage them [participants] to trust you, open up, and explore significant dimensions of their problem situation" (p. 91). Whether participants think their decision to drop out constituted a "problem situation" is not predetermined, but rather becomes part of the exploration process. In addition, Egan (1994) outlines the requirement of "active listening" that includes observing and reading the participant's nonverbal behavior; listening to and understanding the participant's verbal messages; listening to the whole person in the context of the social and cultural settings of his or her life; and listening for what is not being said.

Authors Allen Ivey and Mary Bradford Ivey (1999) in Intentional Interviewing and Counseling: Facilitating Client Development in a Multicultural Society, extend Egan's requirements for effective communication to include sensitivity to a variety of multicultural factors. Although body language, eye contact, and conversational differences in distance may vary from and within cultures, "authenticity is vital to the way you communicate" (p. 35). Ivey and Ivey explain that "whether you use visual, vocal, or verbal tracking or attentive body language, it is vital that you be a real person in a real relationship" (p. 35). Attention to authenticity framed the approach to all interactions with participants. The individual interviews provided opportunities for all to

tell their story; the focus group discussions provided opportunities not only to tell their story but also to hear other stories that enriched the entire process.

Researcher Sue Hendler (1996) asserts that a focus group "allows for interactive processes to produce information that enables a researcher to pose new questions, gain an understanding about a phenomenon, reach tentative conclusions of a more generalizable nature, and test hypotheses" (para.1). Hendler (1996) sees "the focus group as being part of, or at least complementary to, feminist research methods" (para.1). She states that focus groups support feminist methodology since they "give voice to concerns that have not been heard; treat those being studied as partners in the research; have an action orientation; are often interdisciplinary; attempt to be inclusive; and often include the researcher as a participant" (para. 6). Hendler asserts:

> A moderator acting in a non-hierarchical manner with respect to her/his participants and creating a comfortable working environment would be consistent with the objectives of feminist research. In addition, if a focus group was oriented toward bettering the conditions of participants, was self-critical, was based on interdisciplinary, inclusive insight, and was comprised of individuals who often lacked an opportunity to voice their interests, the method could be seen as feminist. (para. 7)

DeVault (1999) speaks of "oppositional research," a label that might refer to both feminist research committed to challenging many oppressions and also to research with other kinds of liberatory foundations and aims. Hopefully, the processes integral to this project offered participants new ways of seeing and thinking. Yet, I acknowledge that "given their ambitious goals, feminist researchers must accept that their efforts will always be only partially successful [since] research, like any human activity, is socially organized and shaped by the institutional context in which it occurs" (DeVault, 1999, p. 22).

By understanding the limitations of this project I remain optimistic that the processes offered opportunities for gathering new knowledge and better understandings related to students' decisions to drop out of high school. In addition, discovering how the school climate may have been affected by school violence prevention policies and practices, thus contributing to this decision, was also vitally important. The construction of interview questions that stimulated conversations important to this topic reflect attention to feminist methodology, as well as respect for multicultural issues.

Interview Questions

The interview questions helped initiate interpersonal communication. Using open-ended questions; fostering a non-judgmental environment; working to focus and refocus participants to the goals of the research project; and clarifying and summarizing responses, valuable information was collected. Aligning interview questions with the goals of the research project provided opportunities to gather information preconceived to be valuable. However, remaining attentive to the needs of the participants and encouraging them to help guide the process provided opportunities to uncover issues not yet conceived of by the researcher. The process was like a dance with both parties taking turns leading. The idiosyncratic nature of the interview process remained open to revisions, insights, and unforeseen problematics. See Appendix E for interview questions.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions followed the completion of individual interviews. The initial focus group discussion provided opportunities for dialogue around themes relevant to the topic, but novel themes were anticipated. The group focused on building relationships

between and among participants; offering opportunities to share experiences; addressing common concerns; and creating insights derived from these interactions. Personal training in group counseling provided the skills and knowledge necessary for creating an atmosphere of trust and openness. Although the goals of these activities were not designed to be therapeutic, it was hoped that participants gained new insights and opportunities for personal fulfillment.

The second focus group discussion offered a video pertaining to issues around school dropouts in order to solicit opinions and reactions of the group. This session provided an opportunity to view a video addressing contemporary issues related to school dropouts. The thirty-five minute video entitled "Look Before You Leap: The Dropping-Out Crisis," focused on choices and alternatives to students who may be contemplating dropping out or who have dropped out of school. The participants' reactions to a commercial representation of the plight of high school dropouts provided opportunities to explore issues of identification and representation or mis-representation in social, political and cultural contexts. The focus group discussion questions are outlined in Appendix F.

Collecting, Organizing, Analyzing and Interpreting Data

All interviews and discussions were audio taped and then transcribed for analysis and interpretation. However, collecting the data was only a preliminary step. Agreeing with Wolcott (1994) that "the real mystique of qualitative inquiry lies in the processes of *using* data rather than in the processes of *gathering* data," the ultimate challenge lies in organizing, analyzing and interpreting the collected data (p. 1). Wolcott (1994) contends that "qualitative researchers need to be storytellers" (p. 17). My goal was to tell my

participants' stories and to relate these to the social, economic, political, cultural and psychological factors informing school violence prevention policies and practices. Determining how these factors interconnected and affected high school students' decisions to drop out of school required analysis. However, limitations must be understood. I agree with Wolcott (1994):

> Just as no researcher as fieldworker can ever hope to *get* the whole story down to every last detail, no researcher as author can ever expect to *tell* the whole story either. One way to circumvent the problem of never being able to tell the whole story is to focus on only one or two aspects, creating a story-within-a-story in which the essence (but not the detail) of the whole is revealed or reflected in microcosm. (p. 19)

Wolcott (1994) also warns researchers to remain alert to the fact that "adopting *any* framework imposes structure on the descriptive account" (p. 21). Furthermore, researchers must be cautious to "not gather only data that support a preconceived framework" (p. 21). Openness and self-reflection throughout the data gathering and data analysis phase provide safety nets for avoiding these pitfalls.

Wolcott (1994) describes three major ways to "do something" with descriptive data:

1. Treat descriptive data as fact with the underlying assumption that the data speaks for itself.

2. Organize and report data using a careful, systematic approach that identifies key factors and relationships among them.

3. Work to make sense of the findings, to seek understandings or explanations that go beyond description or analysis.

However, Wolcott cautions:

> I do suggest that identifying and distinguishing among the three may serve a useful purpose, especially if the categories can be regarded as varying *emphases* that

> qualitative researchers employ to organize and present data. I propose that qualitative researchers keep this distinction in mind as they go about transforming their observational data—all that stuff collected on tape, film, and paper, plus all that other intangible stuff in one's head—into authoritative written accounts. (1994, p.11)

After transcribing the interviews and discussions the data analysis required teasing out common threads. Wolcott (1994) outlines ways to approach analysis that include highlighting the findings; displaying the findings; following and reporting "systematic" fieldwork procedures; fleshing out whatever analytical framework guided the data collection; identifying patterned regularities in the data; critiquing the research process; and proposing a redesign for the study.

Using Wolcott's suggestions to interconnect multiple threads extracted from the data with the focus of the research project provided a vehicle for organizing, analyzing and interpreting the research. Wolcott understands:

> Analysis always suggests something of the scientific mind at work: inherently conservative, careful, systematic. Analysis does more than merely hint at fact, however: it presumes to *be* fact. If, as researcher, I choose and follow procedures correctly, you as reader can and, if we are to maintain a dialogue, you must accept my findings. (p.25)

Although the research focused on determining interconnections among social, economic, political, religious, cultural and psychological factors framing school violence prevention policies and practices in public school and how these policies may have overtly and covertly affected students' decisions to drop out, other leads for future research emerged. Wolcott (1994) contends "truly analytical moments will occur during brief bursts of insight or pattern recognition, some of which must already have occurred to have identified even the most rudimentary categories and coding procedures" (p. 21).

After organizing and carefully analyzing the data interpretation becomes critical. Wolcott (1994) distinguishes between interpretation and analysis.

> Associated as it is with meaning, the term *interpretation* is well suited to mark a threshold in thinking and writing at which the researcher transcends factual data and cautious analyses and begins to probe into what is to be made of them. (p. 36)

Wolcott warns against "pseudoauthorativeness" and implores qualitative researchers to "watch for the tendency to employ research as a basis for self-validation" (p. 38). In addition, Wolcott states that "what a researcher intends is not necessarily what the reader actually finds" (p. 51). This project attends to Wolcott's "warnings" throughout the organization, analysis and interpretation of the data.

Unforeseen circumstances during the research process necessitated some flexibility in executing the research plan. Originally I had planned to interview students who were over eighteen and although the number of students who attended this high school between 1998–2000 and later dropped out exceeded the number needed for interviews, many of my leads had left town or were no longer available for interviews. The initial proposal was amended to permit interviewing students sixteen and seventeen years old, thus increasing the pool of potential interviewees. Not only did this revision provide a larger number of potential interviewees, it also provided opportunities to better understand the current issues facing high school dropouts.

The description of the methodology used in this research project provides opportunities to reflect on the practices and procedures used. The following detailed description of the research findings constitutes the data collection phase of the project.

CHAPTER VI

DATA PRESENTATION

The data presentation is divided into two sections: individual interviews and focus group discussions. Data related to individuals are based on information gathered from personal questionnaires and taped interviews. Both provided an intimate look at personal factors affecting students' decisions to leave high school prior to graduation. In addition, students also shared their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of school policies and practices overtly and covertly informing school violence prevention. All interviewees' names and references to other individuals cited during the interviews or focus group discussions have been changed.

After a brief biographical sketch of each participant, the data presentation focuses on three areas of interest: perceptions of high school experiences in general; personal factors related to the decision to drop out of high school; and effects of school violence prevention policies and practices as well as the climate they fomented, on participants' decisions to drop out. Determining what information to include in the data presentation section was difficult since each participant provided an account of their lived experiences that transcended the parameters of this study. However, the data presented provide the most direct connection to the focus of this research study and work to provide information for addressing the following questions:

1. What are the social, economic, political, religious, cultural and psychological factors framing school violence prevention policies and practices in public schools and society?

2. What are the perceptions of high school dropouts regarding school violence prevention policies and practices and to what extent did they overtly or covertly influence students' decisions to drop out?

3. In what ways could school violence prevention be reconceptualized to make schools safer and encourage school completion?

The Interviewees

Ten recent high school dropouts were interviewed over the course of six months. The initial list of potential interviewees had exceeded 25, but the number of available and willing participants quickly dwindled to 10. Securing participants proved more difficult than I had anticipated for various reasons. Several potential interviewees had left the area to seek employment since job opportunities are limited in this community; one individual was incarcerated.

Some individuals who were contacted regarding their dropout status seemed reluctant to be interviewed. The number of White males and females who agreed to be interviewed exceeded my requirements. However, finding Black males and females willing to be interviewed proved extremely challenging. I surmise that the ethnicity of the interviewer had a significant effect on the willingness of some dropouts to be interviewed. Regardless of my efforts to appear sensitive to White privilege, several Black dropouts passively refused to be interviewed. Although an oral agreement to be interviewed would be secured over the telephone, three Black females did not show up for the scheduled interview. Upon second contact, each apologized for not making the scheduled appointment and agreed to a second interview appointment. When they did not show up a

second time I finally realized they did not want to participate. I found this frustrating and saddening. The experience left me more aware of communication gaps that existed and more alert to the effects of White privilege within interpersonal relationships. If I had been Black I wonder if these individuals would have been more willing to participate. Besides being White, I had also been a teacher within the school system these students had chosen to leave. Ultimately, I was unable to gain their trust.

I hypothesized that some White and Black potential interviewees still considered dropping out of high school an indication of personal failure and a defect in their character. However, I was able to coax most of them into telling their story once they realized that my primary interest was in their perceptions of their high school experiences, including policies and practices related to school violence prevention.

The interviewees ranged in age from 16 to 20. The legal age to drop out of high school in Georgia is 16, however only four interviewees dropped out at this age. The majority (5) of the interviewees dropped out during their junior year; two dropped out as seniors; two left school as sophomores; and one quit high school after the first semester. All but two individuals were enrolled in college preparatory courses. Six participants have been awarded their GED diploma and one interviewee is presently taking courses for a GED diploma. The remaining three are pursuing their high school diplomas through correspondence programs. Four of the individuals are gainfully employed; two are parents and two are expecting a child this summer. Half of the interviewees reside with their parents. At this time one participant is incarcerated. Two of the males and one of the female participants cited have received serious disciplinary actions; two had been

assigned to the alternative school; and one had attended a tribunal for potential expulsion. None of the students were identified as receiving special education services. The following table summarizes some of the pertinent information regarding the interviewees.

Table 1: Profile of Interviewees

Name	Gender & Ethnicity	High School Track	Dropout Age & H. S. Status	Current Educational Attainment	Residency Employment Children
Carl	White Male	College Prep	18 Senior	GED	Parents Unemployed No Children
Melissa	White Female	College Prep	18 Junior	GED	Parents Employed No Children
Edgar	Black Male	College Prep	18 Junior	GED	Independent Unemployed Parent-1 son
Mark	White Male	Tech Prep	17 Sophomore	GED Technical College	Independent Employed No Children
Fran	White Female	College Prep	17 Junior	GED Technical College	Parents Employed No children
Kevin	White Male	College Prep	16 Junior	GED in Progress	Parents Unemployed No children
Lisa	Black Female	Tech Prep	17 Senior	Correspondence Course	Independent Unemployed Parent/ 1 son Pregnant
Steve	Bi-racial Male	College Prep	16 Freshman	Correspondence Course	Parents Unemployed No children
Deirdre	Black Female	College Prep	16 Sophomore	Correspondence Course	Independent Unemployed Pregnant
Nicole	White Female	College Prep	16 Junior	GED in Progress	Parents Employed No Children

Carl—An Openly Gay High School Student

Carl, a White 18 year old male, dropped out of high school during the spring semester of his senior year. He has completed his GED at the local technical college and plans to continue post secondary education in the future. His frustration with having dropped out so close to graduation was evident. "I had nine weeks left when I dropped out!" His mother and father are both college graduates and his father is a public school administrator in another county. Both parents took an active interest in his public education and intervened on his behalf when necessary during his school career. Carl, an only child who was adopted at birth, had expected to graduate. He had attended a university laboratory school prior to attending the city high school. Carl stated that his experiences at this smaller school were very positive and he was not prepared for the social and emotional demands of the larger high school. He had been academically successful and was pursuing a college preparatory seal with plans to attend college the following fall when he dropped out.

Carl was eager to tell his story and hoped that others would read and understand what had happened that "forced" him to drop out. As an openly gay high school student, Carl asserts that his openness about being gay was a primary factor in events that led to his leaving school before graduation. After enduring three and a half years of harassment from fellow students that included physical and emotional abuse, physical destruction of his property, and feeling that the administration was impotent to protect him, Carl called it quits. He recalled:

> At first, you know, I was an incoming freshman and I didn't know totally what was going on. I was unsure about myself so I didn't know what to do. I sucked it up and

> probably my sophomore year I started taking it to the administration....I'd probably go there about everyday—once or twice a day—and nothing ever got better—so it was as if nothing was even happening. (Taped Interview, July 23, 2001)

In addition to perceived discrimination based on his sexual orientation, Carl contended that teachers treat students differently based on socio-economic factors. "In high school there's always little groups or little cliques and teachers usually favor upper class, rich, nicely dressed preppy clique – and I didn't at all fit into that category." Carl recalled one or two teachers who were different and with whom he developed a positive relationship. However, he felt this was insufficient and the lack of understanding and support he received from school personnel contributed to his bleak perception of his high school experience.

> I mean having two teachers on your side is great, but if all the teachers...throughout my whole high school experience could have been, 22 or 28 teachers, [it] would have been even better. That's sad that two out of twenty-something really [were]... willing to talk with me, understand what was going on and give me support.

The understanding and support Carl yearned for might have helped with the frustration over the numerous acts of harassment he felt he endured for being openly gay. During his time in high school Carl remembered:

> Someone keyed my car numerous times, drove nails in my tire one time, put sugar and candy in my gas tank, clogged up my muffler somehow...disconnected one of the wires from my battery and ended up getting under my hood...and messing with the belts on the fan and the actual engine. So it was stuff that could have hurt me very much.

Both fear and controlled anger were evident in his voice as he stated that the administration never found out who had done these acts of vandalism and furthermore, made no effort to find out. "They [school personnel] say they are not responsible for what happens in the school parking lot." In addition to events that occurred on the parking lot,

Carl noted that "faggot" or "queer" would often be found scrawled across his locker and that "there was one time when the door just ended up falling off because they had literally ended up kicking it in."

The events that led to Carl's decision to quit school extend beyond the abuse he felt he experienced for being openly gay. During his senior year Carl had problems passing math. His mother had contacted the teacher early in the semester and requested she be notified if he was in jeopardy of failing. The teacher in question had not notified his mother that he was failing and on several occasions Carl stayed after school for math tutoring, but the teacher failed to meet with him on four out of five occasions. His perception was that she did not want to help him and his failing did not matter to her. Failing math class as a senior necessitated attending summer school and not graduating in the spring. He decided to "drop down" to a tech career diploma that did not require the additional math credit.

The second event Carl mentioned that affected his decision to leave school prior to graduation was a term paper lost by a teacher. "I had really worked my butt off on a term paper and a teacher ended up claiming I didn't turn it in and that pretty much screwed me out of graduating right there." Carl added, "If those two things wouldn't have happened I would have stayed in high school…I probably would have." Carl admitted these events were the "final straw" but added:

> Definitely I had been through too much…I had put up with too much and there was so much that hadn't been done as far as administration and teachers… Because no one deserves to be put through …what I got put through.

Commenting on others who dropped out, Carl added:

> It's basically the whole situation with not fitting in and then sometimes the school work if the teacher is not willing to level and come to a common position with you and understanding.... You know it's like why even try.

When asked about school violence and the polices and practices of the school employed to address such threats, Carl felt the school was often erratic in its implementation, vacillating from being very strict about having shirts tucked in or scanning for weapons to not enforcing these procedures and policies. "I think there's a lot of stuff that goes on that they don't know about."

Disciplinary procedures are in place for those who pose a threat to school safety. An incident that Carl was involved in during his freshman year precipitated such disciplinary procedures. A website had been developed off campus that provided opportunities for students to post comments about the high school. The general tone of the website was derogatory and some of the comments included threatening remarks about the administration. From his home, Carl added his negative thoughts about the school and the administration. The administration identified many of the individuals who had responded to this website and classified their participation as a threat to school safety. For his participation Carl was expelled, but later his punishment was reduced to several days OSS and ISS after the ACLU notified the school board that expulsion for responding to a website off campus was unconstitutional. Carl contends that the principal continued to harbor resentment toward him for this incident and stated:

> It probably hurt me as far as him wanting to take action and to help me against other students--it damaged how he thought of me as a person and what he could and couldn't do.

Although Carl did not think school violence prevention policies and practices directly affected his decision to leave school, he did admit that the lack of school personnel intervention on his behalf may be related to his involvement with the website during his freshman year. During the course of his high school career Carl requested assistance from the principal in averting the continuing harassment. Carl recalled being told by the principal that he "had problems [and] was a sick person" and that the principal "did not want to take time out with me." School violence takes many forms and the lack of intervention by school personnel to protect an openly gay student may fall into this category.

Being gay was not only a problem for Carl at school, but also at home. Having a gay son embarrassed his parents. His father was especially troubled and told Carl that his "hunting friends" were ridiculing him about his son being gay. Vacillating between denial and anger, Carl's parents refused to provide the support he so desperately needed and wanted. Carl moved out and visited friends in Virginia for three months, but eventually returned to his hometown. Still estranged from his parents, he is presently living with friends. He has been researching information on his biological parents and hopes to contact them in the near future. He is also planning to have both his first and last name changed. At this time, Carl does not envision a reconciliation between himself and his parents. His plans for the future are uncertain and he is seeking employment with little success. With neither his family nor the school's support, Carl still thinks dropping out of high school was his only alternative and at the end of the interview he confessed: "It was almost like I had nowhere to turn to."

Melissa—Being On Time and OSS

Melissa is a White 18 year old female who dropped out of high school during her junior year. She has a 14-year-old brother who attends school and she presently lives with her parents. She described her family as extremely supportive, providing her with both material and emotional support. By local standards her family is considered wealthy. Currently, she has completed her GED at the local technical college and is working for the family real estate business. Her plans include moving into her own apartment with her boyfriend and working toward a real estate license.

Melissa's perception of her high school experience reflected her discontent with school policies related to tardiness as well as resentment toward a general climate that she perceived as coercive and uncaring. Describing high school as "a fashion show" where people gossiped about you and where a myriad of rules and regulations made life unbearable, she was especially critical of policies related to tardiness.

> The reason why I dropped out was because it wasn't really about learning too much as it was about everything else that was going on. They wanted to give you ISS for stupid stuff... I mean for getting tardies and once you realized that ... all I have to do is get tardy again and I can get to stay home... because that is the punishment for it... [they should] make you stay in school instead of kicking you out. (Taped Interview, July 23, 2001)

At the time Melissa was in high school, excessive tardiness resulted in ISS and additional tardiness resulted in OSS. Presently, a state mandate has increased the severity of discipline for tardiness to include one day of OSS after five tardies in any one marking period. Students in ISS are given class assignments and allowed to make up tests. However, students serving OSS receive zeros for all assignments and tests given during that time. Researchers Andrews, Taylor, Martin and Slate (1998) state that this policy is

in place in many high schools throughout the country and "students frequently are given after school detention for a set number of tardies" (Andrews, Taylor, Martin & Slate, 1998, para. 5). Melissa commented that many teachers remained hostile to her after she returned from OSS and refused to inform her of curricular information that had been covered.

> A lot of teachers did not want to give you the work. They said because you're out of school you weren't suppose to make this stuff up and it wasn't for the point of making it up because you know that when you're out you can't make it up—it was more the fact that to catch up on stuff and they wouldn't allow you to do that and they wouldn't give you the stuff.

Returning to school after OSS did not guarantee a fresh start. Melissa stated that "once you've gotten the reputation of being out of school you keep that reputation" and teachers treat you badly. She commented on the lack of caring she experienced and how this affected her decision to drop out.

> When it seems that somebody cares about you—you do a lot better....But it was more like they didn't care whether you were there or not—they were there because they wanted their paycheck and that was basically—I mean that's all they did.

Melissa's sensitivity to the perceptions of teachers and other school personnel toward her affected her negative attitudes regarding her high school experience.

> I don't think they really thought I was too intelligent at all. I think they thought I was really dumb. And only because when I was there they would never give me the work to do—so therefore I had to pretty much beg [for the work] or I would be like 'screw it—I'm not doing it.' But to me, in all honesty, I love to read --I love to learn... I don't think they thought too much about me.

Asked if she had had the opportunity to develop a positive relationship with any adults in the school, Melissa said no. She added that if your parents knew people at the school you

might have more opportunities for developing such relationships, but for her there was nobody she could really go talk to that she trusted.

Melissa had concerns regarding the potential for school violence, but thought the current school violence prevention policies and practices did not address the major problems. As a student who had attended the local university laboratory elementary and middle school, adjusting to the demands of a much larger city school was difficult. She found it difficult not only to interact with the diverse population of the high school, but also thought paying more attention to multicultural issues and addressing misunderstandings about other cultures might better address school violence.

> I think because they throw you with so many different types of people and different types of backgrounds and ethnic groups and everything else…and religions…that it's kind of hard to understand when you were never taught before how to learn different cultures without criticizing what they believe and what they don't believe. And so when you don't know and you are ignorant to a certain thing it's kind of hard to get along with those people because you heard such bad things about people like that.

As a young working adult, Melissa commented on the amount of learning that has taken place since she quit high school. Renting apartments to college students has brought her in touch with a diversity of individuals, and she has learned to appreciate and respect their differences.

> I would never have talked to a gay person unless I had to….I do now…and we are friends and we get along well and it's like there are certain people that you would never think that you were friends with, but I know through personal experience by opening myself up and also learning—wanting to learn—you get a different view on different types of people.

In order to address this problem in high school, Melissa recommended that high school classes be smaller and "should include discussions about different types of people, different religions, different ethnic groups…people that just believe different things."

She thinks that stereotyping individuals, whether as a student or a teacher, creates obstacles to the educational process. Melissa would like her former high school teachers to know that "what's wrong with a lot of people is they stereotype too much without getting to know [them] and you can't really judge someone until you get to know them." Wistfully, Melissa wishes her former teachers could see her today.

Edgar –Accused of Carrying a Gun on Campus

Edgar, an 18-year-old Black male who quit high school in the eleventh grade, described a progression of disciplinary actions that led to his dropout status. Edgar's academic record revealed an above-average student who had planned to graduate. Like most previous interviewees, he completed his GED at the local technical college shortly after leaving high school. He admitted that the major obstacle to his completing high school was his conduct, but contends that this treatment for his minor offenses was more strict than those imposed on other students.

His family moved to Georgia from New Jersey when Edgar was still in elementary school and he attended local public schools for over eight years. His family struggles financially and Edgar worked during most of his high school career. On various occasions Edgar's parents intervened on his behalf by attending meetings with school officials. Although disappointed by his quitting school, they concede that it was impossible for him to continue in this situation. He no longer lives at home and has worked off and on for the past year. He has lived with the mother of his young son, although he recently moved out. Currently, Edgar is on parole for a minor drug violation. His future plans include moving to Atlanta to live near his older sister.

Edgar appeared anxious to tell his story. His resentment toward the events surrounding his dropping out was evident. He described his high school experience as "a big hassle" that involved ongoing reprimands for not having his shirt tucked in properly to being accused of carrying a weapon. Admitting that he was confrontational with authorities and occasionally broke school rules, he still contends that the disciplinary measures taken against him were unfair. He described various occasions when school officials appeared to target him.

> When I walked through the hallway it seemed like they were picking just at me....It's like once you come to the office one time they try to get you coming there. Once you go one time you're going to keep going the rest of the time you're in high school....It's like they don't like us or something. I hung in there until the eleventh grade and then I can't take it no more and I had to leave. (Taped Interview, July 26, 2001)

Edgar described an incident that confirmed his belief that school administrators had treated him unfairly. Several students walked by the principal with their shirts out, so Edgar decided he would pull his shirt out and see if they would let him also pass by without a reprimand.

> Cause like I see a couple of guys walk through—they don't have their shirts tucked in and walk right by the principal and nobody say nothing to them. I'm saying why do I have to tuck my shirt in when they don't tuck theirs in? So I tried an experiment one day. I took my shirt out and walked passed them and as soon as I got right by them, they turned around and said 'You have to go to the bathroom and tuck your shirt in and that's the last time I'm going to tell you—we're going to put you out in ISS.' I said 'OK,' and went to the bathroom...that was messed up...I mean I just see these other three guys walk past the principal and nobody said nothing to them. But me, as soon as I get close to them, they spot me up. I don't know if it's they know my face.

Dress code violations include not only un-tucked shirts, but also wearing clothing deemed inappropriate by school officials. Edgar was challenged for wearing a shirt that had unacceptable graphics and agreed to change into another shirt. After being followed

to his locker and into the restroom to change, Edgar confronted the administrator and insisted he leave him alone as he was complying with the demand to change shirts. Edgar was given four days ISS for insubordination.

> I said, 'Man you don't have to follow me—I'm a grown person—you know I can do things. You already corrected one problem—let me go about my business'....I kept arguing back and forth and he got mad....and gave me four days ISS. He's like next time this happens just do what I say and don't back talk me. I wasn't trying to back talk...my voice wasn't raised....he got mad because I wasn't letting go.

Although many of Edgar's friends had already dropped out and encouraged him to do the same, he stayed in school through his eleventh year. "They were like man I don't see why you are still going to school. They are going to keep on doing this and it is going to get even worse." According to Edgar it did get worse, "That's when they had the tribunal about the gun and I just said I quit. You know I just got tired of all the hassle....I wanted to graduate."

The events that finally triggered Edgar's decision to quit high school involved accusations by unnamed teachers who reported to the office that Edgar was carrying a suspicious object in his pocket. After being taken out of class and having a police officer search him, no suspicious object was found. The following day he was searched again because a teacher said she thought he was carrying a gun. This time two officers searched him and they found a cell phone. Even though the phone was not turned on and Edgar explained that he had brought it because he went to work right after school and needed it at work, the phone was confiscated and he was expelled for five days. When he returned to school he was searched again by two police officers. The accusations by unnamed

teachers concerning Edgar's carrying a weapon finally resulted in a tribunal, a hearing by school officials to determine his eligibility to continue attending school in their district.

> They kept saying I'm coming to school bringing up different objects and stuff, you know in school the only thing they found on me was like a cell phone....they say a teacher said I had a gun. I'm like why would I bring a gun to school—I'm trying to learn here...I wouldn't own a gun...I'm not even old enough to buy a gun.

Both his parents attended the tribunal. Edgar continued to argue that he had never brought a weapon to school and that the only banned object ever found in his possession was a cell phone, an offense that does not warrant permanent expulsion. He described the tribunal as a kind of trial in which the jury continued to bring up his former residency, New Jersey, as a possible reason for his alleged misbehavior.

> They kept bringing up that I'm from New Jersey—you know there's nothing but problem kids up north....I'm like why does that have anything to do with me now? My dad got excited. He's like we moved down from Jersey cause there's a lot of bad things up there and why does that have anything to do with why he's going to school down here? 'Well he's from a problem area so he's going to cause a problem down here.' So my daddy got outraged.

Declaring that his son would not attend that school, Edgar's dad was informed that Edgar was going to be expelled anyway. "You know they'd made their decision before I pled my half of the story...a waste of time." Still hoping to see his son graduate from high school, Edgar's dad requested he be transferred to another high school in the district. He was told that he could not attend any public school in the state of Georgia. Edgar stated the tribunal officials were adamant.

> 'Yes, we're putting you out of every school down here—unless you want to go back to your hometown [in New Jersey] and go to school—You can't go to school down here in Georgia no more—not any kind of high school.' Now that's messed up. Now I can't never get a high school diploma.

When asked about school violence and the policies and procedures employed by the school to prevent such violence, Edgar contended it was not a serious threat. A few fights might occur, but they were quickly brought under control and no weapons were used. Metal detectors and scanners seldom turned up anything more than a metal pencil sharpener. He did not think guns were brought onto the high school campus.

> Not the people I associate with.... They might say my people are bad...I never see them carry a gun to school. They didn't want to carry one because they know that's stupid. Why carry a gun to school just to carry it around and ...show people. That's stupid. ....You're going to get caught because they have drug raids...they have all the police here...Nobody wants to take that risk....Nobody wants to bring a gun to school. I'd get into a fistfight before I'd shoot somebody.

He praised the policies at the local technical college that do not employ metal detectors and have no dress codes. He has never seen a fight on that campus and thinks the success stems from the way they treat the students. Students are treated as adults and are not harassed and constantly placed under surveillance.

> Everything about tucking in your skirt and all that kind of stuff—that has nothing to do with your learning. I guess that's trying to keep violence down, but where there was no violence there before so we can't keep violence down where there was no violence before, you know.

Thinking back on his high school career, Edgar remembered a few teachers who seemed to have his best interest at heart and tried to help him avoid disciplinary actions, but their efforts proved fruitless in the face of administrative directives. Other teachers had serious complaints about his behavior in class and accused him of "yelling at them, throwing stuff, giving them nasty looks, not paying attention and not following directions." Although still the target of perceived bias, Edgar wished that school personnel would recognize:

> That I'm a good person. That I'm not a troublemaker. I try to talk out a problem…you know they probably think bad of me now…'Oh, Edgar had a gun…he's a bad kid.' I don't want anyone to think that about me.

Mark—High School Was "A Waste of Time"

Mark, a 20 year old White male who currently lives away from home, worked as a security guard, a job he describes as "something that takes no brains," and is presently a Navy recruit. He dropped out of high school in his sophomore year. He completed his GED shortly after dropping out of high school and had been pursuing a career in auto mechanics by taking courses at various technical colleges. His parents are both college graduates and one teaches at the university level. He has an older sister who is enrolled in college, a younger sister in high school and a younger brother in elementary school. His parents supported his decision to leave high school before graduation and they often intervened on his behalf during disputes regarding disciplinary measures.

Mark admitted to having little interest in high school and being lazy. He also mentioned having few friends during his high school career and never really feeling connected to the school or its activities. He thought of high school as "a waste of time" and preferred work to school. He began working at sixteen and found earning money more enjoyable than staying in school.

As a freshman Mark pursued a general, rather than a college preparatory diploma and found the courses less than challenging. At the time Mark graduated from the eighth grade teachers would recommend students for either the general track or the college track. It is not known which track Mark's teachers recommended for him, but he laughingly confessed to wanting the "easiest" classes.

> It was my fault. I took the easier classes. I felt privileged because those students who took the college preparatory classes were carrying around pounds of books.... You're working for something way out there.... I wasn't seeing myself doing that. (Taped Interview, August 27, 2001)

In retrospect Mark appeared somewhat regretful he had not challenged himself more. He stated that in his general education classes "they were going over stuff you learned in elementary school" and the two college preparatory classes he took were amazingly different from his general education classes. Logistically it is difficult to switch from a general track to a college preparatory track and doing so often requires an additional year of high school. This was an option Mark would not consider.

When asked if an event had triggered his decision to quit high school Mark stated, "The main thing was a teacher that kept holding me back. She was determined to fail me." The majority of Mark's fellow classmates in the non-college preparatory classes were of minority status. Mark stated that racism was an issue for him in this particular class and that a Black teacher had targeted him for failure. He confessed that "there were several incidents that made it concrete she did not want me to pass this class and at the time I was the only White kid in the class. It made her look good [to fail me]."

Mark explained that he had accidentally exchanged his assigned textbook with another student in the class and when he was required to return the book in order to take the final exam, he did not have the correct book. The teacher told him he would either have to pay fifty dollars or find the book assigned to him before being permitted to take the final exam. He found a discarded copy of the textbook and attempted to forge the correct book number. Upon giving the teacher this forged copy, Mark learned that his original

textbook had been found. The teacher still insisted he pay the fifty dollars prior to taking the final exam.

> I take it to the principal and he straightens it out. She acted like she was an all right person as far as racism goes—but a Black person used a racial slur [in class] and she said nothing. If it was reversed it wouldn't happen like that....Racism was part of why I dropped out. The teachers were holding me back because I was White. Black teachers—especially if you were in a majority Black class. I guess maybe they are showing off.

Mark's perception of unfair treatment by school authorities also included an incident in which another student threatened to fight him. His parents alerted the administration, but nevertheless the fight took place. Mark, along with the other perpetrator were given ten days OSS for the incident. Mark contends that he should not have been punished for this fight since he had alerted the officials to the possibility the fight would occur. Mark commented, "My parents thought that was pretty unjust—but the ten days stuck. And next time [the school administrators said] we're going to kick you out for good." Even so, Mark admitted, there were times he did not get caught for fighting.

Mark had a history of disciplinary problems and had been assigned to the alternative school before attending high school. He had been accosted by a coach for refusing to answer to his mispronounced surname and responded by striking back. He was often confrontational with administrators and school staff, blatantly breaking school rules he deemed unimportant. Rather than tuck his shirt in, he would wear a jacket so he could leave his shirt out and not get caught. On one occasion he only tucked in one corner of his shirt just to see what the principal would say. He admitted to taking various drugs throughout his high school career and had been taken to the nurse's office during an episode when he exhibited erratic behavior at school due to ingesting a mixture of various

amphetamines. On another occasion his car was searched because of suspicion of marijuana.

> They were in my car and we had a smoke out the night before and I was sure there was nothing in my car. They called me into the office to have the dogs search the car....They want me to go down so bad.

When asked about the problems of school violence, Mark remarked that he felt there had been a lot of violence directed toward him by other students. He admitted to carrying a knife to school for protection and said metal detectors do not work. Mark thinks more stringent policies also do not work and only create more problems. He thought the school was being run like a prison.

Mark described his final decision to drop out of high school as "a great relief...like I had been released from prison." When asked what he might have done differently in high school, he wishes he had become more involved in school, perhaps in sports, and that he had taken harder subjects. However, he stated he was very unhappy in high school and dropping out seemed almost inevitable.

Some things have changed for Mark, but some things remain the same. In technical college he thinks one of the teachers in his automotive class did not like him and was determined to see him fail.

> One of the teachers didn't like me...some people did less work than I did and they passed. I understand the work they are doing. It's the social parts—I don't fit in—just like in high school. But not quite as bad.

Upon reflection Mark remarked that "problems seem to follow him." As a young adult living independently from his parents he has been faced with the challenge of being self-supportive. During our interview Mark received a call on his cellular phone from a

collection agency regarding a delinquent credit card account. At the time of the interview he was considering dropping out of his auto mechanics program and was unsure what he wanted to do in life. He has since been discharged from the U.S. Navy. Pessimistically, Mark concludes the interview by stating: "Your reputation is always there to defeat you, but it's not unfair. Everyone gets the same shot at life—it's up to you."

Fran--"It Was The School Counselor"

Fran, a White 17 year old, had every intention of graduating from high school and attending college at the beginning of her junior year. She was an honor student who was involved in numerous extra-curricular activities, including band. Fran's mother and father and three older brothers had all graduated from high school. She lives with her mother and father in a middle class community and enjoyed the financial and emotional support of her family throughout her school career. Although her parents were initially disappointed by her decision to drop out of high school the second semester of her junior year, they are proud of her current accomplishments. Fran has been awarded her GED and is attending classes at the local technical college with the ambition of completing a program to become a radiological technologist in the near future.

The circumstances surrounding her decision to leave school prior to graduation are unusual. When asked why she decided to leave high school prior to graduation she stated:

> It was my guidance counselor. First of all she told me I was too big to wear sleeveless shirts. Like this one I have on. She'd stop me in the hallway and it would be winter and I would have one under my jacket that zipped up and she would make me unzip my jacket to see what kind of shirt I had underneath the jacket. (Taped Interview, November 24, 2001)

Fran admitted to a weight problem and preferred wearing sleeveless shirts since she stated she is often too warm when she wears shirts with sleeves. Sleeveless attire is not against the school dress code and no other school employee ever reprimanded her for this attire. Although Fran received no formal disciplinary action for not abiding by the school counselor's request, the continued reprimands became extremely burdensome. "I would walk through the halls wondering if I would pass her that day—or if she would coincidentally walk down the same hall I was." For Fran, the situation was one of continual anticipated harassment. In addition, she noted that girls who actually did break the dress code (by wearing clothing too short or exposing their midriffs) were not reprimanded.

> It made me mad. I'd see girls wearing mini skirts up to here and halter tops that tied around their neck and showed their midriff. And not wearing a bra—and they never stopped any of the girls for shorts being too short.

Besides the issue involving her attire, Fran acknowledged that problems with excessive absences also contributed to her decision to drop out. The school policy states that unexcused absences in excess of ten days may result in failure for that semester. During her freshman and sophomore years Fran's absences had all been excused. In each case a physician's note provided the reason for her not being in attendance. Fran stated that most of her absences during her junior year were also medically related, but the attendance office lost the physician's notes, which excused her absences. However, several of her absences were for skipping school and on one occasion she was given five days ISS for this infraction of school policy. Fran and a friend had intended to go to

school that day, but decided to skip school and spend the day at a friend's house. Fran continued:

> This wasn't the first day I skipped. I had probably skipped three days....My parents and I did not get along then.....One day they took my truck and I decided to walk to school and by the time I got up to the stop sign by the nursing home I had blisters on my feet and I was not going to school. I called my friend to come pick me up and I went over to her house.

On another occasion Fran got sick after her parents had left for work and she called a friend to pick her up so she would not be alone. This friend, who was eighteen, was later called by school officials and warned that she would be in trouble for contributing to the delinquency of a minor by allowing Fran to stay with her rather than attend school. Fran debates whether these infractions are technically skipping: "I mean if you want to get technical, skipping is when they see you on campus and you leave. I never set foot on the school campus any of these times."

Her parents accompanied her to school to discuss the charges of skipping and the harassment regarding her attire by the school counselor. Her father was upset by the harassment his daughter experienced regarding her sleeveless attire, but her mother sided with the school counselor and agreed that Fran should not wear sleeveless shirts to school. Fran explained that in her church girls are not supposed to wear sleeveless shirts, but many do anyway.

Even though Fran had excessive absences and was threatened with failure in her courses for the first semester of her junior year, she did pass and at the time she withdrew she had a 93 average. After researching the procedures for obtaining her GED and deciding on the diploma program she wanted to pursue at the technical college, she

informed her parents of her decision. Her mother accompanied her to school to withdraw and the school officials tried to persuade her mother to have her complete her junior year.

> The school didn't want me to drop out.... I was told they probably did that because they like for the higher grades to stay to make them look good. But they don't mind if the people with lower grades drop out--cause it makes them look better.

As policymakers consider "pay for performance" to enhance teachers' salaries based on their students' test results, those making higher grades will become even more valued.

Fran concedes that after the Columbine shootings she was kind of paranoid, but after about a week she had no fears of school violence at her high school. However, she did relate an incident that she thought might constitute violence.

> Well, I don't know if this is violence, but I never told because I didn't see him. I had these kind of walking pants that zipped up the back and I was getting into my locker and someone walked by me and unzipped them. I didn't see who did it—I didn't know who did it—so I just zipped them back. That was the only thing that ever happened to me.

The school dress code requires that students tuck in their shirts. Students who disobey this rule are subject to disciplinary action. Even though the new principal no longer requires shirts to be tucked in, all students are required to wear ID's. The previous principal was very strict about enforcing the requirement of having shirts tucked in. Fran reported an incident in which a student was accosted for not obeying this rule:

> The other principal pushed it. I saw this one incident where he pushed one boy against the wall. It was a Black boy, but he didn't have his shirt tucked in and the principal told him to tuck his shirt in and it got to the point that the principal threw him against the wall and said, 'You're going to tuck your shirt in!'

Fran concedes that the rule of tucking your shirt in to make schools safer is "stupid" and that you could still sneak a weapon in with your skirt tucked in.

Dropping out of high school was a difficult decision for Fran, but one she does not regret. She loves the technical college and thinks "it's making up for what the high school didn't offer." She adds, "I'm just glad I'm not saying I dropped out because of drugs and alcohol because that's what you expect to hear--that's what most people speculate or assume."

Kevin—Victim of Bullying

Having been diagnosed with anxiety disorder and depression in the eighth grade, Kevin admits that his transition into high school was extremely difficult. Describing himself as the smart kid who never got into trouble, he had not anticipated dropping out of school during the first semester of his junior year. However, the problems he encountered during his high school years were overwhelming and the decision to leave high school before graduation was prompted by his mother. Like most of the interviewees, he has completed his GED. He plans to attend the local junior college this coming fall.

Kevin is a White 16 year old male who lives at home and enjoys financial and emotional support from both parents. He is the youngest and only child living at home, having three other siblings who all graduated from high school. His father is a retired college professor. His mother, a college graduate who had previously worked in the mental health field, now also stays home. Kevin contends that his life is privileged and as "the baby of the family" he receives almost everything if not all, he wants or needs. Even though he may have felt privileged at home, life in public school was a continual struggle.

Middle school had been better than high school since Kevin felt the teachers made an honest effort to help him succeed. "In middle school I really felt the teachers cared if I did well. They made an effort to help whenever they could." High school was a different story and Kevin remarked, "It was like they didn't have time." However, the problems Kevin encountered in high school not only involved a sense of lack of concern by school personnel, but also conflicts with peers.

> It was because I felt like no one cared, but also because I was getting teased. I was getting tormented by the students. My ideas in life they did not agree with. I was raised as a Christian, but I didn't do a lot of the things they did. They thought I was a goody-goody -- that I was too good for them. ...I was an outcast.... This had gone on my entire school career, but it got definitely worse in high school. (Taped Interview, December 19, 2001)

Kevin described an incident that occurred at the end of his freshman year that prompted his initial thoughts about dropping out of high school. He had distributed invitations to a swim party he was planning and one of the recipients returned the invitation with intensely crude and threatening remarks scrawled on it. The note was placed on Kevin's desk while he was at lunch so that it would be seen upon his returning to class. Not only this cruelty by a fellow classmate, but moreover the insensitivity by school personnel to this offense prompted his intense dislike for the school environment and provoked thoughts of dropping out.

> The tormenting and bullying—that would have been one thing—but there was a girl who actually wrote a letter to me and it was so cruel and crude that I am not going to repeat the things she said. I could have dealt with that, but it was the fact that when we [Kevin and his parents] took it to the high school there was never anything done to her.

The girl in question admitted to writing the note and a taped confession was on file. The event occurred at the end of the school year and the school officials were reluctant to

proceed with disciplinary actions at that time. Kevin's parents insisted on a group meeting with the school administrators, the girl and her parents, and a police officer before the end of the school year. However, the girl and her parents never appeared for the meeting and no disciplinary actions were taken. Kevin commented that he was "dumbfounded by the fact the school had proof—she had admitted she had done it." Kevin felt "they [school personnel] had turned their back on me."

> I had no protection. There was nothing from stopping students from saying things. I could have taken it further, but by that time you start feeling what's the point. They're not helping me here. Why take it further?

Previous incidents had reinforced Kevin's opinion that the school would not intervene on his behalf. He stated that lots of people who would pick fights with him or harass him were never disciplined, even though he would report these incidents to the teachers. "I don't know if it's because they didn't want to deal with that or they didn't want to see that it was actually happening." In either case, Kevin surmised that the event with the girl and the ignored meeting were turning points in his ultimate decision to leave high school.

In addition, Kevin felt that some extracurricular activities were more valued than others by school personnel. As a member of the school chorus and the drama club, Kevin contends that these activities were marginalized, while sports and cheerleading received financial support and the lion's share of recognition. Although members of the chorus attended the state conference and won several trophies and honors, the school did not publicly recognize their success.

> My chorus won third place in state competition and we didn't receive one thing from the school. We had to pay for everything…and we're still stuck with old risers. We did a lot of stuff for that school—Veteran's Day performances—and all these things that made the high school look good and no recognition.

However, Kevin commented that the football team, with more losses than wins that season, was rewarded with new lockers and continued school support. Kevin lamented, "If you're involved in the things that aren't valued—then you're not valued." In addition to feeling marginalized, Kevin also experienced significant feelings of alienation from the faculty and staff.

Kevin's lack of rapport with several teachers was problematic. Even though he was potentially a capable student, his academic performance was poor. Admitting to being confrontational, Kevin insists he was not a disciplinary problem. On one occasion he questioned a teacher's motives for giving a pop quiz and asked if she planned to grade this one since she had not graded any previously. According to Kevin, she stated she was not planning on grading this quiz and was only giving it to "waste time." Kevin insists:

> I didn't get in trouble…maybe I did talk too much in class. It just felt like teachers labeled you. They let their gut reactions take over….There were a lot of off line remarks made by some of the teachers to me.

When asked if there were any school personnel that he could talk to about the problems he was having, he stated that nobody at the school seemed to care what was happening to him. The school counselor had only been seen for changing classes and was someone Kevin felt was very nice, but would not understand the problems he was having.

> I felt that she didn't make herself available. She was a very nice person, but yet there was that feeling that I couldn't talk to her. She might not understand. Nobody showed any caring. I was ready to end it all. There were times when I thought about suicide. Now I was a loner. All the friends I had were like me.

Concerned that Kevin's anxiety disorder and depression were worsening, his parents petitioned the school for an alternative placement. Kevin was assigned to an alternative program for students with health-related problems that prevented them from attending the

regular high school. Having already been diagnosed with anxiety disorder and depression, Kevin was now considered school phobic and had missed close to fifty days of school. He began the alternative program as a sophomore and the first year was deemed successful. Kevin remarked, "When I first got there everything was good—it seemed like they really cared." With only eight students and three teachers, he had developed a strong bond with one of the male teachers. Unfortunately, this teacher left and he began his junior year with only two teachers while an additional six students were added to the program. Kevin now felt disconnected from the program. In addition, he stated that one of the teachers showed disrespect toward students by talking indiscriminately about them to other students and teachers.

> One of the teachers would actually make remarks about other students to students. She would make remarks to other teachers while those students were in the room. Students could definitely hear them. She made a remark to me about another student and said that 'She'll never succeed in life—she's lazy.' She also talked about me and made remarks to the other teachers. 'The reason I don't think Kevin is disciplined is because he and his mother are so much bigger than his dad that he feels intimidated by them.'

Although Kevin insists he was not a disciplinary problem in school, he did receive reprimands for verbal confrontations with other students. Kevin contends that as a high school student he was now ready to defend himself from the teasing and harassment he had experienced for most of his public school career. Kevin explains:

> When I hit ninth grade I stopped taking shit. I stopped taking it—I decided that was over—that was done with. I'm going to stand up for myself. But when I did stand up for myself, it seemed like I was the one getting in trouble.

School violence prevention policies and practices require disciplinary actions, not only for those instigating a fight, but also for students who defend themselves verbally or physically from such attacks. Kevin explained that school officials insist there is no

reason to ever fight and that both parties would receive OSS for such an offense. Kevin disagrees and confesses that "if somebody is trying to punch me in my face—I'm going all out. That's just the way I am. I am a nice person, I think, but I can be a very violent person."

During Kevin's high school career the requirement of shirts being tucked in to prevent a student from hiding a weapon and bringing it on campus was enforced. During lunch students often took their shirts out and tucked them back in upon returning to class. Kevin received detention for failing to remember to tuck his shirt back in. Kevin questions to what extent this rule helps prevent weapons on campus.

> That to me just seems like a stupid rule. If somebody wanted bad enough to hide a gun they're going to do that anyway—for sure. In a baggy shirt with the edge of it over. You couldn't see a gun. It's just a stupid rule... It makes them feel safe. It gives them a false sense of security. If you think about it—none of that was enforced. It has always been a rule, but it was never enforced until after the Columbine shooting.

Kevin's concern over potential school violence reveals a personal understanding of how Columbines can be created within a school culture. Having been the target of teasing and tormenting by other students himself, Kevin felt he understood the motivations that drove the Columbine shooters to their atrocities.

> People think that's all the way in Colorado and that's not going to happen at our school. They need to step up and realize that there are people who feel that way. I understand why those kids did it.

Kevin is quite articulate about his thoughts on potential school violence and has been researching the Columbine shootings on the Internet. He explained how fellow classmates had also tormented the students who committed the Columbine shootings and how this abuse leads to anger.

> People would form circles around them and throw ketchup and mustard all over them and call them faggots and torment them and I started to understand why they had done it. The teachers stood there and watched. They were thrown into lockers. They were bashed and they were bruised and teachers saw it and they said nothing.

Kevin did not fear being a victim of school violence as much as he feared his own feelings of hatred toward those who had abused him throughout his school career.

> I wasn't scared of it [school violence] because I was the one thinking about doing it. Literally thinking about doing that. It got to the point that I had a dream that me and a bunch of the people I knew went to school and took it over. I was angry with the school and I was angry with the students. I was going to take it on myself. Something's got to break. And the only reason I didn't do it was because right after that I started having intensive counseling every week--for an hour.

Kevin was not alone in his desire to seek revenge for those who had tormented him throughout his school career. He spoke of other students who shared his sentiments and one student who had made up a list of potential victims at the high school.

> When you see someone actually take the time to make up a hit list, it's no longer a joke. Somebody did that. He was sent off to YDC [Youth Detention Camp] and he was gone for the rest of the year.

By his own personal confession, Kevin appears to understand the potential for school violence not only at his former high school but in every school.

Kevin still suffers from depression and an anxiety disorder, but his life seems to be turning around. He still contends that he would never go back to high school.

> I lost some serious respect for the school system. I do not believe to this day that I would ever go back—I would never go back—just because I don't think anything has changed.

When asked if anything might have kept him from dropping out, Kevin emphasized the need for care. "When you go into a profession like teaching you need to be ready to

care for your students—put out a true concern. Without that concern I think students don't succeed."

Lisa—Pregnant and a Senior

Graduating from high school with her class was extremely important to Lisa, yet a series of events prevented her from reaching this goal. Neither of her parents graduated from high school and they were disappointed their daughter would also fail to receive her high school diploma. Lisa, an 18 year old Black mother who is expecting her second child in February, dropped out of high school after the first semester of her senior year. She has several younger siblings who are still in school and she lives with her boyfriend. Motherhood keeps her busy, but she is determined to get her high school diploma through a correspondence program she saw on television. She stated emphatically, "I'm waiting to get my papers from Madison High School to get my diploma. I don't want a GED."

Lisa, who was on the Tech-Prep track, liked high school even though she thought the work was sometimes hard. She was a model middle school student with no discipline record and had looked forward to attending the local high school. Unfortunately, during the first semester of her freshman year, she "got in trouble" for fighting with another girl and was given ten days ISS, ten days OSS, and assigned to the alternative school for the remainder of the semester. The fight did not involve weapons and no one was injured. She described it as "a hair-pulling, scratching kind of fight about he said-she said stuff." She further explained:

> I didn't start it—she did—she started with me. It wasn't my fault. I was sitting at breakfast [in the school cafeteria]and she came up to me and said something to me…all I can remember is we started fighting. (Taped Interview, December 29, 2001)

Ten days OSS caused Lisa to fall behind on some of her credits after receiving zeros for the missed days, but she was able to make up some of the work in the alternative program. Lisa appeared to accept the school policy that any fight results in the same disciplinary actions for both parties, regardless of who might have been the instigator. However, she insisted the punishment was extremely harsh since she had not started the fight and had no previous record of violent behavior.

> It was fair because we got into a fight so I had to get the same punishment she got. It wasn't fair because I didn't start it so I could have gotten something less. My parents were upset because me and the girl were friends—we're still friends and we talk off and on. We got everything straightened out—now we talk all the time.

Lisa described her sophomore and junior years as uneventful, but she began her senior year pregnant and still harbors resentment for what she perceives as a lack of genuine concern and effort by school personnel to help her graduate. As part of her Tech-Prep program she had chosen the work- study component to satisfy three credits toward graduation. Because the job she held required long hours of standing, her pregnancy necessitated her quitting before the end of the first semester. Understanding she would be lacking enough credits to graduate without the work-study credits, she applied to take courses during the morning before the official school day began. Even though this would require her taking nine classes, seven during the regular school day and two prior to the official start of school, she was willing to do that. Unfortunately, the school stated they could not accommodate her plan and she was told her only alternative was to attend summer school or return to school the following fall. Neither option was acceptable to Lisa.

She had also contacted the school counselor to make arrangements for homebound care for the month following the birth of her baby.

> I don't remember what happened—she [the school counselor] didn't get back to me about that. I was willing to come back to the school and get my work for that month I was going to have to be out and take it back to school.

As the obstacles to graduation continued to mount, Lisa decided to stop attending high school the second semester of her senior year. She admitted that her pregnancy created some obstacles to her initial graduation plans, but insisted the school could have done more to help her receive the credits needed for graduation. Her younger sister had also had a baby while in high school, but was able to stay in school and not drop out. She questioned why the school did not advise her to pursue an alternative program to work-study or did not try to secure her a job that was less strenuous to facilitate her earning the needed credits for graduation.

> I was so mad about it I wanted to cry—but I didn't. Then when I went to graduation and I saw my class graduating I wanted to go back to school so bad. I wanted to graduate with my class. They didn't understand how important that was to me. I had all my credits so far and one semester left and they didn't try to help and I could have graduated.

In conclusion, Lisa hopes that other girls who get pregnant while in high school get the help they need so they can graduate. As the interview ended, Lisa's son toddled over to her; she gave him a smile and stated, "It was my last year—one semester left. There was something they could have done. If they really wanted to, they could have helped me."

Steve—Avoiding Fights By Dropping Out

Boot camp was not an alternative Steve wanted to consider, but one the high school officials deemed appropriate for his severe truancy. Steve, a 16 year old who described himself as half Black/half White, dropped out of high school after the first semester of his freshman year. As an only child, he thinks of his life as privileged and enjoys the comfort of two supportive college-educated parents. Steve's problems began shortly after entering high school.

As part of the Freshman Academy, a program initiated at the high school to keep freshmen isolated from the older students who might create problems for them, Steve perceived the program as an utter failure. He stated that it was mostly kids his own age and a few older students who made his life so miserable he found it unbearable to continue attending school.

> The first few months were fine, but eventually everything went downhill from there... Some of the students wanted to start things and it got to the point that they would mess with me everyday. They wanted to fight me and I wouldn't do it. It got to the point that I couldn't take it anymore. Like every time I go there [school] I'm going to get in trouble—and I'm just trying to get my work done and get it over. (Taped Interview, December 29, 2001)

Steve explained that it was three or four boys who would threaten to fight him over petty things. If he had talked to one of their girlfriends they would come up to him later in the day and say they wanted to fight him. He began leaving school early to avoid fights and eventually stopped attending school altogether. "I tried to avoid them because I know how I am—I'll lose my cool easy. I don't want to fight in school."

When asked if he had requested help in dealing with this problem, he said his parents "just told him to stick it out—that's just the way it is." Concerned that if a fight ensued he

would be suspended according to board policy, Steve notified the principal about one of the boys who had been threatening him. The boy denied all allegations, but the threats continued. Steve explained:

> I went to the principal—he was just trying to wave it off....I told the principal you know something is going down and you don't do anything. If I get in a fight you know you are just going to suspend me....He didn't talk to the boy too much and it went on again so I didn't say anything. So after he [principal] blew me off that one time, I just said I'm not going back to him no more.

Steve knew that he was capable of getting into a fight and had received disciplinary action for a fight in middle school. A fellow classmate had kicked Steve in his injured knee. Steve explained:

> The boy kept messing with me and I told him to leave me alone—just don't bother me and my knee was hurting at the time and he went and kicked me in my knee and I started fighting him. We both got suspended from school. I got the same discipline as he did. If you make contact, that's all that matters.

Prior to Steve's court appearance and withdrawal, school officials investigated his extreme truancy. According to his estimation, he had missed about 62 days out of 90 days during the fall semester of his freshman year. Although Steve had never been called in to speak with the school counselor regarding his truancy, she questioned his friends regarding his possible drug use and his whereabouts during school hours. On one occasion the counselor tracked Steve to a local pool hall. "The counselor came to one of my hangouts and looked at me and left. I told my friends not to tell her where I hung out after that." Steve adamantly denied ever using drugs and stated he even quit smoking cigarettes because it slowed him down during his workout sessions. However, the stereotype of drug use among potential dropouts prompted the counselor to pose the question to Steve's mother during a meeting to discuss his truancy.

> The counselor made me and my mom mad over there at the high school....The counselor had asked my friends if I was doing drugs because I came to school with my eyes red—that's because I stay up half the night because I like to stay up late. She asked my mom if I was on drugs and my mom didn't appreciate that. She [the counselor] thought I was on drugs—since I'm not coming to school I must be on drugs.

As the situation at school became more tense, Steve requested that his father withdraw him from school and allow him to complete his high school education through an Internet program a friend's sister had used to secure her high school diploma. Steve explained that he had to go to court since the school had charged him with truancy and he would either have to start attending classes at the high school or be sentenced to "boot camp," the equivalent of a prison for juveniles. The judge agreed to allow Steve to continue his education through the Internet home school program. Presently, Steve works three hours a day on his coursework and plans to complete the requirements for his high school diploma earlier than if he had remained in the public high school. Steve stated that this was his only alternative since the problems appeared so overwhelming, "I couldn't do anything about it [other students harassing him] and I wasn't going to be a dropout."

Steve recalled that he had always been a good student and had always gotten along well with his teachers. He did not think weapons were being brought on campus and he thought the metal detectors were a good idea. He also advised the school to install cameras or other monitoring equipment so they would have proof that someone was "messing" with you. He followed school policies regarding having his shirt tucked in, but thought the rule did little to prevent students from bringing weapons to school.

> It's just their rule, but that's not stopping anyone from bringing a gun to school. They can always hide them in a halter....If anything, that's giving the kids a chance to bring a gun to school because they are going to be always looking around the shirt thinking

> they have something. You could have your shirt tucked in and still bring a gun to school.

Increasing the dropout age from 16 to 18 might help, Steve speculated, but when asked if he thought he could have tolerated his situation for two more years he answered, "No, not the way things were going." In summary, Steve thought school was all right, but that other kids were the main problem. He added that it wouldn't matter what school he attended, problems with peers would continue. He thinks kids should not drop out simply because they get tired of school.

> Some people who drop out give lame excuses—like they get tired of it. Now that's not a good excuse to drop out. There's nothing wrong with school—just the people around there.

In conclusion, Steve stated he had never thought about being a dropout and advised anyone who is thinking about dropping out to have an alternative plan. He added, "Some people think you're dumb just because you drop out. They don't really know the story behind it."

Deirdre—A Gifted Dropout

Deirdre, an articulate Black 18 year old who dropped out of high school when she was 16, wished she could have graduated. As an honors student who took "Challenge Courses" and had been jointly enrolled at Georgia Southern University in Physics, Deirdre's home life presented challenges to her attending and graduating from high school. The birth of her baby sister during her sophomore year necessitated Deirdre staying home to care for her sibling since her mother had to go to work to support four younger children living at home. Deirdre explained, "I had to drop out because of my mom, you know." Deirdre has not abandoned her educational goals and is currently

enrolled in a correspondence course to complete her high school diploma. When asked why she did not complete a GED she stated:

> If I felt like just doing the GED--I could easily just take the test and pass it—but I wanted to learn more…about school and getting more education….My plan is to get my diploma—I need it—it's something that people need and I know I need it to get a good job. I know a high school diploma is better than a GED. (Taped Interview, January 6, 2002)

Deirdre's parents and older siblings all graduated from high school and she had every intention of graduating and attending college. "Leaving was a surprise," she stated. Deirdre lives in an apartment with her fiancée whom she has dated for the last three years. She is expecting her first child in June and insists this had nothing to do with her withdrawal from high school. However, she had several interesting insights regarding teen pregnancy and dropping out of school.

> A lot of girls I know thought about getting pregnant. They thought the boy really liked them and if they had the baby--and they wanted to have the baby by the guy—all of my friends have kids and all started having them in the 7th grade.

Deirdre's critique of school practices concerning pregnant students at the high school highlighted inequities that targeted some students who might be encouraged to complete their education after the birth of their child. Deirdre perceived that if the student was academically superior, she might be encouraged to return to school to complete her education. However, if she was not academically superior, she was not encouraged to return to school and complete her education. Deirdre explained:

> That's another thing I think is not fair—like if you have a child they do not encourage you to come or stay—you know—push you to stay in high school. The girls want to come and stay and graduate, but they don't really help you out. You might as well drop out if you have a kid. That's the message they give them. They don't encourage them to come back to school. One of my best friends— she's very smart—she was encouraged to stay in school [even though she was pregnant] because she had really

> good grades. I know for myself they encouraged me and pushed me and for others—if they drop out it's no bother for them—just let them go.

Deirdre had no disciplinary record and stated she had never received either OSS or ISS. However, an ongoing dispute with another student created concern that she might become part of a disciplinary procedure that punishes both parties if a fight ensues. She reported alerting school officials of her concern regarding this student and the potential for violence, but received no satisfaction. She never spoke with a school counselor, but did speak with the assistant principals assigned to 9th and 10th graders. She remembered:

> They said they would talk with her and [stated] if I had a problem come talk with us and we'll talk to her. But I thought talking wasn't enough and my mother agreed and [we] thought they should take more action in the situation.

Deirdre's mother confronted the school administrators about the situation with the other student, but no action was taken. Deirdre understood that if she got into a fight she would get the same punishment as the girl who started the fight. "Most likely I would have because other people who have reported things that happened or were happening and they got the same treatment as the other ones." Explaining how she felt this policy was unfair, Deirdre contended that "if you have informed the staff that you had a problem with somebody, they should take action about what you told them," and that when they don't "that makes you feel that they don't care or are not listening to you." Deirdre reflected:

> I don't think they really cared until something really happened and then when something really happens they want to take action... when something bad happens. They should stop it before it actually happens.

Potentially, something "really bad" might have happened since Deirdre admitted to bringing a knife to school. "Well, I brought a knife to school for protection before—I had

a problem with this girl all through school—I got tired of it, you know." Even though Deirdre remembered many fights at the high school, she did not perceive the high school as violent. She thought the policy of tucking in your shirt to prevent the concealment of a weapon to be misguided since weapons could be creatively brought onto the school grounds by those determined to do so. "If they want to bring a gun or a knife they can bring them somewhere other than their shirts—they can bring them in their shoes or in their book bags." Furthermore, Deirdre explained that locker searches were infrequent, only occurring once every month or once a semester. That left "plenty of time to bring a gun to school."

Besides being a policy that had little effect on preventing weapons being brought to school, Deirdre thought the policy of students having to tuck in their shirts encouraged school personnel to focus on the wrong things.

> They are looking at what you wear to school—focusing on what kids wore. They're focusing on the wrong things like are your pants too long or do you need to tuck in your shirt. They say it's because it gets kids minds off what's going on in the classroom. I think if a kid's mind wants to be on something other than what they're learning then that's what it will be on.

Adhering to the dress code guidelines had presented problems for other interviewees and Deirdre stated she had experienced discrimination regarding her apparel. White girls who wore the same type of top she wore were not reprimanded, but she was told her apparel was inappropriate. She conceded that the dress code policy was not fairly enforced and some students were targeted for violations more than others.

As the interview drew to a close Deirdre discussed her career plans. These included finishing college and working with kids who have been abused or who come from

abusive homes. She stated, "I know something about that—I feel I can talk to kids and they will trust me."

Nicole—"I Dropped Out the Day I Turned Sixteen"

Nicole, a White female, states that she dropped out of high school the day she turned 16. As a good student who was taking college preparatory classes and who had no serious school disciplinary violations, Nicole admitted this was nothing she had anticipated since "in my freshman year I talked about being a senior and then in my junior year everything went all downhill from there" (Taped Interview, January 21, 2002).

Nicole lives with her supportive parents in an upper middle-class community. She has two older siblings not living at home who completed high school. Her mother completed a GED and her father, a contractor, graduated from high school. Presently, Nicole is helping her mother with her cleaning business as she prepares to complete her GED.

Nicole thought attending high school was not a problem until her junior year and then "it was just horrible." Fed up and stressed out, she explained that she felt she was having a nervous breakdown prior to dropping out:

> It was kind of like it was building up. I felt like I was going crazy. I cried every day. I was horrible to my mom....[I] would get frustrated and overwhelmed and I would get dizzy and feel like I was going to pass out from all the stress. It felt so fake. It felt like everybody was just so plastic and two-sided and just acted like someone they really weren't. It was just an uncomfortable environment—so hostile to everything....I [had] suicidal thoughts about it.

On several occasions she visited the school counselor's office in tears. Although she had hoped for some comfort, she admitted that her primary goal was to obtain information about an alternative to attending this high school. Nicole confided that the counselor "kind of bribed" her to stay in school by offering to admit her to the Work

Study program reserved for seniors and allowing her to leave school early. "She was willing to do that for me if I would stay in school." However, the counselor refused to discuss alternative programs and she told Nicole that she needed to stay in high school "no matter what."

She had been told by school personnel that if she withdrew from the high school she would be unable to obtain a GED until her class graduated. Since she was already enrolled in GED classes and would be receiving her diploma in the next few months, she knew this was false information. "I've gotten into arguments with a lot of the students at high school because they say you cannot get the GED until your class graduates." She surmised that they want to discourage kids from getting their GED because "they [the high school] get money for every kid who stays in school."

There was no specific event that triggered Nicole's decision to drop out, rather just a growing sense of alienation and hopelessness. Her greatest complaint was lodged against her teachers. She felt they did not teach and treated some students unfairly.

> It was the teachers—they didn't teach. They would just come in and give you work....You could tell they weren't interested in their job or what they were doing....They were boring and they really didn't know what they were talking about. The students were obnoxious and some of the teachers were afraid of the Black students and favored the Black students over the White students—afraid that they would do something or whatever....I would ask little stuff—like permission to go to the bathroom, and one of the teachers would let one of the Black students go and she wouldn't let me go—and other times they would let me go and not let the Black students. You know, it depends on what teacher it was. It seemed they all had different prejudices.

She extended her analysis of differential treatment based on race. "If you were an attractive White female some of the older Black teachers ...treated you differently." She explained that they were less apt to call on her, let her run errands, or let her go to the

bathroom. She offered no explanation for why they might treat her differently and she stated that she was not a racist and had many Black friends. She also perceived that teachers treated you differently if you were not involved in sports or other after-school activities.

> I did good in all my classes, but I was not into the after-school sports because I didn't like school in the first place so I didn't want to be there any longer than I had to—so they [teachers] would think that you were not caring about your education.

After Nicole suffered an extended illness, her mother requested her makeup work. Nicole was especially concerned about her Algebra II course grade and wanted to try and catch up on her missed assignments. The teacher was hesitant to give her mother the makeup work and wrote the following message on the papers: "This is pointless. She is never going to get it [her grade] up. I don't even know why she tries." In reference to this teacher, Nicole stated:

> Well there was one teacher who taught only once or twice the whole year....We [students] talked about it and we had petitions and everything. Parents came up to the school. She would write it [assignments] down...she'd tell us to ask questions, but if you asked questions she would be like, 'You don't know what I'm talking about?' like kind of criticizing.

When asked about the potential for violence at the high school, Nicole admitted she had not seen many fights, but did mention one incident in which "a girl clobbered a boy with a two by four." She stated that boys who went hunting over the weekend might have shotguns and knives in their pickups, but she did not know of any other weapons that had been brought on campus. She had no problem with the use of metal detectors to scan students, but thought the procedure was extremely ineffectual.

> I didn't really feel like getting shot at school where you are supposed to be safe, but they only use the metal detectors in the morning when you come in the door....There

> are people who stand outside and they don't get checked and there are people who come in late and they don't get checked. So it's just like 100 students who would be checked and the rest of the school wouldn't be checked.

She also thought the policy of tucking shirts in to prevent students from bringing in weapons was "terribly, terribly stupid." She commented that "if they thought they were doing such a good deed by having metal detectors why would there be a problem?" The school policy of requiring all shirts be tucked in and the surveillance by school personnel to conform to the policy made you feel like "a dangerous person." She stated that "you walk down the hall and you see the teachers eyeing you and stuff like that."

As a ninth grader she had been part of the "Freshman Academy," a program designed to prevent school violence by isolating freshmen from older classmates. She not only thought this policy was ineffectual, but also contributed to a lack of school community spirit.

> Your first year of high school you're already the little kid of the group and you have no respect from anybody else and it [Freshman Academy] made it a lot worse. We were not involved in anything; we didn't interact with anyone and [we] felt more isolated—more like a little child.

Nicole also commented on a recent school policy aimed to deter students from loitering in the halls and bathrooms and thus preventing possible school disruptions. In order to curb tardiness, school officials designed a progression of disciplinary measures that included a verbal warning for the first tardy; a written reprimand for the second tardy; detention for a third tardy, and the assignment of ISS and eventually OSS for continued tardiness. Nicole felt such extreme punishment for tardiness unfair since traveling from one part of the school to another was often impossible in the time allotted for changing classes.

Despite her harsh critique of teachers, she had developed a close relationship with four teachers during her sophomore year. However, all but one of these teachers left the school before her junior year and the other one plans on leaving after this year.

> Every teacher I had a positive relationship with and actually liked—every one of them left except one. My favorite teacher is leaving this year. It just seems like if the teachers don't like it and they want to leave so bad—why would I like it?

She stated that her favorite teacher was different than the rest and "he treated me like a person—not like I was lower than he was." He also conducted his class through discussions and activities that she found rewarding. "He engaged us—not textbook material that other teachers [used]—like read this chapter and answer the questions."

Nicole remains bitter about her high school experience and stated that she does not care what the school personnel think about her or her decision to drop out. "They could think I was the biggest piece of dropout trash in the world. I really don't care about them."

Focus Discussion Group

The focus group discussions took place after all participants had been individually interviewed. Participants had been contacted a week in advance regarding the time and location of the focus group discussion. The session was held in a small classroom in the School of Education on the Georgia Southern University campus. A video and tape recorder were set up for documenting the event. All participants had previously agreed to have the session taped and had also agreed to keep the contents of the session confidential.

After brief introductions and a review of the confidentiality agreement, participants were informed of the ground rules governing their participation. The format reflected procedures compatible with group counseling that help to ensure personal respect and responsibility throughout the process. The ground rules maintained that only one person is allowed to speak at a time and that each person's response must be respected in spite of how much it might differ from their own. However, participants were encouraged to question each other's responses for clarification and to enhance their understanding. The questions for the general discussion are found in Appendix F. Responses participants offered to the general discussion questions provided further insights and information for data analysis. The focus group discussions were held on the same date to accommodate scheduling difficulties, but were divided into two separate sessions that each lasted about forty-five minutes.

High School Isn't For Everyone

There was mutual agreement that students drop out of high school because of the school's climate. Several participants targeted teachers as the main cause for their perceptions of a negative school climate, whereas others thought negative interactions with their peers were the primary culprits. When asked what schools might do to curb the dropout rate several thought that there should be more incentives for staying in school. Incentives suggested ranged from money paid for good grades to extra privileges such as movies or field trips. However, a few participants stated that there wasn't enough money in the world to have kept them in high school. There was mutual agreement that if

students had more voice in school policies and if their opinions and suggestions were perceived as valuable, more students would be willing to stay in school until graduation.

Most participants agreed that high school should end when you are 16, an idea shared by Thomas Hine (1999), author of The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager. Hine (1999) reminds us that the idea of high school for all adolescents began a little more than fifty years ago, following World War II (p. 139). Commenting on how "American high schools are often criticized, but rarely challenged," Hine asserts that "we have become so accustomed to the idea that high school should be the universal experience of our youth that we don't even consider other possibilities" (p. 139). My interviewees suggested that at sixteen students should have the option of delaying further education with the option of continuing at a later date. It was suggested that opportunities to become apprentices or to join service organizations like the Peace Corps would be desirable options.

As the discussion continued, participants seemed to concur that they wanted their high school experience to be more closely aligned with real world experiences. They suggested the need for alternative programs that would replace the traditional high school. Many thought computer-based home school programs were a desirable alternative to attending traditional high school. All participants stated that their decision to drop out was in their best interest and that they hoped to make meaningful contributions to society. I think that most of my participants would agree:

> Teenagers bear an inordinate share of the blame for society's failures, while they're given too little responsibility for its improvement. Teenagers are people of who, too much is asked and too little is expected. (Hine, 1990, p. 295)

"Look Before You Leap"—But I've Already Jumped

A short break followed the forty-five minutes of discussion. Upon returning, the group viewed a 1991 video entitled "Look Before You Leap: The Dropping-Out Crisis." I was aware of the contents of the video since it had been part of a career awareness curriculum I had previously taught. The back of the video case featured this description:

> This upbeat, powerful video features young people discussing their reasons for dropping out and the vast differences between expectations and the reality of life after dropping out. Students see the abundance of choices available to them as high school graduates and the depleted job market accessible to dropouts.

Since this was one of the better educational videos I had found on the topic of "dropouts," I was especially interested in my participants' reactions to the way adolescents were portrayed. I found it interesting that as the title appeared ("Look Before You Jump") a member of the group said, "But I've already jumped!" Perhaps viewing a video that explores options to not dropping out of high school appeared shortsighted to my clientele at this point in their lives.

Within the first five minutes of the video a member asked, "When was this video made?" and the group proceeded to find fault in the format and in the representation of adolescents in the video. Differences in hairstyles and clothing that had not seemed dated to me, struck my group as "old fashion." Within the realm of educational videos, a video dated 1991 is relatively new and many are shown that are much older. In addition to finding the video dated, the group perceived the video's message to be contrived and one that stereotyped high school dropouts. They also asserted that the video was ineffectual for motivating adolescents to remain in high school. Although the participants agreed with several of the reasons given in the video for dropping out, they maintained that until

schools change students will continue to leave school before graduation. Several suggested that they should make an updated video that would "really tell the truth about why kids drop out of high school." Of course, agreeing on whose truth may be more challenging than they realize. Even so, I wholeheartedly encouraged them to pursue this idea and offered my assistance in the project.

In general, the focus group discussion did not yield as much valuable data as I had hoped. The group dynamics limited the depth of the conversations since few were willing to challenge remarks made by others. In addition, neither of the Black females attended the focus group, even though one had promised the night before that she was planning on attending. The individual interviewees proved much more valuable and provided a more intimate picture of each participant. However, several friendships developed during the group discussions and each seemed to find comfort in knowing that others had had similar experiences in high school.

CHAPTER VII

DATA ANALYSIS

The stereotype of the high school dropout that portrays individuals with family histories of dropout behavior; students unable to meet the academic demands required for graduation; adolescents plagued by poverty, illegal drug use and crime; as well as those who lack parental support; constructs society's image of this population. However, the National Dropout Prevention Center warns us that all students may be at risk at any given time for dropping out of school and that a variety of conditions can lead to a student's "at-riskness." Furthermore, some students who appear at-risk do not drop out and thus previous assumptions must be continuously re-evaluated.

After listening to the lived experiences of recent high school dropouts, I agree that stereotyping this population is both potentially dangerous and shortsighted. Although the top reasons listed by the National Dropout Prevention Center for leaving high school before graduation include pregnancy for females and conflicts with teachers for males and each were contributing factors for several of my interviewees, searching for a single reason appears futile. Rather there appear to be multiple tensions that create a personal milieu for particular students that make remaining in high school unfathomable. Pallas, a character in Toni Morrison's novel Paradise, provides some valuable insights into the way some students perceive their high school experiences:

> She was back in that place where final wars are waged, the organized trenches of high school, where shame is the old plate-shifting time it takes to walk down the hall, failure is a fumble with the combination lock and loathing is a condom wafer clogging a fountain....Where smugness reigns, judgments instant, dismissals permanent. And

> the adults haven't a clue. Only prison could be as blatant and as frightening, for beneath its rule and rituals scratched a life of gnawing violence. (p. 254, 1997)

Although a character in a novel, Pallas' high school experiences do not seem far removed from many of the contemporary experiences of high school dropouts I interviewed. To what extent these experiences are exacerbated and interconnected to policies and practices instigated by school violence prevention and zero tolerance policies requires analysis. The high school experiences varied for each of the individuals I interviewed and negotiating the social and institutional demands imposed on them by the high school proved problematic to each. To what extent the "adults haven't a clue" must also be deconstructed in light of the efforts being formulated to help curb the current numbers of high school dropouts in Georgia.

In order to provide an in-depth analysis of the multiple and often hidden factors that may contribute to school leaving, this section of the research works to find common threads that interconnect the perceptions of high school dropouts regarding school violence prevention policies and practices with their decisions to leave school before graduation. Sometimes the connections with school violence prevention practices and policies appear transparent, at other times they remain hidden and the connections may only become apparent through subjective interpretations. In addition, dissecting the social, economic, political, religious, cultural and psychological factors framing school violence prevention policies and practices in schools and society and ascertaining to what extent these factors affected decisions to drop out of school becomes equally relevant to the analysis and interpretation of the data collected. Furthermore, deciphering how

factors related to ethnicity, gender, and class are interconnected to the implementation of school violence prevention policies and practices enhances our understandings of students' decisions to leave school before graduation.

Prior to presenting the analysis and interpretation of the data collected it becomes imperative that these findings are not considered generalizations about the population of high school dropouts, either in southeast rural Georgia or within the confines of the high school these students attended. The purpose of this research is not to draw conclusions about the reasons students leave high school prior to graduation, but rather to relate how personal experiences and perceptions may have been influenced by policies and practices, either overtly or covertly, related to school violence prevention. Overt influences reflect direct actions taken by the school as part of the school violence prevention policies and practices, such as suspension and expulsion. Covert influences that may result in general feelings of estrangement from the school community are more difficult to recognize, but may be more widespread. Within the population of students who were interviewed there were striking commonalities as well as stark differences.

My interviewees' perceptions of their high school experiences and how these perceptions led to their decisions to drop out of high school may at times seem difficult for adults to fully appreciate. No doubt, interviews with school workers would present a quite different picture. Furthermore, what my interviewees were willing to share with me reflects their interpretations and understandings of complex, multidimensional issues. What was not said may be as important as what was said. There were times that I internally questioned whether or not my interviewees were telling me the whole story.

The need to develop and maintain a positive rapport with my interviewees necessitated extreme sensitivity. Although I probed for deeper understandings and gently confronted contradictory information, maintaining a non-combative milieu was essential to the success of the interviews. At times it seemed the interviewees were trying to represent themselves in a way that felt most comfortable with their own self-identity and they avoided self-criticism. The ability to empathize with the challenges faced by school personnel to maintain school safety was also often missing.

Historical and cultural chasms exist between the lives of contemporary adolescents and adults. Being able to empathize with the thoughts and feelings of adolescents trying to negotiate their lives within the context of school becomes a challenge. However, I reiterate that I am not an arbiter of truth but rather a conduit for attempting to honestly present my interviewees' stories. By working to understand how their decisions to drop out of high school may interconnect with school violence prevention policies and practices and the climate they foster, new insights emerge.

Three common threads evolved from an analysis and interpretation of the data. These included a perception by most interviewees that some school violence prevention policies and practices were not only ineffectual but also often enforced unjustly. This perception contributed to their feelings of estrangement from the school community. Much of the curriculum, often driven by school reform efforts to improve scores on standardized tests, was perceived as less than engaging and that opportunities to interact with teachers and other students in the spirit of a community of learners was absent. Finally, a general perception by most participants that school workers were not concerned about their well

being contributed to their decisions to drop out. As each area of concern is analyzed within the context of the interviews and focus group discussions, interconnections with social, political and cultural factors informing school violence prevention policies and practices is examined. Before beginning the analysis and interpretation of the data, a comparison of my sample of dropouts with those described within the literature is informative.

Disrupting Stereotypes

Although some research tends to support the conviction that factors contributing to a dropout status are stable over time, the interviewees in my sample appear less than typical (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Duttweiler, 1995). One must remember that individuals willing to be interviewed represent a select clientele. Those willing to be interviewed may perceive their individual situations differently from those who refuse to discuss the events leading to their decisions to drop out of high school. In addition, the difficulties I encountered in finding Black interviewees must be noted. To what extent White privilege played a role in Black interviewees reluctance to participate provides additional issues worthy of investigation. However, the participants I interviewed must be recognized as a legitimate sample of high school dropouts from this particular school.

According to a study of two samples of dropouts from the pre-Columbine mid-1970s and 1980s potential dropouts tend to be retained in the same grade; have poor academic grades; and are more likely to come from low socioeconomic status families where parents did not complete high school (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997;

Duttweiler, 1995). My interviewees disrupt many of these stereotypes and may represent a new trend that widens the descriptors for high school dropouts. Perhaps the implementation of school violence prevention policies and practices, including zero tolerance, have somewhat changed the demographics of the typical high school dropout.

The socio-economic status of my participants varied widely, but each felt that their financial status was irrelevant to their decision to drop out. The majority came from intact families and had parents who not only had graduated from high school but who also had college degrees. Most of the interviewees stated that they had maintained good academic records, but truancy and OSS had lowered several of their grade averages. Fran had been an honor roll student prior to her dropping out and Deirdre had attended university classes while still in high school

However, feeling disengaged from school; adhering more frequently to perceived deviant norms; exhibiting psychological vulnerability and manifesting perceived behavior problems were profiles for many of my participants. Mark and Edgar were the only participants who had been arrested and none of the participants tended to be part of a large peer group (Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 1997; Duttweiler, 1995). It appears that research supporting the profile of the dropout from the mid 1970s and 1980s may be inadequate to describe current trends informing drop out behavior of my sample. Such data disputes the conviction that factors contributing to a dropout status are stable over time.

According to researcher S. E. Wells (1990) situations that put youth at risk for dropping out may be categorized as student related, family related and/or school related.

Student related factors that corroborate my findings include: poor school attitude, attendance/truancy, pregnancy, poor peer relationships, illness/disability, low self-esteem/self-efficacy and nonparticipation. However, the following student related factors were not observed or only occasionally observed in the sample for this project: low ability level, behavior/discipline problems, drug abuse, and/or friends have dropped out.

Family related factors cited by Wells (1990) included low SES, dysfunctional home life, no parental involvement, low parental expectations, non-English-speaking home, ineffective parenting/abuse, and high mobility. The majority of my interviewees enjoyed middle-class status and had strong parental support and high parental expectations. Most of the parents were actively involved in their child's education and had intervened with school officials on several occasions. Most of the participants had good academic standings, even though several had begun to fail classes due more to non-attendance than to lack of ability. Their academic records were not verified and their academic standing was their own perception of how well they were doing in school. All of the participants had planned to graduate from high school and several were seniors when they quit school. Some were involved in extra curricular activities such as band, chorus and drama club, but none were involved in any sports activities. The majority was also on the College-Prep track and most planned to attend college after graduation. All participants have either completed a GED program or plan to secure a high school diploma through an alternative process. It appears that they all understand the importance of education and all wish that their high school experience had been different. I reiterate that my

interviewees may represent a unique sample of dropouts or they may reflect new trends in the dropout population.

Wells (1990) identified school related factors in dropout behavior that include conflict between home/school culture, ineffective discipline system, lack of adequate counseling, negative school climate, lack of relevant curriculum, passive instructional strategies, inappropriate use of technology, disregard of student learning styles, retentions/suspensions, low expectations, and lack of language instruction. A lack of adequate counseling; a negative school climate; lack of a relevant curriculum; passive instructional strategies and a disregard for learning styles were attested to by my participants. Although student related and family related factors contributed to my interviewees' decisions to leave school prior to graduation, this research focuses primarily on school related factors. In addition, interconnections with the interviewees' perceptions of the school climate influenced by school violence prevention policies and practices and decisions to drop out remain the primary focus of the research.

The "Push Effects"

Educational researchers Will J. Jordan and Julia Lara (1996) identify "push effects" that are "located within the school itself that negatively impact the connection adolescents make with the school's environment and cause them to reject the context of schooling" (para. 4). My interviewees corroborate the existence of "push effects" as school-related and as contributing factors in their decisions to leave school before graduation. Jordan and Lara (1996) maintain that "when the school becomes frustrating, punishing, or something a student wishes to avoid" (para. 4), dropping out becomes a

viable solution. My research supports Jordan and Lara's findings that school-related reasons for dropping out include feelings of alienation and estrangement that may be traced to not getting along with teachers and/or peers, as well as not feeling cared for within the school environment. Not feeling safe at school is also a factor and may include concerns over physical and/or verbal attacks by other students and extreme difficulties in developing positive peer relationships. Therefore, push effects identify internal school factors that "may be structural, contextual, climate-related, or individualized" and that contribute to certain student's perception of school "as an unwelcoming place, and eventuates into their alienation and disengagement" (Jordan & Lara, 1996, para. 6). For many of my interviewees, the perceived school climate at their high school was inhospitable.

Defining school climate "as the feelings that students and staff have about the school environment over a period of time" (Peterson & Skiba, 2000, para. 2), researchers Peterson and Skiba hypothesize that negative feelings such as alienation, fear, frustration, and a sense of powerlessness would negatively affect learning and behavior. On the other hand, positive school climates would encourage "comfortable and supportive feelings [that] would support effective and efficient learning and teaching as well as positive student behavior and attitudes" (2000, para. 3). Deconstructing to what extent school violence prevention policies and practices are interconnected to push effects and negative school climate becomes imperative.

School Violence Prevention Practices and Policies

Students and staff want to feel safe at school. Most of my interviewees stated that they felt safe at school. The majority of my participants did not perceive their high school to be violent and none thought that weapons were being brought on campus. However, it must be noted that two participants (Mark and Deirdre) admitted to carrying knives on campus and Edgar was accused of concealing a gun while at school.

Peterson and Skiba (2000) assert that security measures such as video cameras, locker searches, and metal detectors may do more than improve the safety element of the school, but may also negatively impact school climate by "creating an atmosphere of fear or intimidation" (para. 5). Some participants thought having metal detectors was a good idea. However, since many students could avoid the screening they considered it an ineffectual means of preventing weapons from being brought on campus. Steve recommended that surveillance cameras should be installed in hallways in order to identify perpetrators in fights. To what extent such safety precautions negatively impacted the school climate and "created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation" is open to debate.

A direct connection between students' decisions to drop out of school and policies and practices initiated through school violence prevention often becomes blurred. However, I reiterate that current practices designed to prevent violent acts and punish offenders seem to reveal a limited understanding of underlying causes, deterministic assumptions and an overwhelming desire for quick fixes. Analyzing the extent to which perceptions of interviewees that some school violence prevention policies and practices were not only

ineffectual, but were also enforced unjustly contributed to their feelings of estrangement from the school community helps to understand their decisions to drop out.

Fighting and bringing a weapon on campus may appear to be the violations that most obviously invoke the enforcement of polices and practices related to the prevention of school violence. Edgar was the only student who attended a tribunal for accusations of carrying a weapon on campus. However, school violence prevention policies and practices cast a wide net and include not only overt acts of violence such as fighting or carrying a weapon on school grounds, but also violations of dress codes, truancy and tardiness. Insisting shirts be tucked in so weapons cannot be hidden; issuing equal punishment to both parties involved in a fight regardless of who initiated the fight and OSS for excessive tardiness are also part of the policies and practices designed to prevent school violence. Some interviewees contend these polices and practices contributed to a school climate that was perceived as inhospitable and contributed to their decisions to leave school prior to graduation. Jordan and Lara (1998) recognize:

> Many schools have policies that force teachers to fail students who miss some set number of school days or who are frequently tardy. If a student reaches the maximum number of absences that means automatic failure, he or she may lose any incentive for continuing to come to school and exerting academic effort for the remainder of the term. In addition, students who are often suspended begin to see themselves as incapable of succeeding in school, and the school itself affirms this perception with each new suspension. For all intents and purposes, in the worst cases, adolescents are evicted from school in that they have slipped so far behind and developed such an adversarial view of their own schooling that the probability of getting back on track is quite small. (para. 5)

OSS for Tardiness

The school my interviewees attended had policies in place that required OSS for excessive tardiness and teachers were required to assign zeros for all work missed due to

suspension. Melissa understood the policy of receiving zeros for work she missed due to OSS, but requested the work so she would be able to pass future assignments. Melissa stated that "a lot of teachers did not want to give you the work" even though you would not receive credit for it. This policy seemed to increase Melissa's feelings of estrangement from the school community and her perception that teachers did not value her.

> I don't think they really thought I was too intelligent at all. I think they thought I was really dumb. And only because when I was there they would never give me the work to do....When it seems that somebody cares about you—you do a lot better....But it was more like they didn't care whether you were there or not....Once you've gotten the reputation of being out of school you keep that reputation.

Melissa admitted that these experiences strongly contributed to her estrangement from school and her decision to drop out. Other participants also agreed that OSS contributed to their estrangement from school. After receiving zeros for assignments missed while suspended, the potential to pass certain courses becomes remote and dropping out to avoid failure constitutes a viable option.

Who Started the Fight Doesn't Matter

Fear of receiving OSS for being in a fight that you had not initiated and that you had tried to avoid was a serious problem for Steve and created a stressful situation that was ameliorated by leaving school during his freshman year. Steve remembered:

> I tried to avoid them because I know how I am—I'll lose my cool easy.... I don't want to fight in school. Some of the students wanted to start things and it got to the point that they would mess with me everyday. They wanted to fight me and I wouldn't do it....I went to the principal—he was just trying to wave it off....I told the principal you know something is going down....If I get in a fight you know you are just going to suspend me....So after he [principal] blew me off that one time, I just said I'm not going back to him no more.

Mark also confided to me that other students often harassed him. He also alerted school officials to the problem but stated that they had taken no action on his behalf. Feeling powerless to stop the assaults and threats contributed to his decision to leave school. Lisa, whose disciplinary action for defending herself during a fight she had not initiated resulted in being assigned to an alternative school for the remainder of her freshman year, still harbors resentment for treatment she deemed unfair. Lisa stated:

> I didn't start it—she did—she started with me. It wasn't my fault....It wasn't fair because I didn't start it so I could have gotten something less. My parents were upset because me and the girl were friends—we're still friends and we talk off and on. We got everything straightened out—now we talk all the time.

To what extent this experience contributed to her rejection of high school is questionable since she did not drop out until her senior year. However, thinking that school personnel have treated you unfairly may have contributed to Lisa's feelings of powerlessness and may have contributed to her estrangement from school.

Deirdre also had requested school personnel to intervene on her behalf since an ongoing dispute had become so threatening that she had brought a knife for protection. Understanding that if she got into a fight defending herself she would be suspended, Deirdre solicited her mother's help. Deirdre protested that "if you have informed the staff that you had a problem with somebody, they should take action about what you told them."

Although Kevin insisted he was not a disciplinary problem in school, he received reprimands for having verbal confrontations with other students. After having been teased in middle school, Kevin explained that he was now ready to defend himself:

> When I hit ninth grade I stopped taking shit. I stopped taking it—I decided that was over—that was done with. I'm going to stand up for myself. But when I did stand up for myself, it seemed like I was the one getting in trouble.

Kevin understood that fighting would result in OSS but insisted that "if somebody is trying to punch me in my face—I'm going all out. That's just the way I am. I am a nice person, I think, but I can be a very violent person."

As an educator I have witnessed fights in which students who were defending themselves from a physical attack were routinely suspended. In the United States a plea of self-defense has successfully been used to avoid prosecution, but in this public high school both parties are considered guilty during a fight and neither have an opportunity for a plea of self-defense.

The Weapon Was a Cell Phone

Edgar was quite familiar with OSS and had been suspended numerous times for offenses that he often deemed unsubstantial. As a capable student his grades had not suffered as much as his sense of justice and self-esteem had been eroded by accusations he perceived as unsubstantiated. After being accused of carrying a gun on campus and having only a cellular phone in his pocket, Edgar was convinced school officials were determined to have him withdraw from high school. Comments made to him and his father by school personnel during his tribunal regarding his alleged weapon possession were the final straw:

> They kept saying I'm coming to school bringing up different objects and stuff, you know in school the only thing they found on me was like a cell phone....You know they'd made their decision before I plead my half of the story...a waste of time. ... Now that's messed up. Now I can't never get a high school diploma....You know I just got tired of all the hassle....I wanted to graduate.

Edgar adamantly denied ever bringing a weapon on campus and he perceived that school officials discriminated against him because he and his family had previously lived in New Jersey. He asserted that "they kept bringing up that I'm from New Jersey—you know there's nothing but problem kids up north....I'm like why does that have anything to do with me now?"

As a Black male who had several disciplinary referrals, Edgar may represent society's stereotype of the dropout. Edgar disrupted this stereotype by being an honor student. However, his confrontational reactions to authoritarian dictates he viewed as unjust proved detrimental within the context of this high school. On several occasions he perceived school officials targeted him:

> When I walked through the hallway it seemed like they were picking just at me....It's like once you come to the office one time they try to get you coming there. Once you go one time you're going to keep going the rest of the time you're in high school....It's like they don't like us or something. I hung in there until the eleventh grade and then I can't take it no more and I had to leave.

The "us" Edgar refers to is a poignant reminder of the divide that often exists between students and school personnel. Whether "us" refers to other Black males that appear threatening to the safety of the school also hints at perceived unfair treatment that may reflect perceived racial discrimination. Edgar admitted that he often felt targeted by school personnel and that his other Black male friends shared this perception.

Is Your Shirt Tucked In?

Edgar confessed that he disliked the dress code policy of tucking in your shirt and affirmed that the policy was administered unfairly. Other students supported this position and commented that it was only enforced to punish students perceived as

"troublemakers." Edgar remembered one incident that confirmed his perception regarding racial discrimination:

> Cause like I see a couple of [White] guys walk through—they don't have their shirts tucked in and walk right by the principal and nobody say nothing to them. I'm saying why do I have to tuck my shirt in when they don't tuck theirs in? So I tried an experiment one day. I took my shirt out and walked passed them and as soon as I got right by them, they turned around and said 'You have to go to the bathroom and tuck your shirt in and that's the last time I'm going to tell you—we're going to put you out in ISS.' I said 'OK,' and went to the bathroom…that was messed up…I mean I just see these other three guys walk past the principal and nobody said nothing to them. But me, as soon as I get close to them, they spot me up. I don't know if it's they know my face.

Fran, who also thought tucking in your shirt to prevent weapons on campus "stupid," witnessed an event at the high school that she described as "violent." She recalled an incident in which the principal pushed a male student against the wall because he refused to tuck in his shirt.

> It was a Black boy, but he didn't have his shirt tucked in and the principal told him to tuck his shirt in and it got to the point that the principal threw him against the wall and said, 'You're going to tuck your shirt in!'

In general, students were willing to follow rules that were enforced fairly, even if they did not agree with the efficacy of such rules. All interviewees thought tucking your shirt in to prevent weapons being brought on campus was "terribly, terribly stupid." However, when students observed the rule not being fairly enforced, some were driven to test the rule and to see if they would be reprimanded for this violation. Besides Edgar, Mark also had tested the way this rule was enforced. He stated that he would wear a jacket so that he could leave his shirt out or he would only tuck in one corner of his shirt in order to see if he would get caught.

In the fall of 2000 a new principal was hired at the high school and the dress code rule of tucking in your shirt was abandoned. Edgar would have welcomed this change since he thought:

> Everything about tucking in your skirt and all that kind of stuff—that has nothing to do with your learning. I guess that's trying to keep violence down, but where there was no violence... we can't keep violence down.

Deirdre added that "if they want to bring a gun or a knife they can bring them somewhere other than their shirts—they can bring them in their shoes or in their book bags." She stated that since locker searches are infrequent, students have "plenty of time to bring a gun to school."

Why this rule that resulted in past offenders being assigned ISS and even OSS for repeated violations was removed remains unknown. However, for some of my interviewees their experiences related to this school violence prevention policy contributed to their estrangement and alienation from the school community. To what extent this policy contributed to their decision to drop out is debatable. To what extent this policy confirms Phallas' assertion that "the adults haven't a clue," is more discernable.

Curriculum, Learning Styles and Dropping Out

Education was deemed important to all of my interviewees and each had hoped to graduate with a high school diploma. Academic failure persists as a primary reason society thinks students drop out. However, this was never given as a reason why any of my interviewees dropped out of high school. Instead, many former students found their classes overwhelmingly boring. Nicole reported that "it was the teachers—they didn't

teach. They would just come in and give you work... They were boring and they really didn't know what they were talking about." Melissa agreed that her classes were not interesting and recommended that classes "should include discussions about different types of people, different religions, different ethnic groups... people that just believe different things."

Respected educational theorist Theodore R. Sizer, author of Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School (1984), Professor of Education at Brown University and Chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools, states:

> When you ask high school kids to apply adjectives to their school experience, the most common one--it has been the same for 25 years--is the word 'boring.' And it is, of course, boring in the respect that what we ask them to do is to memorize too often. We ask them to memorize other people's answers to other people's questions, which is to say to a kid: 'You're so irrelevant that, even though you've been on this planet for 15 years, your views, your questions, your perceptions are a matter of no consequence whatsoever, they're to be put down. I have the answer; you learn it.' (Sizer, 1994, para. 14)

I agree with Sizer that "this approach is not only disrespectful, it promotes the kind of docility and slouching that characterize schools" (1994, para. 15). Connecting how improvements in school curriculum can reduce school violence and even school dropout rates further emphasizes the need for enlightened school reform. Sizer explains:

> Serious intellectual work dramatically captures the mind and dramatically lessens boredom. A youngster who is engaged in school is a youngster who stays in school. The youngster who stays in school is the youngster the faculty knows. If the faculty is deployed in such a way that teachers can act on that knowledge, you will see a dramatic drop in violence but, more importantly, a dramatic increase in the sense of agency, self-esteem and of constructive powerful behavior. (1994, para. 16)

Educational researcher Kathleen L. Kaminski (1993) in her article "Rural Dropouts: A Casual Comparison," also attests to the role of curriculum in students' decisions to leave

school. She cited several early studies that recommended improvements in high school curriculum as a measure for reducing dropouts.

Although only two students admitted to being bored with the curriculum, most of the students lodged complaints targeting teaching styles that they perceived as ineffectual. Use of textbooks as the primary teaching tool and lack of meaningful discussions with teachers and other students were primary complaints. Previously I explained how current school reform efforts are closely linked to school violence prevention since safe schools are also deemed effective schools. Efforts to control the school environment as well as improve scores on standardized tests, often result in a curriculum that is driven by textbooks and that is devoid of content and teaching styles that might better engage students. My personal observations confirm that teachers as well as students are under surveillance and that teacher' evaluations are often determined by how well they can control their classrooms. Noise levels deemed unacceptable; unnecessary student movement; and activities that are not part of the prescribed curriculum often meet with administrative disapproval.

Although some classes will prove more interesting to some students than others and curriculum reform is obviously needed, most students found their relationships with their teachers and the teaching style employed to be most problematic. Examining why so many of the participants choose to complete their education at the local technical college provides some interesting findings.

Getting My GED

All of my interviewees have obtained or hope to obtain an equivalency high school diploma in order to avoid being stigmatized as a "dropout." Those who attended the local technical college for preparatory classes have been extremely positive about this experience. Edgar praised the policies at the local technical college that he thought treated students with respect. Fran echoed his praise by stating that "it's making up for what the high school didn't offer."

Liane Brouillette (1999), Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at the University of California at Irvine confirms that "for many students the benefit derived from the GED program was primarily associated with the relationships between instructors and students, which were markedly different from those they had experienced in high school" (para. 27). Teachers were viewed as coaches whose expertise was valued by the students. Working for a common goal of passing the GED exam removed the tensions that often existed within the context of high school where teachers were experienced as punishing and authoritative. My interviews with former high school students who have now completed their equivalency diploma collaborates Brouillette's assertion that this event transformed school dropouts' self-perceptions:

> They had begun the process of seizing control of their lives, of breaking out of the mood of hopelessness that had paralyzed them. A major step in doing this was the shedding of the pejorative label 'dropout.' Through passing the GED test, they were able to prove to themselves and to others that there was life after the decision to drop out of school. (1999, para. 31).

Melissa, Edgar, Mark, Fran, Carl and Kevin all attended GED classes at the local technical college and have been awarded their equivalency diploma. Nicole plans to take

her GED test this spring. Steve, Lisa and Deirdre preferred to complete a correspondence program that leads to a high school diploma. Interestingly, all three of these individuals who view the GED as less prestigious than a high school diploma are Black or biracial. Whether knowledge of marginalization experienced by those of color who do not have a high school diploma was part of their internal motivation remains hard to ascertain, but deserves consideration. In addition, why all White interviewees did not foresee problems with their future career aspirations by obtaining a GED instead of a high school diploma through a correspondence program, is equally interesting.

To what extent this underscores factors related to White privilege remains hypothetical, but demands attention. Furthermore, the question of what might have happened to this population of dropouts that knew about the GED courses at the technical college and their easy access to the program if such options were not in place, provides more opportunities for future analysis. Could the technical college be offering a vehicle for diffusing potential school violence by providing students an alternative for acquiring a diploma? One might also ponder whether or not the technical college, with its easy access to GED courses, is a contributing factor in the increasing rate of local high school dropouts. Finally, I wonder why the high school does not examine the mechanisms in place at the technical college that appear to provide opportunities for success to those who choose to leave the high school before graduation. These questions are beyond the scope of this project, but offer important foci for future research.

The Freshman Academy

The Freshman Academy was initiated in 1999 as part of the high school's efforts to prevent school violence. In an attempt to continue the model that was being used at the middle school, the high school desired to keep ninth graders separated from older students. The middle school model provides physical space so that sixth, seventh and eighth grade classrooms occupy separate wings of the school. Within this model each grade level became its own community of learners and older eighth grade students did not have opportunities to interact with younger students. This model replaced the junior high school model that many educators deemed developmentally inappropriate for eleven, twelve, thirteen and fourteen year olds.

The rationale for implementing the Freshman Academy included the premise that older students would negatively influence younger students. Furthermore, school administrators thought that by separating this group of students they could better monitor their progress and help those who experienced academic failure. Statistically, a large number of students drop out during their freshman year. Although well intended, the Freshman Academy was viewed by all participants involved as problematic. Once again it seems that "the adults haven't a clue."

Several interviewees lodged complaints about the Freshman Academy. Nicole commented that "your first year of high school you're already the little kid of the group and you have no respect from anybody else." She asserted that the Freshman Academy made it worse because "we were not involved in anything, we didn't interact with anyone and [we] felt more isolated—more like a little child." Even though the Freshman

Academy had been designed to prevent school violence, Steve, who perceived the program as an utter failure, recalled that it was mostly kids his own age that were harassing and teasing him. Fran's critique of the program centered more on the limitations it imposed on course selection. She wanted to take more challenging classes but was denied access because of the constraints imposed by the Freshman Academy rules. Whether or not the implementation of the Freshman Academy has reduced school violence is unknown. However, it does not appear to help nurture a sense of community and may contribute to a sense of isolation and alienation for some students.

Relationships With Teachers

As an educator I found that most students want to be liked by their teachers. My interviewees were no exception. To what extent school violence prevention policies and practices inhibit school personnel from developing positive relationships with students deserves attention. Nicole asserted that she felt like "a dangerous person" when she walked down the hall and saw teachers eyeing her for possible dress code violations. Perceiving that your teachers consider you "a dangerous person" does little for developing positive student-teacher relationships.

Melissa felt that she had had no positive relationships with her teachers and that there was nobody she could really talk with that she trusted. As an openly gay student Carl regretted that there had been only two teachers that he felt comfortable speaking with and conceded "that's sad that two out of twenty-something [were] willing to talk with me, understand what was going on and give me support." Kevin's lack of rapport with several teachers was equally problematic. He thought that teachers labeled him and that they "let

their gut reactions take over." Kevin was especially concerned about an incident he had witnessed in which one teacher exhibited disrespect toward another student:

> One of the teachers would actually make remarks about other students to students. She would make remarks to other teachers while those students were in the room. Students could definitely hear them. She made a remark to me about another student and said, 'she'll never succeed in life—she's lazy.' She also talked about me and made remarks to the other teachers.

As adults we have an obligation to be role models for students. If students view teachers' behavior as disrespectful toward them, then developing positive relationships is greatly hampered. Respect for the school community and all its members frames tenets supporting safe and effective schools. In order to receive respect from students, adults must understand the importance of showing respect for students. A sense of mutual trust is critical to developing positive relationships. For many of my interviewees this component was missing from their school experiences.

Some school violence prevention practices and policies, such as equal punishment for all parties involved in a fight and disciplinary action for dress codes violations that are deemed not only ineffectual but unfairly enforced, work against the development of positive student-teacher relationships. Kaminski (1993) agrees with Bearden, William and Morocco (1989) that besides "more student-teacher interaction in the classroom, more teacher involvement with the students out of class, and smaller class sizes for an improved learning environment, [there exists] the need for improved counseling services" (para. 9). If students were unable to develop positive relationships with teachers, it would be hoped that the school counselor would provide this needed support.

The School Counselor

As a certified school counselor I understand the obstacles faced by counselors who wish to provide counseling services to high school students. Time is a critical factor and much of a counselor's day revolves around resolving scheduling problems; changing students' classes; preparing materials for standardized testing; and consulting with students regarding post-secondary decisions. However, several of my participants visited the school counselor and left with little or no counseling services provided. No participant perceived the counselor as an effective agent working on his/her behalf. In the worst-case scenario, Fran targets the actions of the school counselor as the primary reason she dropped out.

> It was my guidance counselor. First of all she told me I was too big to wear sleeveless shirts....She'd stop me in the hallway and it would be winter and I would have one under my jacket that zipped up and she would make me unzip my jacket to see what kind of shirt I had underneath the jacket.

Understanding that school personnel are often solicited to determine the appropriateness of student attire, some may feel obliged to impose their own standards of "good taste."

School counselors have been described as advocates for students, yet no interviewee shared this perception of their school counselor. Kevin, a student diagnosed with severe anxiety disorder and school phobia, qualifies as a prime candidate for scheduled visits to the school counselor's office. However, he had never visited the school counselor's office except for schedule changes. Kevin thought she was "a very nice person," but he did not think she would understand the problems he was having.

> I felt that she didn't make herself available. She was a very nice person, but yet there was that feeling that I couldn't talk to her. She might not understand. Nobody showed any caring. I was ready to end it all. There were times when I thought about suicide.

Steve had never considered visiting the school counselor regarding the harassment he had been experiencing from other students, but his truancy had been brought to the counselor's attention. Rather than addressing him directly about his truancy the counselor queried his friends about his possible drug use. Steve recalled:

> The counselor made me and my mom mad over there at the high school....The counselor had asked my friends if I was doing drugs because I came to school with my eyes red... She asked my mom if I was on drugs and my mom didn't appreciate that....Since I'm not coming to school I must be on drugs.

Lisa was still waiting to hear back from the counselor regarding homebound services that would allow her to continue her education throughout her pregnancy and the birth of her child. Carl also felt uncomfortable confiding in the counselor about his sexual orientation and had not visited her office to discuss his concerns. Nicole had visited the counselor numerous times, but she perceived the counselor as someone who only wanted her to remain in high school regardless of the pain she thought it was creating for her.

To what extent school counselors have been advised to dismiss the social and emotional vulnerabilities of the potential dropout population is unknown. However, the ineffectiveness of this role in helping these potential school dropouts negotiate their problems is undisputable. As a primary agent of care within the context of school, the school counselor's role is extremely important. Within the context of this high school, a perception of care was missing.

The Missing Discourse of Care

Professor Theodore R. Sizer (1994) addresses the connection between school violence and respecting students.

> The central needs are to have people who care and to have each student be known. It's as simple as that. Someone who cares. Being known signals a kind of respect: You're 14, you may be a ragamuffin or worse, but you still deserve respect. If schools are to deal with violence, the per-teacher loads have to be reduced dramatically; the schools have to be places where the kids are unequivocally known. (para. 7)

Sizer contends that the size of the school makes a tremendous positive difference in reducing students' feelings of alienation that may lead to quitting school before graduation. "The lesson I have learned from watching and listening in schools all around the country is that small schools are an antidote to anonymity" (Sizer, 1994, para. 3).

> Those schools that have reorganized themselves--within their existing budgets--so that no teacher has more than a total of 80 kids witness a dramatic drop in the incidence of violence and other forms of counterproductive behavior. And in most situations this kind of reorganization is financially possible--the barriers to it are political and traditional. (Sizer, 1994, para. 4)

Understanding that the high school all the interviewees attended is rather large with over 1400 students, the problems of individual students may prove difficult for school personnel to adequately address. However, this does not excuse the need for addressing these problems. Statistics garnered from the most recent Georgia Department of Education's Report Card reveal a high school completion rate percent for the entering class of 1997 to the graduating class of 2001 to be 57.5% compared to the state completion rate of 71.7%. This means that close to 43% of students from this high school who entered their freshman year in 1997 failed to graduate in 2001.

Although personal circumstances varied each interviewee cited a lack of care by a variety of school personnel as a contributing factor in their decision to leave school prior to graduation. Mark and Steve had notified school personnel regarding a potential fight and each felt dismissed by the school authority they had contacted for help. Carl and

Kevin experienced continual harassment by other students and each brought their concerns to school personnel who were perceived as impotent in stopping the assaults. Carl thought several of his teachers were not concerned about his failing grades and that they did little to help him academically. Both Fran and Steve insisted that the insensitivity of the school counselor were triggers in their decisions to quit school. Lisa, who was pregnant during her senior year, also perceived a lack of care and concern on the part of school personnel who were not willing to accommodate her needs for securing the necessary credits for graduation. Thinking back on his high school career Edgar remembered a few teachers who seemed to have his best interest at heart and who had tried to help him avoid disciplinary actions, but each had proved impotent when confronted by administrative directives. Melissa's perception of her high school experience reflected her discontent with school policies related to tardiness, as well as resentment toward a general climate that she perceived as coercive and uncaring. Deirdre, who had an ongoing conflict with another student and whose requests for protection had been ignored stated "that makes you feel that they don't care or are not listening to you."

Unfair Treatment

When students perceive that they are not being treated fairly in school their regard for that institution and its personnel are diminished. Whether the adults involved were aware of perceived differential treatment remains unknown. However, several of my interviewees reported discriminatory actions by school personnel based on several policies and practices connected with school violence prevention. The most flagrant violations of equal treatment were associated with the enforcement of dress codes.

As a teacher I have been asked to make judgments regarding the appropriate length of female students' shorts or skirts. A ruler has been used to measure the distance from students' knees to hemlines in question. On other occasions students are asked to stand with their arms at their sides to ascertain if the hemline is above their fingertips. I have found these requests to monitor student attire distasteful and often unwarranted. However, failure to identify and discipline students who are deemed inappropriately dressed is grounds for serious reprimands by one's superior, as well as other teachers who take this responsibility very seriously.

It has not been my experience that an extra inch of fabric on the hemline of shorts or skirts has a positive impact on school climate. However, the humiliation and discomfort experienced by both students and those school personnel who find such monitoring of student dress inappropriate, provide fuel for creating a negative school climate. Students who overtly dress in ways to be deemed inappropriate by exposing themselves may be more in need of counseling services than disciplinary actions. In Fran's case, exposing one's upper arms could hardly be deemed inappropriate.

Although the dress code forbids tank tops, it does not mention any prohibition of other sleeveless attire. Fran understood that the harassment she had received for wearing sleeveless apparel was unfair since it was not a dress code violation. She had not been reprimanded for breaking the dress code, but rather for exposing her large upper arms that were considered unsightly by the school counselor. I remain baffled by the motives behind the school counselor's actions, but I hypothesize that issues pertaining to sexism, morality and possibly Christian fundamentalism might be involved. Fran admitted that

her church frowns on sleeveless attire for female patrons. However, Fran stated that many of the teens wear sleeveless clothing. Regardless of the rationale behind this bizarre situation, Fran cited the ongoing harassment regarding her clothing choice as the primary reason she dropped out of high school. Her sense of injustice was further ignited when she observed other girls blatantly breaking the dress code by exposing their midriff or wearing extremely short attire and not being reprimanded. She conceded that these girls were slim and attractive but that this was no excuse for making exceptions to the rules.

Deirdre also recognized discrepancies regarding dress code enforcement. She stated that White girls would not be disciplined for wearing the exact apparel she wore and thought that this was discriminatory. Like Fran, Deirdre thought that the dress code policy was enforced unfairly and that what you were allowed to wear depended more upon the color of your skin or the slimness of your body than upon adherence to dress code policy.

Being a pregnant high school student presents numerous problems. However, discrimination based on pregnancy is illegal within public schools. Deirdre knew many high school girls who were pregnant or who had babies while they were in high school. From her personal observations Deirdre believed that pregnant girls with high academic standings were encouraged to stay in school, whereas girls who were struggling academically were encouraged to withdraw from school and to not return after the birth of their child.

> That's another thing I think is not fair—like if you have a child they do not encourage you to come or stay—you know—push you to stay in high school. The girls want to come and stay and graduate, but they don't really help you out. You might as well drop out if you have a kid. That's the message they give them. They don't encourage

> them to come back to school. One of my best friends—she's very smart—she was encouraged to stay in school [even though she was pregnant] because she had really good grades.

Lisa, a young mother, confirmed Deirdre's observations and thought that the school could have done more to help her earn the credits she needed for graduation. "It was my last year—one semester left. There was something they could have done. If they really wanted to, they could have helped me."

Sticks and Stones

Bullying has been identified as a primary cause for violent acts within public schools. Although "incidents of violent retribution have led to an increased awareness of the problem of bullying...the problem is often overlooked in public schools" (Peterson & Skiba, 2000, para. 46). Several of my interviewees may be representative of the approximate 20% of students who are bullied in schools throughout the United States and who suffer detrimental psychological effects such as low self-esteem, depression and suicidal ideation (Peterson and Skiba, 2000). Ongoing bullying without any effective interventions from school officials directly contributed to several of my interviewees' decisions to drop out of high school. Unfortunately, bullying is often tolerated and ignored in public schools.

> Some have estimated that teachers rarely detect this problem and only intervene in 4% of all incidents. In addition, students tend to believe that bullied students are at least partly to blame for their victimization that bullying makes the victims tougher, and that teasing is simply done in fun. Students who report such incidents believe that nothing will be done. (Peterson & Skiba, 2000, para. 50)

The experiences of several of my interviewees support these contentions. Peterson and Skiba assert:

> A student is being bullied or victimized when exposed, repeatedly over time, to intentional injury or discomfort inflicted by one or more other students. This may include using physical contact or verbal assault, making obscene gestures or facial expressions, and being intentionally excluded. Bullying implies an imbalance of power or strength in which others victimize one child. (para. 47)

This expanded definition of bullying challenges our thinking and reasserts the need to reconceptualize school violence. However, whether school officials would categorize these acts as of bullying is questionable.

The high school my interviewees attended has a different interpretation of bullying. According to the Student Handbook with Conduct Code for 2001-2002 for the school district my participants attended, bullying is defined as:

> Any willful attempt or threat to inflict injury to another person when accompanied by an apparent present ability to do so; or any intentional display of force such as would give the victim reason to fear or expect immediate bodily harm. Discipline may be from a reprimand to out-of-school suspension. The third offense of bullying in a school year, at a maximum shall result in the student being assigned to an alternative school or other alternative educational program. (p. 41)

The differences between Peterson and Skiba's definition of bullying and the one outlined in the Student Handbook with Conduct Code for 2001-2002 are notable. Denoting bullying to include "discomfort" from "physical contact or verbal assault, making obscene gestures or facial expressions, and being intentionally excluded" is omitted from the Student Handbook with Conduct Code for 2001-2002. Such omissions seriously limit the extent to which students may assert they have been victimized by bullying.

This same handbook states "students are encouraged to seek help of school officials in resolving conflicts with other students [since] fighting is not permitted under any circumstances" (p. 34). Furthermore, this policy is "applicable to students at any time on school grounds, off the school grounds, at a school activity, function, or event, and on

school transportation" (p. 34). With such encompassing policies in place it is interesting how many interviewees who had notified school officials about threats, assaults, harassment and bullying were routinely dismissed.

Kevin stated that he had been teased and tormented his entire school career and those who were reported for these acts of bullying were never disciplined. Kevin is a large young man, weighing over 200 pounds and standing over six feet tall. One might surmise that his large size would preclude anyone from bullying him. Since the Student Handbook with Conduct Code for 2001-2002 states that threats must be accompanied by an ability to carry out such threats, school officials apparently did not deem him a potential victim of bullying. School officials appeared to accept the bully stereotype. Peterson and Skiba (2000) contend that "bullies are typically larger than their victims" (para. 48). However, relying on what is "typical" and denying the likelihood a threat would be carried out is dangerous.

Despite Kevin's imposing size he deserved protection by school personnel from those who teased and tormented him. Kevin commented: "I don't know if it's because they didn't want to deal with that or they didn't want to see that it was actually happening." Kevin vividly reported an incident in which a girl had made vulgar remarks about him and although she had admitted to the deed, no disciplinary action was taken against her. Although victimization of a large male by a female student might not fit the stereotype of victim and bully, dismissing Kevin's claim and the girls' taped confession to the act are unacceptable. At that point Kevin decided he could not continue at that high school and self-transferred to the alternative school. This appears peculiar since the student doing the

bullying, according to the Student Handbook with Conduct Code for 2001-2002, should have been transferred to an alternative program. Kevin asserted:

> I was dumbfounded by the fact the school had proof—she had admitted she had done it....I had no protection. There was nothing from stopping students from saying things. I could have taken it further, but by that time you start feeling what's the point. They're not helping me here. Why take it further?...I lost some serious respect for the school system. I do not believe to this day that I would ever go back—I would never go back—just because I don't think anything has changed.

Alluding to the school shooting in Columbine, Colorado, Kevin stated that "people think that's all the way in Colorado and that's not going to happen at our school [but] they need to step up and realize that there are people who feel that way." Kevin confessed:

> It got to the point that I had a dream that me and a bunch of the people I knew went to school and took it over. I was angry with the school and I was angry with the students. I was going to take it on myself. Something's got to break.

What broke was Kevin's educational career. Whether dropping out was his way of avoiding an act of violence on school grounds will never be known.

By all accounts the verbal and physical abuse Carl endured until he dropped out his senior year of high school must be classified as bullying. Homophobia runs rampant within the halls of many high schools and this high school was no exception. Interestingly, the Student Handbook with Conduct Code for 2001-2002 omits harassment based on sexual orientation as grounds for disciplinary action.

> A student who believes he/she has been the victim of sexual harassment, racial harassment, or disability harassment by another student or by any school employee should immediately report the incident to a teacher, counselor, an assistant principal, a principal, the superintendent, or to another adult or school official in the school system. (p. 34)

Perhaps the omission of being a victim of harassment due to sexual orientation accounts for their neglect in protecting an openly gay student. Carl was rightfully offended when his high school principal told him he "had problems" and that he "was a sick person." Carl confided: "It was almost like I had nowhere to turn to." After being routinely teased, physically assaulted, having his automobile vandalized and bringing these offenses and many more over several years to the attention of school officials with no effective interventions, Carl gave up and quit high school. "I had put up with too much and there was so much that hadn't been done as far as administration and teachers... because no one deserves to be put through ... what I got put through."

Although Deirdre does not identify the lack of intervention on her behalf during repeated episodes of verbal threats by a classmate as the reason she dropped out, she does contend that such behavior can lead to violence. Deirdre admitted: "Well, I brought a knife to school for protection before—I had a problem with this girl all through school--I got tired of it, you know." Critiquing the lack of intervention by school officials to protect students who are being bullied, Deirdre added:

> I don't think they really cared until something really happened and then when something really happens they want to take action... when something bad happens. They should stop it before it actually happens.

Why school officials failed to intervene on behalf of many of the students I interviewed remains unknown. Perhaps they did not consider those who requested protection really in danger. Perhaps the administrators at Columbine High School felt the same way. Researchers Howard Spivak and Deborah Prothrow-Stith (2001) have addressed the importance of understanding the relationship between bullying and school

violence. They contend that bullying can be controlled without resorting to zero tolerance policies that may increase student hostility and student alienation, thus potentially leading to more violent acts within the classroom. School violence prevention policies and practices that do not actively work to prevent potential violent acts such as bullying, are impotent. Some students deal with bullying by withdrawing from high school. Some drop out in order to regain their dignity; others may withdraw to prevent committing violent acts on school grounds.

Advice from the Trenches

At the conclusion of the individual interviews I asked participants to disclose what they wished their teachers knew about them that they did not think they knew; how they wished things had been different for them in high school; and their recommendations for school improvement. As a counselor I know it is important to express feelings of regret and to self-reflect on life events that may still feel unfinished. It was hoped that this process might offer these former students some comfort, as well as providing needed insights for ameliorating current problems within the school.

Melissa stated that she would like her former high school teachers to know that "what's wrong with a lot of people is they stereotype too much without getting to know [them] and you can't really judge someone until you get to know them." Finally, she wished her former teachers could see her today. Still thinking that her teachers consider her "dumb" she would like them to know that she has completed her GED; that she is working successfully in the real estate business and that she is planning to obtain a real estate license in the near future.

Edgar regrets the fact that the school continues to assert that he had a gun on campus. He would like his teachers to know:

> That I'm a good person. That I'm not a troublemaker. I try to talk out a problem…you know they probably think bad of me now…'Oh, Edgar had a gun…he's a bad kid.' I don't want anyone to think that about me.

Lisa would like the school personnel to know how important graduating from high school had been for her and how much she regrets the fact that she was unable to receive a high school diploma.

> I was so mad about it I wanted to cry—but I didn't. Then when I went to graduation and I saw my class graduating I wanted to go back to school so bad. I wanted to graduate with my class. They didn't understand how important that was to me. I had all my credits so far and one semester left and they didn't try to help and I could have graduated.

Kevin insightfully advised school personnel to develop an ethics of care within their teaching profession. "When you go into a profession like teaching you need to be ready to care for your students—put out a true concern. Without that concern I think students don't succeed."

Steve warns anyone considering dropping out to consider their alternatives since "some people think you're dumb just because you drop out [because] they don't really know the story behind it."

Nicole has nothing to say to her teachers since the few she liked and respected have resigned. Still harboring resentment for treatment she perceived as uncaring, Nicole vehemently asserted: "They could think I was the biggest piece of dropout trash in the world. I really don't care about them."

Regardless of the words they used my interviewees each expressed regret that their high school experiences had not been different. I perceived that each interviewee would have liked their teachers to know how much they needed to feel cared for and how much they needed to be understood. For the students I interviewed the past remains painful but each one looks to the future with renewed hope.

Action as Inaction Revisited

After completing my research and analyzing the stories my participants shared, Linda Bell's words become even more poignant:

> To combat the conflation of inaction with not acting, we must make very clear that inaction generally is tantamount to action, that to do none of the acts we could do to oppose oppression is to act on the side of the oppressors, that is, to collaborate with the oppression. Only if our ethics makes this clear will it become apparent that inaction supporting the status quo--and thereby tacitly endorsing the violence that underlies it, is subject to moral condemnation. (1993, pp. 34-35)

I contend that many of the high school experiences reported to me by my interviewees deserve "moral condemnation." The policies and practices designed to prevent school violence may be potential sources of violence when they are enforced arbitrarily; when students' rights to safety are jeopardized; and when students think that their only option is to drop out of high school. Our actions are often inactions when policies and practices designed to prevent school violence overtly and covertly contribute to student alienation and feelings of hopelessness that lead to dropout behavior.

The extent to which reported actions of school personnel regarding these particular students was motivated by school violence prevention policies and practices has become more discernible. The general atmosphere of distrust that these policies and practices appear to have generated in both school workers and students contributed to my

participants' decisions to drop out. From my research findings I surmise that the climate of fear of school violence influenced the extent to which many school personnel were willing to interact positively and effectively with particular students. Issues embedded within racism, classism, sexism and homophobia interconnected with the implementation and non-implementation of school violence prevention policies and practices and thus created opportunities for marginalization and disenfranchisement to certain sectors of the school community. Perceived inequities become more transparent as we become privy to the lived experiences of these former students as they unsuccessfully negotiated their way through high school.

Recommendations

Problematizing policies and practices designed to prevent school violence necessitates moving beyond finding fault to devising possible solutions to problems that inhibit equity and equality for all students. The following section outlines six recommendations for advancing an agenda of social justice within public school, thus improving the school climate and proactively working to prevent school violence. These recommendations also have the potential to help ameliorate dropout behavior by addressing the concerns of recent high school dropouts. The recommendations include: addressing the need for multicultural education; recognizing the need for comprehensive sexuality education; acknowledging the diverse needs of students facing family responsibilities; disputing current rhetoric calling for increasing the compulsory school age requirement; providing effective school-wide programs focusing on conflict resolution and peer mediation within a context of care as an effective means of preventing school violence; and advocating for

school reform that demands curricular revisions, improved alternative programs and smaller classes.

Bridging Gaps With Multicultural Education

Melissa understood the need for multicultural education as a means of bridging gaps of misunderstandings that perpetuate racism, sexism, classism and homophobia.

> I think because they throw you with so many different types of people and different types of backgrounds and ethnic groups and everything else... and religions... that it's kind of hard to understand when you were never taught before how to learn different cultures without criticizing what they believe and what they don't believe. And so when you don't know and you are ignorant to a certain thing it's kind of hard to get along with those people because you heard such bad things about people like that.

In Teaching to Transgress; Education as the Practice of Freedom bell hooks (1994) would agree with Melissa's perception that stereotypical thinking negatively affects the school climate by marginalizing sectors of the student population. In order to counteract an increasing trend toward nationalism, isolationism and xenophobia schools need to recognize cultural diversity; to rethink educational practices; and to actively promote an appreciation of differences (hooks, 1994; Florence, 1998). Unfortunately, in areas of curriculum reform Allan Bloom and William J. Bennett's appeal for a return to basics and an emphasis on the "classic texts" of Western Civilization negate recognition of differences and deny the need for an exploration of diversity. Ignoring differences is yet another way to marginalize oppressed groups.

Giroux (1991) calls for education to be understood as producing not only knowledge, but also political subjects. Teachers must understand how they wield power and authority and how particular forms of authority are "sedimented in the construction of their own needs along with the limited subject positions offered them in school" (p. 255).

Recognition of cultural diversity; reconceptualization of what constitutes knowledge; reawakening of critical consciousness; and receptivity to students' experiences as meaningful components of the curriculum are requirements for a classroom committed to engaged pedagogy (Giroux, 1991; hooks, 1994). Looking to educational settings as sites of struggle and contestations, supporters of multicultural education contend that schools offer the potential to address social injustices; to model democratic practices; and to begin a discourse leading to change (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 1981, 1983, 1991). Richard A. Friend (1993) in "Choices, Not Closets: Heterosexism and Homophobia in Schools" agrees:

> Given that differences in race, social class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation do have important bearing on academic achievement and future success, it is important for professionals involved in the lives of students to be aware of how these components of identity are shaped in the minds of students and lived experiences of young people. While students may act out socially, experience depression, rage, truancy, or even drop out, viewing the source of these problems as existing within the students rather than in the contexts in which they live their lives contribute to a process of blaming the victim. (pp. 234-235)

Schools that ignore the need for diversity awareness and that provide no opportunities for students, staff and faculty to acquire an appreciation and respect for cultural differences remain trapped within a context that has the potential to foster resentment, alienation, hostility, depression and rage. Enforcing school violence prevention policies and practices that may be deemed unfair by and/or ineffectual to certain segments of the population contributes to a negative school climate. Not only does such a context provide the impetus for increased school violence, but also for increased rates of dropouts. Within the context of multicultural education an awareness of the need for comprehensive sexuality education looms large.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education Reduces School Violence

Calling for increased awareness and appreciation of diversity includes acknowledging differences in sexual orientation, as well as differences in personal lifestyles related to sexual activity. Comprehensive sexuality education programs provide opportunities for students to develop an appreciation and respect for differences, as well as to gain knowledge pertinent to avoiding unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. However, comprehensive sexuality education programs are rapidly being replaced with abstinence-only programs that avoid topics related to sexual orientation, contraception, HIV/AIDS, and sexually transmitted diseases. The high school my interviewees attended does not provide comprehensive sexuality education and adheres to a strict abstinence-only-until-marriage focus.

Current bans on comprehensive sexuality education in public schools have been fomented in the United States by a number of Christian fundamentalists groups that support abstinence-only-until-marriage sexuality education. The most vocal group supporting this approach to sexuality education is Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, which has organized the American Center for Law and Justice and the Christian Activist Serving Evangelism (CASE) to fight for abstinence-only until marriage programs in all public schools. The American Civil Liberties Union (1998) asserts that withholding developmentally appropriate sexuality information that helps adolescents prevent unwanted pregnancies and that protects them from sexually transmitted diseases is a violation of their civil rights. According to researchers Kelly and McGee (1998) uninformed adolescents are at higher risk of being infected with HIV from having

unprotected sex. The Committee on Adolescent Health Care (1996) reports that an estimated three million adolescents are infected annually with STDs and AIDS is the sixth leading cause of death for individuals between the ages of fifteen to twenty-four. In Dangerous Inhibitions: How America Is Letting AIDS Become an Epidemic of the Young Collins (1997) reports that during 1997 those under the age of twenty-five accounted for one-half of all new HIV infections in the United States. Furthermore, over 16,000 new HIV infections occur daily among individuals ten to twenty-four years old (Kelly & McGee, 1998). Advocates for Youth and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) assert:

> More than any other variable, concern over teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is transforming the debate over sexuality education in the U.S. to a consensus around public health. Seventy-two percent of all Americans agree that 'preventing HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases are public health issues and should be left to scientists and experts, not to politicians.' Moreover, 7 out of 10 Americans oppose the provision of federal funds for education promoting abstinence-only-until-marriage that prohibits teaching about the use of condoms and contraception for the prevention of unintended pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and STDs. Congress passed such a program as part of welfare reform legislation in 1996. (Advocates for Youth & SIECUS, 2002, para. 2)

In addition, a poll conducted by the Advocates for Youth and SIECUS on America's attitudes toward sexuality education revealed that:

> All groups, including conservative Christians, support high school and junior high school sexuality education to prevent disease and unintended pregnancy.... Eight out of every 10 Americans reject the idea that providing such sexuality education encourages sexual activity....[and] that with the average age of puberty at 12 and of marriage at 26, and since 70 percent of 18-year-olds have had sexual intercourse, at least 69 percent of Americans agree that teaching abstinence-only-until-marriage is just not realistic. (2002, para. 3)

An undeniable connection exists between teen pregnancy and dropout behavior. The National Dropout Prevention Network (1995) states that 31% of 8th to 10th grade dropouts list pregnancy as their reason for leaving school before graduation. The United States teen pregnancy rates from 1990 to 1995 for women 15 to 19 years of age was 64 per 1000. The Committee on Adolescent Health Care (1996) reports that approximately one million teenage women in the United States become pregnant each year. In countries that support comprehensive sexuality education the rate was much lower for similar populations of young women. In the Netherlands teen pregnancy rates were reported to be 7 per 1000; in France the rates were 9 per 1000; and in Germany the rates were 13 per 1000 (Kelly & McGee, 1998). Researchers Kelly and McGee (1998) noted that in the Netherlands, France and Germany sexuality education is comprehensive; fully supported by the communities; and integrated throughout the curriculum. The emphasis in these countries is on normalizing sexuality; assuring medical and scientific accuracy; promoting values of respect and responsibility; and encouraging healthy relationships.

In the community in which my participants reside the 1995 pregnancy rate among all school age youth between the ages of ten to nineteen was 41.6 per 1000 and in 1996 the rate had risen to 52 per 1000 (telephone interview with Catherine Williams, director of Family Connection, Fall 1998). Dropout rates related to pregnancy continue to be a concern for the high school my interviewees attended. Although dispensing information concerning contraception will not stop teen pregnancies since issues surrounding teen pregnancy are multidimensional and demand sensitivity to a variety of issues, such efforts should not be curtailed.

Multicultural educational programs that work in conjunction with comprehensive sexuality education programs to provide information related to differences and to develop appreciation and respect for diversity have the greatest potential for success. By providing an atmosphere of respect for acknowledging differences in sexual orientation, public schools can address multiple areas of concern related to school violence. The high school my participants attended offers no programs that support gay or lesbian students. The local university offered assistance in getting these programs in place at the high school, but to my knowledge the programs were not welcomed.

Since an awareness of sexual orientation often begins in childhood and continues through young adulthood, providing positive information regarding sexual orientation is appropriate in high school (Edwards, 1996). Research indicates that males recognize their sexual orientation around the age of fifteen (Downey, 1994). I contend that Carl's experiences as an openly gay high school student are not unique and that other students who are not heterosexual have experienced similar abuse.

In the article "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: At Risk and Underserved" researchers Kent Klindera, Lauren Patti and Carrie Shriver (1998) agree that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth experience serious difficulties growing up in a culture that presents heterosexuality as the accepted norm and that often views non-heterosexual orientation as deviant. Klindera, Patti and Shriver (1998) assert:

> Homophobia and heterosexism greatly contribute to higher rates of suicide, violence victimization, risk behavior for HIV infection, and substance abuse among LGBT youth as compared to their heterosexual peers. (par 1)

Carl's reports of threats and assaults are not isolated incidents since research shows that "classmates often verbally and physically abuse LGBT students because of their orientation" (Klindera, Patti and Shriver, 1998, para. 6). Recent studies show "that from 30 to 70 percent of gay males and lesbians experience verbal or physical assault in school [and that] approximately 28 percent eventually drop out of school" (para. 6).

> A 1995 Safe Schools Coalition study of Seattle public schools found LGBT youth were more than five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to be targets of violence and/or harassment, almost three times more likely to be injured in a fight severely enough to need medical attention, and nearly twice as likely to be threatened or injured by someone with a weapon. Since the study's inception in 1993, seven young people have reported being gang raped in public schools because of their sexual orientation. (Klindera, Patti and Shriver, 1998, para. 7)

Surveys that identified youth risk behavior in Massachusetts, Washington, and Vermont corroborate the previous findings and uncover more disturbing data regarding problems faced by LGBT youth in schools. Compared to their peers, LGBT youth were two to five times more likely to skip school because of feeling unsafe; three times more likely to be threatened with a weapon on school grounds; twice as likely to be a teen parent; up to ten times more likely to report having tried cocaine; and twice as likely to report abusing alcohol at least once in the previous month (Center for Disease Control and the Massachusetts Department of Education, 1997; Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1995; Vermont Department of Health, 1997; Roffman, 2000).

Suicide and suicide attempts among teens is a national concern. Suicide attempts among gay and bisexual adolescent males are seven times higher than among their heterosexual peers (Klindera, Patti and Shriver, 1998). "Reasons cited for considering suicide include unhappiness over self-awareness of same gender attraction, social and

emotional isolation, low self-esteem, and physical and/or verbal abuse from peers and family members" (Klindera, Patti and Shriver, 1998, par 14). The risk of suicide becomes even greater for LGBT youth of color since a recent survey revealed that "41 percent of females and 34 percent of males had actually attempted suicide" (Klindera, Patti and Shriver, 1998, par 15).

Deborah M. Roffman (2000) finds it "difficult to imagine another situation in which such intolerant attitudes would be allowed to exist inside a school building" (para. 3). I agree with Roffman that "it is incumbent upon us as educators to ask how and why these abuses--and the resulting emotional, physical, and educational costs for sexual minority youth--are allowed to persist" (2000, para. 3). Understanding the obstacles to securing programs that address the needs of LGBT youth in public schools is important. Encouraging school policymakers to provide comprehensive sexuality educational programs is difficult; inviting them to embrace programs that also address the needs of LGBT youth are even more challenging. Roffman (2000) explains why:

> Many factors explain the reluctance of schoolteachers, administrators, and guidance personnel to intervene against blatant anti-sexual minority bias. Prejudice, stereotyping, ignorance, and sheer discomfort with the topic of homosexuality and transgender certainly play a part. In addition, many school personnel are genuinely confused or conflicted about these issues because of their own deeply held moral or religious beliefs. Lack of leadership at local and state levels is also a paramount ingredient; only a small minority of districts and states explicitly mandate equitable treatment of sexual minority youth. Furthermore, mandates--where they do exist--do not necessarily guarantee adequate funding or specific directives for enforcement and staff training. Moreover, organized opposition groups, most notably the Family Research Council, lobby heavily on local and national levels against equity-oriented changes in school policies and practices, charging that these are tantamount to promoting homosexuality and other alternative lifestyles. (Roffman, 2000, para. 6)

Roffman (2000) explains how negative perceptions and attitudes towards LGBT students in schools persist and how they also encourage a negative school climate for all members of the school community.

> Unlike other minority groups, virtually anyone may potentially be relegated to sexual minority status by virtue of perception, rumor, scapegoating, public name-calling, or the like. In schools where hostility toward sexual minorities is especially acute, virtually everyone is caught in the dynamic: students who actually are LGBT; students who are not LGBT, but who are perceived to be; and students who are in neither group at present, but who are worried that unless they distance themselves sufficiently (often by participating in various forms of LGBT bashing), they might well be. Thus, everyone in the building potentially becomes involved as a victim, potential victim, perpetrator, or bystander. Moreover, in any school community where the overt targeting of any one minority group is permitted, students come to understand intuitively that all other individuals and groups are thereby potentially vulnerable, resulting in a highly charged and threatening environment for every student. (2000, para. 5)

In addition to providing needed information on contraception to avoid unwanted pregnancies and to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, comprehensive sexuality programs would also create opportunities for all students to gain a greater understanding of sexual orientation. I concur with Roffman (2000) that there is an urgent need for schools and communities to address this problem:

> In the absence of state or federal mandates regarding sexual minority youth, individual schools and/or school districts will face two choices: to maintain the existing status quo, or to work together as a community to establish new policies, norms, and practices. Self-examination and internal dialogue are the first steps toward significant and meaningful school change. (para. 1)

Such an approach would not only benefit the heterosexual students, but would also provide opportunities for LGBT students to better understand themselves.

I hypothesize that by providing a comprehensive sexuality curriculum that also addresses the needs of LGBT youth, not only would the school climate become more

positive, but school violence would also decrease. These improvements also have the potential to decrease the dropout rate. Multicultural education programs working in conjunction with comprehensive sexuality education programs provide young people with the tools for empowerment through knowledge. In addition, such programs offer opportunities for increasing students' sense of responsibility and respect for themselves and others.

Family Responsibility and Dropping Out

The need to provide child-care assistance for teen moms in order to assist them in completing their high school education and school-based health clinics that disseminate sexuality information seems obvious, but various factions of society find this type of assistance questionable. Those who oppose such services assert that these programs encourage and condone teen pregnancies. I am unaware of any research supporting this contention and I think it is driven by the same mentality that bans comprehensive sexuality education and supports abstinence-only-until-marriage sexuality education in public schools. However, research by Michelle Fine (1993) provides counter-arguments to the assertion that school-based health clinics encourage adolescent promiscuity and teen pregnancy:

> Predictions that school-based health clinics would advance the onset of sexual intimacy, heighten the degree of 'promiscuity' and incidence of pregnancy, and hold females primarily responsible for sexuality were countered by the evidence. The onset of sexual intimacy was postponed, while contraception was used more reliably. Pregnancy rates substantially diminished and, over time, a large group of males began to view contraception as a shared responsibility. (p. 94)

In order to better understand the obstacles faced by local adolescents regarding access to contraceptives and information related to sexual activity, the following information is provided:

Ms. DeeDee Varner, a licensed professional counselor at the local teen counseling center, was interviewed on September 18, 1998 as part of a course project. She explained that the need for the teen counseling center and health clinic had developed from a community survey conducted around 1992 that reflected deep concern over the increasing rate of school dropouts and teen pregnancies. After canvassing community members the committee appointed to develop the teen counseling center determined that public opinion would not permit the building to be near the high school. Although this had been part of the initial plan, the county gave the committee land to build the center on the other side of town and well hidden from the general public. Ms. Varner explained that the center had not been built on school grounds because of community resistance based on the belief that contraceptives would be distributed and this would encourage teen sexual activity.

Ms. Varner also explained the mixed messages the Georgia state law gives to adolescents. The contradictory message consists of one law which states that young people have the right to birth control without their parents' consent and the center has distributed contraceptives to girls as young as 12. The second law states that it is illegal for adolescents under the age of 16 to have sex and participants may be charged with "unruly" behavior. If one party is under 16 it is considered statutory rape and legal actions could be brought against the older participant. According to Ms. Varner,

criminalizing a behavior that needs to be dealt with in a different way is compounding the problem. In addition, Georgia state law mandates that information regarding under age sex that is revealed in counseling sessions be reported. Ms. Varner stated that it is widely known that this law is ignored.

The high school my participants attended offers child-care services to adults in the community and high school students care for these children as part of their child development course requirements. The child-care program is considered prestigious and there is a waiting list for prospective parents. The child-care service does not accommodate infants or children of high school students.

In "Exploring the Causes of Early Dropout Among Race-Ethnic and Gender Groups" researchers Jordan and Lara (1996) agree that not "providing care for an infant is a primary obstacle for teen moms being able to return to school" and that "family-related and job-related reasons for dropping out imply some straightforward remedies that may reduce these causes of leaving school" (para. 65).

> In addition to counseling, this might involve identification of affordable and accessible child-care facilities for the children of adolescents. Often, poor minority females are forced to accept the responsibility of caring for younger siblings, parents that are ill, or for other members of the immediate or extended family. Schools need to link such students with social service agencies that can help with care of members of the extended family. (Jordan & Lara , 1996, par. 65)

Deirdre states that she dropped out of high school to assist her mother in caring for her infant sister. Since her mother could not afford child-care and there was no one else to care for the child, Deirdre was solicited for the task. Lisa dropped out of high school because her pregnancy prevented her from continuing her planned work-study program and the school was unable to accommodate the changes needed in her schedule to allow

her to graduate. I surmise that these students are representative of a much larger segment of the local dropout population. The programs and services outlined by Jordan and Lara would have helped Deirdre and Lisa remain in high school.

By critically examining the lived experiences of recent high school dropouts public school policy makers would be better equipped to make recommendations that effectively address the needs of this population. Issues of morality cut both ways and by ignoring the needs of teen parents and adolescents who must care for family members, the cycle of blaming the victim continues.

Raising School Dropout Age—Grasping at Straws

Some Georgia school reform policymakers have proposed raising the compulsory school age requirement for quitting public school. As the state of Georgia gains notoriety by being ranked fiftieth for high school completion (this ranking includes the District of Columbia since South Carolina actually ranks fifty-first), Georgia legislators are now considering raising the compulsory school age requirement from sixteen to seventeen or eighteen to decrease the dropout rate. Governor Roy Barnes favors such legislative action as a means of reducing the dropout rate (Salzer, 1999). However, a careful examination of school age compulsory requirements among the states with the highest number of high school graduates and the states with the lowest number of high school graduates disputes the claim that the age at which a student may legally dropout has any bearing on the likelihood of completing high school.

According to the most recent National Dropout Prevention Center's state statistics on high school completion, the states with the highest number of students completing their

four year high school career and being awarded a high school diploma all have legal age requirements of 16. Furthermore, several of the states with the lowest high school completion rates have the highest compulsory school age requirements. North Dakota, New Jersey, Iowa, Nebraska and Vermont all have 16 as the legal age for withdrawing from high school and all have completion rates above 80%. Tennessee, Louisiana, and South Carolina have a high school completion rate of approximately 50% and each has a legal age requirement for dropping out over 16. The following chart is offered for comparison.

Table 2: A Comparison of High School Completion and Compulsory School Age

State	Percent H.S. Completion	Compulsory School Age
North Dakota	86.9	16
New Jersey	85.8	16
Iowa	84.7	16
Nebraska	82.2	16
Vermont	81.1	16
Florida	56	16
Tennessee	55.9	18
Louisiana	55.0	17
Georgia	53.2	16
South Carolina	52.4	17

Source: National Dropout Prevention Center 2001

Asserting that by increasing the compulsory school age requirement the dropout rate will decrease continues the cycle of blaming the victim by ignoring how schools may contribute to the problem. Having students remain longer in school when they already feel disenfranchised, alienated and hopeless does little to improve school climate and might even threaten school safety. Since most of my participants had no intentions of dropping out and each looked forward to graduating, assuming that students have made prior plans to leave school at sixteen is unwarranted. Although my random sample of only ten dropouts may not be indicative of the age other students dropped out of high school in Georgia, the fact remains that the states with the highest number of graduates also assign sixteen as their legal age for leaving school.

Once again looking for quick fixes to complex problems is not new, but raising the compulsory school age requirement would be an act of desperation. I assert once again: "The adults haven't a clue."

Proactively Preventing School Violence

Reducing the potential for school violence necessitates more than stricter disciplinary actions and increased surveillance, but rather a reconceptualization of what constitutes school violence prevention. Researcher Pedro A. Noguera (1995) writing for the Harvard Educational Review examines the effectiveness of using disciplinary measures to prevent violence in schools. Noguera states that "disciplinary measures exact a heavy toll on students, teachers and the entire school community by producing prison-like schools that remain unsafe" and that "alternative strategies for preventing violence through humanization of school environments" hold the key to success (para. 1). Success begins

by understanding that school violence prevention must encompass more than disciplinary procedures. Peterson and Skiba (2000) agree:

> Whether at the school or the individual level, effective intervention requires a wide spectrum of options that move significantly beyond a narrow focus on punishment and exclusion, which themselves can contribute to a negative school climate. (para. 4)

All of my interviewees attested to the need to create a more caring environment within the high school. Programs that proactively prevent school violence by going beyond disciplinary measures provide opportunities to improve the school climate and create a community of care within the school. Noddings (1992) recognizes the need to create "caring in schools" or "caring learning environments" that not only improve social-emotional relationships, but also enhance academic achievement. Addressing the power of care and the sense of being needed, Sizer (1994) asserts that "there is no more delicious elixir than being authentically needed [and that] telling a kid that he or she can help solve a problem is a form of profound respect" (para. 10). School violence prevention programs that incorporate peer mediation and conflict resolution training offer students such an elixir. Unfortunately, most school violence prevention programs are narrowly defined and focus on reactionary approaches to discipline offenders. Peterson and Skiba (2000) recognize programs that not only encourage a sense of caring within the school community, but also have the potential to prevent or reduce school violence. Such programs include:

> Mentoring programs, peer- and cross-age tutoring programs, school-within-a-school programs, cooperative learning, home base/homeroom programs... programs emphasizing welcoming and belonging in schools: All could be considered programs emphasizing these principles and the idea of small, close-knit learning communities. Although these certainly focus on improving climate and all probably have a role in

> violence prevention as a result, they have not generally been viewed as violence-prevention programs. Perhaps they should be viewed that way. (para. 6)

I support this recommendation and advise the high school my interviewees attended to consider putting such programs in place. However, putting such programs in place without the school community support jeopardizes success. Personal experiences in schools that have attempted to initiate such programs without the support of the school community have been failures. Previous attempts to incorporate peer mediation and conflict resolution programs at this high school were unsuccessful. As a freshman my daughter had been trained as a peer mediator for a conflict resolution team at the high school and before the school year ended the program was abandoned. It is unknown why the program was abandoned, but those trained as peer mediators thought the program had been very successful in preventing conflicts that could lead to school violence. The success of such programs requires commitment by the entire school community. The success of these programs in creating positive school climates and in reducing school violence has been well documented by research.

Researchers Linda Lanteri and Janet Patti (1996) have evaluated school-based violence prevention programs and recognize the fact that teaching students to manage emotions, resolve conflicts, and challenge biases can play an important role in reducing school violence. Peterson and Skiba (2000) note other documented benefits that include:

> Improvements in classroom climate and student self-esteem, reductions in fighting and other disciplinary violations, and lower rates of both suspension at the middle school level and dropping out at the high school level. Teachers in successful programs have reported that they find themselves listening more attentively to students. (para. 34)

Several of my interviewees were bullied throughout their high school careers and perceived the school community to be impotent in protecting them from on-going assaults and threats. Peterson and Skiba (2000) found that "most bullying occurrences are undetected or ignored, leading to detrimental effects for victims, bullies, and school climate" (para. 56). School violence prevention efforts that omit anti-bullying programs remain inadequate in addressing the needs of students victimized by such abuse.

> A well-conducted prevention program teaches students that bullying is unacceptable behavior and will not be tolerated. Effective programs have significantly reduced the occurrence of bullying and have improved school climate. (Peterson & Skiba, 2000, para. 56)

As in other efforts to prevent school violence the entire school community must support the program for it to be successful. Peterson and Skiba agree that "bullying prevention programs are a whole school effort designed to send a message that bullying will not be accepted in school [and that] well-designed and well-implemented programs can create an overall climate of warmth and adult involvement and can educate students to recognize instances of bullying" (para. 51). With such a program in place the abuse that led to Kevin, Carl, and Steve's decision to drop out might have been curtailed.

School policymakers would be well advised to reconceptualize school violence prevention policies and practices to include comprehensive programs that teach students how to resolve conflicts; how to deal effectively with bullying; and how to proactively prevent violent acts in school. Such programming would have extended benefits since they would also create a more positive school climate. Such a transformation has the potential not only to increase academic achievement, but also to reduce the school dropout rate. Peterson and Skiba (2000) agree that "many programs whose purpose is to

prevent violence or inappropriate behavior are also programs that might prevent disaffection, dropping out of school, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor academic performance" (para.1).

School Reform and Avoiding Past Mistakes

Engaged pedagogy requires that schools offer a curriculum that is relevant and meaningful to the lives of students, as well as encourage teachers and students to take more responsibility for mutual learning (Giroux, 1981, 1983; hooks, 1994; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Florence, 1998). Current school reform in Georgia and across the nation calls for more testing and more accountability, but seems to ignore the need to revise a curriculum that many participants found "boring." Understanding the connection between forces driving current school reform and school violence prevention policies and practices may help one understand the rationale behind proposed school reform recommendations. Since effective schools are considered safe schools, the need for verifying effectiveness demands that schools demonstrate that they are teaching what the tests are testing. Engaged pedagogy may be difficult to measure on a standardized test. No doubt school reform is needed; however what needs to be reformed remains open to debate.

Although researcher Gary G. Wehlage's article, "At-Risk Students and the Need for High School Reform," was written fifteen years ago, little has changed and perhaps things have gotten worse. Wehlage (1986) asserts:

> Information garnered from national studies indicates that the school can be seen as contributing to the problems of the at-risk student. Self-esteem of dropouts actually rises after leaving school. Attempts by the school to respond in a constructive manner

> raise a number of dilemmas....It is argued that many schools now resolve these dilemmas in ways that further alienate at-risk youth. (para. 1)

I contend that school violence prevention policies and practices employed by the high school my participants attended contributed to their at-riskness and overtly and covertly encouraged their dropout status. Current school reform efforts continue to remain blind to the needs of many students and to remain focused on standards, accountability and efficiency. The likelihood of things changing remains bleak. In 1986 Wehlage called for school reform that emphasized:

> Small size, authority to create an environment appropriate to the selected population of students, a teacher culture featuring collegiality, optimism about student success and an extended role toward students. The student culture is characterized by commitment to the program, high expectations for academics and behavior, and a 'family' atmosphere. The curriculum is individualized in many academic areas, but also has many group experiences. An active mode is essential, and this is best seen in a set of experiential components that feature action and reflection. (1986, para. 1)

One can only imagine how the experiences of my interviewees would have been different if they had experienced such a school environment. Unfortunately, most school reform continues to place the onus for change to reduce the dropout rate and prevent school violence on the shoulders of students. Jordan and Lara (1996) concur that change must start with the schools themselves and that their research strongly suggests "that the school itself should be able to reduce the dropout problem by reforming the conditions that push students away from their middle or high school" (para. 66). Jordan and Lara assert:

> As our measures indicate, general student alienation can be produced by failure in course work, poor relations with teachers, and feeling lost in the school's environment....Improved learning activities that encourage active student participation with interesting practical applications of course material should encourage good

> attendance and student effort that earns passing grades, especially if flexible resources for extra help are available when most needed. (1996, para. 66)

Reducing student alienation would also have a dramatic impact on reducing the threat of school violence and school dropout rates. In agreement with other research findings, Jordan and Lara also insist that "schools need to offer alternatives to suspensions with training in personal coping skills to help students who get into trouble adjust to school demands" (para. 67). Additional school reform efforts should focus on staff development that increases awareness of diversity and that strengthens cross-cultural communication. Staff development that requires school personnel to develop active listening skills would also help contribute to a positive school climate that proactively works to reduce school violence and that encourages students to remain in school.

Conclusions

At the end of this project I feel a sense of relief, not only because it has been a difficult and time-consuming task, but also because I have addressed a problem that I perceive to be extremely important. Revisiting my initial questions provides a means of evaluating to what extent the task has been successfully accomplished. My three initial inquiries were:

1. What are the social, economic, political, religious, cultural and psychological factors framing school violence prevention policies and practices in schools and society?
2. What are the perceptions of high school dropouts regarding school violence prevention policies and practices and to what extent did they influence students' decisions to drop out?
3. In what ways could school violence prevention be reconceptualized to make schools safer and encourage school completion?

The experiences my participants shared with me confirmed my hunch that their decisions to drop out of high school were connected to school violence prevention policies and practices, either directly or indirectly. A negative school climate appeared to have the greatest impact on their decisions and this was exacerbated by the high school's school violence prevention disciplinary practices and policies. I was surprised by how much each participant had hoped for a different outcome and by how much each yearned for a caring relationship with an adult within the school community. Elementary and middle school teachers appear more sensitive to these needs, and I wonder if high school teachers know how much their students seem to crave their approval and attention.

Drawn to critical theory and intrigued by the idea of the hidden curriculum, I wanted to discover how school violence prevention policies and practices are embedded within other forces shaping our political and cultural landscapes. During my research it became clear that schools mirror society and that they may even present a more concentrated version of the political and cultural shifts experienced by the rest of society. An awareness that school policies and practices do not occur in a vacuum but are products of both the positive and negative forces driving our culture, is important for disrupting oppressions and dismantling forces oppositional to social justice. However, these forces are extremely powerful and there is ample opportunity to withdraw from the challenge. Linda Bell's words continue to motivate me and I am driven to meet inaction with action since to do otherwise is to act on the side of oppression. Writing this dissertation has been my call to action and my attempt to disrupt the status quo and to avoid my own moral condemnation.

I have learned a great deal from my participants about why they dropped out of high school. At times it was hard for me to truly empathize with their plight; at other times I found myself welling up with tears and regret over the abuse that many of them had endured. However, my sentimentality does nothing to ameliorate the problems I see that drive some students to leave high school before graduation. I truly think that had I endured the problems some of my participants experienced I would have dropped out much sooner than they did.

Although nothing can erase the pain that many of my participants endured during their high school experience, I can offer recommendations that address several of the inequities and problems that were described to me. I can work to increase awareness by school personnel of the problems some of their students experienced. To do so takes a certain amount of moral courage. I think that many of my recommendations might be met with polite acknowledgments, but little else. Disrupting the status quo is not easy and public schools already feel vulnerable to attack on many sides. Thinking that one is being attacked by a colleague might provoke resentment. Yet the purpose is not to attack but to join hands and work together. Change comes in little increments and you can only change things by knowing they need changing. To ignore the need for change is to remain stagnant and we all know what develops in a stagnant pond.

Linda Bell's words continue to inspire me: "If our actions make the world--then our actions can change the world." This dissertation has been my call to action. The real work has just begun.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LETTER TO PARTICIPANT

Dear_____ Date_____

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project. I appreciate your willingness to help me gather information about why students drop out of high school. I think this information will help school policy makers improve educational experiences for other students.

Your name was randomly selected from a group of potential participants. However your selection was based on the need to have a diverse population of participants that self-identified as belonging to a specific gender and racial/ethnic category. My research design calls for five male, five female, five Black and five White participants. Throughout this research your personal information will be kept confidential and only members of the dissertation committee will have access to this information.

After receiving your signed consent to participate (please find stamped self-addressed envelope), I will call you to set up an interview. Enclosed you will also find copies of all the forms for your personal files. As I explained in our phone conversation, I will be audio and video taping the interview so I can remember all that you say and can write down your exact words. I am planning to use the facilities of Georgia Southern University for this purpose. The interview will last around 30 minutes. You will be able to listen to the interview after we complete taping, as well as view the written transcripts so you can correct any misinterpretations or mistakes I may have made. These tapes will be locked in a file box and only my dissertation committee, which consists of four college professors, and I will have access to tapes or any written material regarding your interviews or other personal information.

You will also be asked to complete a personal questionnaire for this research project. This questionnaire will be given to you after our interview and you will be given a self-addressed stamped envelope for its return. At the end of the research project all tapes and personal information will be destroyed. Your interview and personal information will help me better understand your decision to leave school before graduation. I think this is important information and I am grateful for your willingness to share your experiences with me.

You will also be part of two focus group discussions that will allow you to hear what other adolescents think about dropping out and to offer your own opinions and insights. During the first focus group discussion we will share our concerns, ideas and insights

APPENDIX A (continued)

regarding dropping out of school. During the second discussion group we will view a film related to dropping out of high school and I will ask for your reactions. By listening to other students who also choose to leave school before graduation, you may learn more about this topic. Both focus group discussions will be audio and video taped. Again, only research committee members and I will have access to view and listen to these tapes. The tapes will be secured in a locked file box throughout the research process and destroyed when the research is complete. You will have the opportunity of viewing the tapes immediately following the focus group sessions and you will have the opportunity to make any corrections or add any comments. The place and time for these events will be given to you later, but I am planning to use the facilities at Georgia Southern University. Each discussion group session should last around 45 minutes.

I will be using the information from your interview and the information from the discussion groups to write a dissertation as part of my doctoral degree requirements at Georgia Southern University. You will have an opportunity to read what I write and to offer your input. Your opinions are valued.

Please sign and return one copy of this letter acknowledging that you read and understand the project, along with the attached Participation Agreement and Confidentiality Assurance Form. A self-addressed stamped envelope is provided. If you have any questions, you may call me at (912) 865-5395. Thank you again for your willingness to participate.

Sincerely,

Ms. Bea Geddie

I have read and understand this letter outlining the research project for which I am volunteering.

Participant's Signature:_____ Date:_____
If you have any comments or concerns, you may indicate them here:

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO PARENT OR GUARDIAN

Dear_____ Date_____

Thank you for granting permission to have _____(name of potential interviewee) participate in this research project. I appreciate your willingness to help me gather information about why students drop out of high school. I think this information will help school policy makers improve educational experiences for other students.

After receiving your signed consent to have your child participate (please find stamped self-addressed envelope), I will call you to set up an interview for your child. Enclosed you will also find copies of all the forms for your personal files. As I explained in our phone conversation, I will be audio and video taping the interview so I can remember all that they say and can write down their exact words. I am planning to use the facilities of Georgia Southern University for this purpose. The interview will last around 30 minutes. They will be able to listen to the interview after we complete taping, as well as view the written transcripts so they can correct any misinterpretations or mistakes I may have made. These tapes will be locked in a file box and only my dissertation committee, which consists of four college professors, and I will have access to tapes or any written material regarding their interviews or other personal information.

They will also be asked to complete a personal questionnaire for this research project. This questionnaire will be given to them after our interview and they will be given a self-addressed stamped envelope for its return. At the end of the research project all tapes and personal information will be destroyed. Their interview and personal information will help me better understand their decision to leave school before graduation. I think this is important information and I am grateful for your willingness to allow your child to share their experiences with me.

They will also be part of two focus group discussions that will allow them to hear what other adolescents think about dropping out and to offer their own opinions and insights. During the first focus group discussion we will share our concerns, ideas and insights regarding dropping out of school. During the second discussion group we will view a film related to dropping out of high school and I will ask for their reactions. By listening to other students who also choose to leave school before graduation, they may learn more about this topic. Both focus group discussions will be audio and video taped. Again, only the research committee and I will have access to view and listen to these tapes. The tapes will be secured in a locked file box throughout the research process and destroyed when the research is complete. They will have the opportunity of viewing the tapes immediately following the focus group sessions and they will have the opportunity to make any corrections or add any comments. The place and time for these events will be given to you and your child later, but I am planning to use the facilities at Georgia

APPENDIX B (continued)

Southern University. Each discussion group session should last around 45 minutes. I will be using the information from their interview and the information from the discussion groups to write a dissertation as part of my doctoral degree requirements at Georgia Southern University. They will have an opportunity to read what I write and to offer their input. Their opinions are valued.

Please sign and return one copy of this letter acknowledging that you read and understand the project and give permission for your child to participate. A self-addressed stamped envelope is provided. If you have any questions, you may call me at (912) 865-5395. Thank you again for your willingness to allow your child to participate.

Sincerely,

Ms. Bea Geddie

I have read and understand this letter outlining the research project in which my child will participate.

I give permission for my child, _____, to participate in this research project.

Parent or Guardian's Signature:_____ Date:_____

If you have any comments or concerns, you may indicate them here:

APPENDIX C

CONSENT AND CONFIDENTIALITY FORMS

Dear_____ Date_____

It is important that your participation in this research project is voluntary. It is also important that you agree to have your interviews and participation in the discussion groups taped. Your agreement to participate must also be a commitment that you will attend the interview session and the discussion group sessions. Of course, you may terminate your participation at any time. Every effort will be made to arrange these events at your convenience and transportation, if needed, will be arranged. If you have any questions or concerns about your participation please contact me at (912) 865-5395. If you agree, please sign the form below:

I voluntarily agree to fully participate in the taped interview and taped discussion groups for this research project and understand they will only be used for this research project. I also understand that all precautions will be taken to secure all information, regarding tapes and written documents. In addition, all documentation will be destroyed at the end of this research project.

_____	_____	_____
Bea Geddie, Researcher	Participant	Date

Confidentiality Assurance

It is important that anything you say or write during the interview or discussion groups remains private. I promise to never use your name in any written document pertaining to this dissertation and to not reveal your participation in this research project. Your participation will remain *confidential* and each participant is asked to keep all discussions of the group private. In addition, all tapes and written material pertaining to this research will be kept in a locked file box and all material destroyed at the end of the research process. Only myself and my research committee, consisting of four college professors, will have access to any information or tapes regarding this research project. Below I have signed my name promising confidentiality during this research project. Please sign your name if you agree to keep the group discussions confidential.

_____	_____	_____
Bea Geddie, Researcher	Participant	Date

APPENDIX D

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete the following questionnaire. This information will better help me get to know you and will be valuable to my research. All information will be kept confidential.

Name:_____ Date:_____

Address:_____

Telephone Number:_____

Biographical Information:

Date of Birth:

With whom do you live?

Did they complete high school?

Brothers and Sisters (names and ages):

Did they complete high school?

Family's Income: (choose one) [I choose to use expressions that would be understandable to adolescents, rather than typical categories of income]

_____Just getting by

_____Usually had what I needed, but things were tight

_____Always had what I needed

_____We always had enough money and I always had what I needed and wanted

Ethnicity: With which group do you most closely identify?

_____White_____Black_____Bi-Racial_____Latino/Hispanic_____Asian

Educational Experience:

When did you drop out of high school?

APPENDIX D (continued)

What was the last year of school you completed?

Were you on college prep track or tech-prep track?

Were you part of the "Freshmen Academy"?

Did you receive special education services? Do you know which ones?

Were you ever in ISS? If so, about how many times and why?

Were you ever given OSS? If so, how many times, for how long and why?

Did you attend the alternative school? If so, when and why?

Did you ever attend "boot camp"? If so, when and why?

Did your parents/guardians ever come to school because of your behavior?

If so, when and why?

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me what it was like in high school.
2. When did you begin to think about dropping out?
3. Was there any particular event that triggered your decision?
4. How did the school play a role in your decision?
5. What do you think about the problems of school violence?
6. Were you ever personally affected by school violence prevention policies that require "zero tolerance" for violations? For example, were you ever given ISS/OSS for fighting, carrying a weapon or having drugs, dress code violations like having your shirt out, or excessive truancy and tardiness?
7. Do you know anyone else who was affected by these policies? How were they affected?
8. Do you have any friends that also dropped out of school? Did they influence you to drop out? What can you tell me about why they dropped out?
9. If you could have changed things at high school, what would you have changed?
10. What would you have liked your teachers to know about you, that you don't think they knew?
11. What might have kept you from dropping out?

APPENDIX F

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

General Discussion:

1. Why do kids drop out of school?
2. What did you like/dislike about your high school experience?
3. What should schools do to encourage students to complete their education?
4. What is your opinion about school violence at your school?
5. Were you ever the victim of school violence?
6. Do you think current policies and practices to prevent school violence are working?
7. How effective do you think disciplinary measures like ISS, OSS, alternative schools, and boot camp are in preventing school violence?
8. Do you think raising the compulsory school age to eighteen would reduce the dropout rate?
9. Do you think there is a need for classes that teach about respect and encourage appreciation for diversity at your school? Why? Could these help prevent/reduce school violence?
10. Do you think there is a need for comprehensive sexuality education that includes discussions about contraception and alternative lifestyles at your school? Why? Could these help prevent/reduce school violence?
11. Do you think changes in the curriculum are needed at the high school? Why? Could these help prevent/reduce school violence?

APPENDIX F (continued)

12. Do you think there is a need to offer conflict resolution classes and peer mediation programs at the high school? Why? Could these help prevent/reduce school violence?

13. What else might help reduce or prevent school violence?

14. What advice might you have for a friend who was considering dropping out of high school?

15. When might dropping out be the best solution?

Questions to Solicit Reactions to the Video "Look Before You Leap:"

1. What is your opinion of the video as a tool to keep students from dropping out of high school?

2. On a scale of 1 (least effective) to 5 (most effective), how would you rate the video?

3. Did you see anything that was similar to your experiences in high school? Which ones?

4. Do you think the video accurately reflected the problems students face in high school? Why or why not?

5. If you were an educator concerned about helping kids stay in school, what would you do?

APPENDIX G

TABLE 3:

DATA ANALYSIS OF ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES

AND NEGATIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

5 4 3 2 1
most influence to least influence

Interviewees	OSS	Dress Code Violations	Protection from Bullying	Drugs & Weapons Searches/Metal Detectors/Security Guards/Surveillance Equipment
Carl	4	3	5	1
Melissa	5	5	3	1
Mark	5	5	5	4
Edgar	5	5	3	5
Fran	3	5	3	2
Kevin	5	4	5	2
Lisa	5	5	5	2
Steve	5	3	5	1
Deirdre	5	3	5	2
Nicole	5	5	4	2
	47	43	43	22

Out of school suspension (OSS) was deemed the worst offender since it removed the student from the school community for even minor offenses, such as repeated tardiness. Dress code enforcement was also cited as a contributing factor since students thought it was arbitrarily enforced. Lack of administrative protection against personal threats and harassment that could be classified as bullying were also considered to have a negative effect on school climate. Drug and weapon searches and the use of metal detectors, security guards, and surveillance apparatus to prevent drugs and weapons on campus were considered less of a factor contributing to a negative school climate.

APPENDIX H

TABLE 4:

DATA ANALYSIS OF ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES AND EFFECT ON DROPOUT DECISION

5 4 3 2 1
most influence to least influence

Interviewees	OSS	Dress Code Violations	Protection from Bullying	Drugs & Weapons Searches/Metal Detectors/Security Guards/Surveillance Equipment
Carl	2	2	5	1
Melissa	4	4	1	1
Mark	2	2	4	4
Edgar	4	4	5	5
Fran	3	5	1	1
Kevin	1	3	5	1
Lisa	3	1	1	1
Steve	4	1	5	1
Deirdre	1	4	5	1
Nicole	1	4	4	1
	25	30	36	17

A correlation between zero tolerance policies that participants thought contributed to a negative school climate and those that contributed to decisions to drop out must be noted. Out of school suspension and problems associated with dress code violations were cited as contributing factors to both a negative school climate and decisions to dropout. However, it must be noted that lack of protection from potential personal violence was the major contributing factor for the majority of interviewees in formulating their decision to leave high school before graduation.

APPENDIX I

TABLE 5:

DATA ANALYSIS OF REASONS FOR DROPPING OUT

5 4 3 2 1
most influence to least influence on dropout decision

Interviewees	Academic Failure	Problems with Peers and/or School Personnel	Sense of Lack of Concern by School Workers	Drugs and/or Weapons Violations
Carl	3	5	5	1
Melissa	1	5	5	1
Mark	1	5	5	3
Edgar	1	5	5	5
Fran	1	5	5	1
Kevin	1	5	5	1
Lisa	1	4	4	1
Steve	1	5	5	1
Deirdre	1	4	5	1
Nicole	1	5	5	1
	12	48	49	16

Academic failure is often cited as a reason for dropping out of high school and this rationale has been used to end social promotion in Georgia. Governor Roy Barnes recently signed legislation that will end social promotion in Georgia's schools by 2006 (GDOE Website, 2001). Barnes asserts that "it is in high school that social promotion bears fruit [and that] when a child who hits the ninth grade is unable to do high school work and has been pushed along, that's when they drop out" (Associated Press, 2001, para. 12). However, academic failure was not cited as a primary reason for dropping out. Instead, problems with peers and school workers and a general sense that there was little concern regarding their well being were the primary factors in their decisions to leave high school before graduation.

APPENDIX J

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD LETTERS

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Phone: 912-681-5465
Fax: 912-681-0719
Ovrsight@gasou.edu
P.O. Box 8005
Statesboro, GA 30460-8005

To: Beatrice A. Geddie
Curriculum, Foundations and Research

Cc: Dr. Delores Liston, Faculty Advisor
Curriculum, Foundations and Research

From: Mr. Neil Garretson, Coordinator
Research Oversight Committees (IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Date: May 9, 2001

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

---

After an expedited review of your proposed research project titled "Deconstructing Social, Political, Economic and Cultural Components of Violence within Public Schools: Listening to High School Dropouts in Rural Southeastern Georgia," it appears that the research subjects are at minimal risk and appropriate safeguards are in place. I am, therefore, on behalf of the Institutional Review Board able to certify that adequate provisions have been planned to protect the rights of the human research subjects. This proposed research is approved through an expedited review procedure as authorized in the *Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects* (45 CFR §46.110(7)), which states:

> (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

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 exempted 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, please notify the IRB Coordinator so that your file may be closed.

APPENDIX J (continued)

Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs
Georgia Southern University

Research Oversight Committees (IACUC/IBC/IRB)
Memorandum

Phone: 681-5465 P.O. Box 8005 Fax: 681-0719
ovrsight@GaSoU.edu -- or -- ngarrets@GaSoU.edu

To: Beatrice A. Geddie
Curriculum, Foundations and Research

Cc: Dr. Delores Liston, Faculty Advisor
Curriculum, Foundations and Research

From: Neil Garretson, Coordinator
Research Oversight Committees

Date: September 18, 2001

Subject: Request to Revise/alter a Previously Approved Protocol

---

Your request to revise/alter the previously approved research protocol for the project titled "Deconstructing Social, Political, Economic and Cultural Components of Violence within Public Schools: Listening to High School Dropouts in Rural Southeastern Georgia" has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Your research protocol is in effect from May 9, 2001 until May 9, 2002. If at that time data collection has not been completed, you may request a one-year extension of the approval period.

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, please notify the IRB Coordinator so that your file may be closed.