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One Foot In, One Foot Out: A Qualitative Study of Frequently Truant Latino High School Graduates Who Nearly Dropped Out

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ONE FOOT IN, ONE FOOT OUT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FREQUENTLY

TRUANT LATINO HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES WHO NEARLY DROPPED OUT

by

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Abstract

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Given the continued growth of the Latino population in the United States and the long history of schools not serving Latino students, it would be hazardous for the education community to not address their needs. Under the premise that it can reveal, both obstacles and sources of resilience/perseverance, this research study will examine the schooling experiences of Latino graduates who nearly left high school or did leave but then returned to complete their diploma requirements. The data were collected during the summer of 2014. The purpose of this study was to better understand and acknowledge, from the graduates' perspectives, what schools did or did not do to help them complete graduation requirements. This study is based upon six interviews of graduates of a large (by regional standards) Midwestern school district. The graduates responded to open-ended questions that guided our conversation.

Dedication

To N. Irma Diaz, my beautiful mother in heaven, for being my number one supporter who believed I could do anything. I know you were with me every step of the journey.

To my children: Andrés, Elán, Salvador, and Briseis for allowing me time away from you to complete my research. I hope I am an example of perseverance and a reminder that you can set goals and reach those goals with the support of those who love you.

To my family and friends, for your support and encouragement along this journey.

Words cannot express how much I love you all.

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I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the one individual, Dr. Martin Ramirez, who encouraged me to question. You, sir, are the one who helped me push myself beyond all boundaries that I put up for myself. You encouraged and guided me to find my voice and be a Chicana activist on the UNL campus in the Lincoln community. You always asked when I was going to start the next degree so now your work is done and you can focus your efforts on another Latino student. I thank you for being my mentor the past 20 years.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

"What students become is intricately connected to the kind of school experiences they have."

- Nilda Flores-González (2002, p. 32)

For 17 years, I have worked in various educational settings (which followed 17 years of negotiating such settings as a student). Ten of those years were in the classroom. It was not until I began a career in administration that I had a larger and more autonomous opportunity to help Latino students connect to school. Once I became an administrator, more often than should have been so, Latino/a students would share experiences of not feeling respected by adults in our building, and truancy became one of the ways students responded to perceived lack of respect. In some cases, after students shared their negative experiences, I had to accompany students for their interactions with my colleagues to ensure they were provided the resources they needed.

In 2008, my first year as an administrator, I worked with five Latinas who were struggling to attend a school after several negative school experiences. Their school was a large, comprehensive high school with a population of roughly 1,700 students. In helping these girls move beyond their negative school experiences, I found myself becoming their advocate, a role they too infrequently had encountered previously. Of the five students, two left to attend an alternative school and eventually graduated, one discontinued her enrollment, and one left school and but returned to complete requirements for a diploma.

Fictionalizing important details and using pseudonyms (in both cases to protect their identities), allow me to sketch a few portions of their stories here at the start of this dissertation to introduce the themes of student dislocation and disengagement with

school, related to feeling overlooked, slandered, and/or dismissed. These young Latinas'

biographies overlap with my own experiences as a student and yet our educational

outcomes were very different. These young Latinas wanted to do well in school but were

not able to make that a reality. They are Raquel, Leticia, Gina, Karen, and Rosa. And in

some sense, they are the reason for this dissertation. I learned from them about some

troubling experiences and struggles and knew they had raised issues that I wanted later to

study more deeply and systematically (and from a sample who were not part of my direct

responsibility)

Vignettes about these five forecast themes found in the literature on Latino/a K-12

educational experience and highlight the importance of gaining a phenomenological

perspective about how struggling students experienced school whatever the range of

intentions of those who impacted such experiences. The vignettes also set up my study of

the six focal students of this dissertation (who studied more systematically and describe

primarily in chapter 4). The stories I quickly gathered from five young Latinas as part of

my regular work in 2008 sound sadly quite similar to the more detailed accounts from the

two young men and four young women I collected data from in 2014, although the 2014

sample add did eventually graduate, none on time. To capture and retell the students'

stories, I chose to use the method of phenomenology. This methodology is discussed in

Chapter 3.

Student Vignettes

    Raquel

School coursework came easily to her but she had poor attendance. She was quiet and shy at school but verbalized her desire to graduate. This young person opened my eyes to some troubling student experiences with their guidance counselor. After two occasions where Raquel showed up at my office upset after meeting with her counselor, one that had ended in tears, I offered to accompany her to every subsequent meeting with her counselor. Raquel ended up leaving school/ dropping out during the second semester of her senior year but then returned the following year and completed her diploma requirements in a semester. When I last heard from her, she told me she had a child and was attending community college.

    Leticia

This young woman was a great student in middle school but did not achieve academically in a large comprehensive school of 1,700 students. Leticia had an older sister and the both of them would often leave school during the day without parent permission. She would go through peaks and valleys of giving effort to improve her attendance and grades and then reverting to truancy. Eventually, that truancy led her to dropout altogether during her junior year. She was gone from school for one year and then transferred to the school districts' alternative high school. There, Leticia was able to be more successful. She graduated from this school, meeting her graduation requirements in just one year of renewed work and went on to attend the local community college.

Gina

Gina was another young Latina who did well in middle school and then had a very different high school experience. Her administrator and I shared an office, so when Gina needed to be spoken to about her attendance, I would often be a part of those conversations. This was a young person who had been incredibly mature as a middle school student (where I had known her from when I was a teacher). Initially, there was no doubt in my mind that Gina would not only graduate on time but also attend a university. Yet her story was similar to Leticia's. Her truancies became more frequent as the school year progressed. Gina would come to my office in tears because she did not feel like school was welcoming and she did not feel like this school was a good fit for her. She eventually left school and became involved with the legal system because of her truancies. Gina was court ordered to have a 'tracker' who was assigned to students who had been referred to the County Attorney for poor attendance. Her tracker worked with her family to monitor her attendance and eventually encouraged Gina to leave school and prepare for her GED (*General Equivalency Demonstration)* as a way to avoid further legal consequences. Gina was a junior when she dropped out but eventually completed her GED and did start attending community college.

Karen

Karen was another example of a young Latina attending the school district's alternative high school after not finding success in a large school. Karen, like all the other girls would express her desire to stay and complete school, but she struggled academically even though (unlike the others) she never expressed feeling like she did not feel welcome at school. Karen completed her junior year and then transferred to the

alternative high school for her senior year. She finally graduated after completing 4.5 years of high school.

Rosa

Rosa had an older sibling who did not complete high school, but who tried to come back several times, only to leave again. Rosa, in contrast, presented herself with confidence at school. Yet like her sibling, she eventually chose to leave school after struggling through family situations that she brought with her to school. She then went to work full-time at a fast food restaurant located in a shopping mall. She did come back to school, three years later, and completed her requirements for her diploma.

As I share a small view into the five Latina students' school experience, I am reminded, as a Chicana/Latina in an educational administration position that I am often the trusted face turned to by Latina and Latino youth as they negotiate secondary school. I am a recipient of their stories (as shared above), and it is through their stories and their experiences that I begin to reflect on my own story.   Our stories and our experiences— both where they overlap and where they differ—have led me to a passion for understanding how school experiences affect student attendance. Why am I on the verge of a doctoral degree, while so many like me struggle? The five Latinas' stories inspired me to gain a deeper understanding of the schooling experience of students from a variety of backgrounds such as gender and school location within a school district.

This dissertation is ultimately a phenomenology influenced study of six graduates, somewhat like me and more like the five just described previously. This is far more of an account of who they are, what they have encountered, and how they aspire to be, than it is an account about me. However, it is my responsibility to share my own schooling

experience and position them (i.e., you) to consider why those I interviewed might (or might not) consider me a person they could be candid with.

I was born and raised in the Panhandle of Nebraska, between the North and South branches of the Platte River, just above their junction. The community had roughly 5,000 residents, a tally that has since declined a little (to just over 4500) despite the town's proximity to Interstate 80. My grandmother, Cidelia Rodriguez, and grandfather, Salvador Diaz, came to the western part of Nebraska in the late 1940s via Texas and Colorado, respectively.

Nothing other than the traditional dominant culture's account of history was ever taught in my K-12 school experience. In 1994, my sophomore year of college, I learned about Nebraska's multicultural education state statute. In 1992, the Nebraska legislature had passed a statewide mandate, which required schools to implement multicultural education in all public schools. I have often wondered how my school experience, which never included multicultural education or even taught viewing topics through multiple perspectives, might have been if those perspectives had been included. I reflect back on a very vivid image of a tradition during football games that included a student wearing a headdress and a cowhide looking outfit.

My high school's mascot was (and still is) a caricature of a Native American. At sporting games it was not uncommon to see our mascot, a student dressed as an Indian chief, chanting, although what they were chanting presumably was gibberish, as I don't recall any classmates being known for knowing an indigenous language. It was also common to see the tomahawk chop or the drumming patterns of 'Native' drummers, although I have actually never heard these drum patterns at any pow-wow I have

attended. Nonetheless, trying to mimic drumming patterns at a football game was not in honor of Native American people and had no place at a sporting event. But I mention them as illustrations of a type of unintentional (hopefully) ignorance that I was subjected to growing up. Nobody questioned the demeaning and appropriating nature of what we did every Friday night at our sports events. This was our school culture, and we all participated in that culture.

At the time, I was not informed of the multiple perspectives in history, nor, in particular, about indigenous culture or thought. This behavior was justified as tradition, culture, and even in pride by having a Sioux tribe name, which somehow gave us the authority to exploit Native culture in the name of tradition, culture, and pride. While the Nebraska Department of Education (1995) reported that in 1994-1995, my town had five American Indian students, to my knowledge, we did not have any Native students at our school. If anyone did have Native ancestry, it was not expressed outwardly.

My heritage was Mexican, not Sioux, and I do not recall any specific school incidents where my family's culture or traditions were ever questioned or disrespected, but they were not acknowledged much either. I recall hoping to learn more about Mexicans or Mexican Americans and their historical contributions. The one time we did learn about Mexicans was as the 'other side' and hapless enemy during the Mexican-American war, but I left class that day feeling horrible. My ancestors were characterized as being unjustified in the fight even though it was US troops who invaded Mexico, not vice versa (Wheelan, 2007).

Now, as an educator for the past 17 years, I am often reminded how Latino students feel alienated and subjected to a school experience that was not supportive of

their culture, and this may play a part in why students do not feel validated or view school negatively. My experience with students who express a lack of school connection or school identity will often begin to skip school. The frequency, typically, will increase slowly. When I began my administrative position, the five students were sophomore status or older and already had a pattern of non-attendance. I too, have experienced negative school experiences. These experiences caused me see individuals whom I had grown up with and thought I knew well in a different way. What one does with these experiences that cause us to pause, defines our stories.

Eyes Wide Open

I was born and raised in the panhandle of Nebraska. I attended Catholic school during my elementary years and then public school for grades 7-12. Everyone knew everyone. My graduating class had 86 students. Four were Latino, one was bi-racial (Vietnamese and Caucasian), and everyone else was White. We did have two biracial (African American and Caucasian) young men at the school, but neither was in my class and they had not spent most of their lives there. They were in foster care brought to this rural panhandle community from a large urban city, 325 miles away.

For the most part, I did feel welcomed and included in this rural town. One of the other Latina students in my class, and I, jointly had a *quinceañera* (a traditional Mexican Catholic celebration when a 15 year old female takes on the responsibilities of the church and is recognized, religiously anyway, as an adult) where all of our friends and some of their parents attended our celebration. Akin to Morales (2015) who recounts her childhood in northwest Kansas, I knew I had a different culture, but I never felt alienated, at least I almost never did.

In 1992, my Senior-level English class viewed a video from Oprah's on-air talk-show. I intended to use this video to start a conversation and bring awareness of racial injustice to my classmates. Many of my classmates I had known since kindergarten and I was shocked when some of them did not believe that discrimination was occurring in the United States. Even after watching they denied the inequity of the incidents caught on tape. I look back to this experience and frame their reaction to what Gallagher (2003) describes as having "color-blind privilege." Because my classmates, most of whom were privileged in their ethnicity and socioeconomic status, were afforded the opportunity to have little experience with discrimination and therefore their "colorblind-privilege" enabled them to not 'see' or believe that discrimination exists. I remember only one of my classmates believing what we saw in the video.

In the Oprah video, two men used a hidden camera while they inquired about the vacancy of an apartment and asked about car prices. When the African American man walked up to the apartment building, there was a sign posted that read, "Apartment For Rent." When the man asked to see the apartment, the apartment complex manager made up an excuse that all the apartments were occupied. It was an excuse because an hour later the White man asked the same apartment complex manager the same question, and, suspiciously, there were several vacancies. The video then documents the same two men at a car dealership. Each asked the price of several cars and every time, the African American man was quoted a higher price. When I saw this video the first time, I understood what was happening, however, several of my classmates vocalized their disbelief, one vocalized his support, and the others sat quietly and gave no response.

Even though I did not experience it regularly (and I am not African American), I knew that race/ethnicity-related unfair treatment existed and the video incident was not my only source for this sensibility. When I was around 8-10 years old, I had a good friend, Suzanne, who lived down the street from me. A new girl had moved to town and Suzanne began to spend time with her, and I was eventually invited to play with them both. One day, the new girl made a comment to me about "dirty Mexicans". I remember the anger and the rage that I felt, and uncontrollably, I slapped her. I recall hiding in Suzanne's garage while she ran inside her house. I was scared that her family was going to tell me to leave and never come back. I heard a door slowly open. I peeked around a wall and I saw Suzanne's father and I could hardly breathe. In his deep voice, he asked me to come inside the house. He told me that I should not have slapped the girl, but she was no longer welcome in their home because of what she said to me. That day I learned that there were hateful people in my community, but also people who stood for what was right. So when I showed the video, I imagined my classmates being able to summon the kind of outrage and anger that I had felt after being referred to as a "dirty Mexican," but that was not the case.

The conversation after the Oprah video in my classroom had a tone of denial. The only exception was when a student, Jason, shared his thoughts on how some townspeople made fun of others in our community, who were in poverty, as they lined up to get food commodities. Jason also shared that most in the line were people of color. He told a story of witnessing residents driving by and shouting out racial slurs towards the people in line. Nobody stopped this inhumane and shameful treatment. Most of my classmates did not say much, while a handful of them expressed their denial of the events in the

video. This handful of students did not believe the video was an accurate representation of the experiences of people of color.

The classroom that day exemplified the notion of color-blind privilege (Gallagher, 2003). It was as if because my Caucasian classmates believed they treated people the same, regardless of skin color (a belief that also required them to ignore the closer-to-home example that Jason had mentioned), then this type of treatment could not exist. This privilege allows white people to locate themselves in what they think of as a racial-tension free space. The space is a respite zone from all the racially charged experiences that result in white guilt (Storrs, 1999).

When I saw a video of how an African American man was treated very differently than a White man, heard all of the derision directed at the low-income locals in my hometown, and then watched the denial right in my classroom, I started to connect the dots. That day, I realized that my treatment by the girl down the street when I was growing up and these other pieces were part of a shared experience by other people of color. The significance of the video brought only some of the ills of our society to the forefront. Learning that many of my classmates did not believe inequities occur for people of color, raised more.

In the spirit of honest conversations, how could we move forward on race issues in my hometown, or anywhere in the United States, if we could not even talk about the existence of race issues? As Pollock (2004) has memorably noted, race matters when we talk about it *and* when we do not. For the first time in my life, at the end of high school, I began to wonder how I might be able to make a change in this world. My classroom experience made me feel alienated from the majority. I was the only student of color in

class and I felt alone. I reflect on my negative school experiences and the five Latina students and our biographies overlap here but diverge with regard to regular school attendance.   This is where my journey to become an educator and to study social justice began and it is that journey which brings me to the concern about Latino/a students struggling to complete high school.

Rationale for Study

There is a considerable amount of literature on the topic of high school dropouts, however, my focus is on the habitually truant Latino high school student. I am seeking an understanding of the common experience of how students overcome obstacles of alienation and truancy do ultimately persevere and graduate.   What I have found is lacking in the literature is the separation of students who have been habitually truant from elementary through high school or even middle school through high school. There is no attention, specifically to the students who attended school regularly through middle school and began their identification of highly truant after beginning high school. This is a population of students whose schooling experiences in high school can inform school personnel in great ways by how students continue their school engagement, how they become disengaged, or some other reasons. It is worth considering how those who struggle, those who feel pushed or pulled out, or neglected enough to 'fall out,' make sense of what is welcome, what is desirable, and what is possible.

I will focus my research on the students who were not classified or identified as highly truant students prior to entering high school. It has been in my experience, when a student has been classified or identified as a highly truant student before entering high

school, the challenge to re-engage them into school presents many difficulties as it involves a habitual pattern of non-attendance. It is critical for school personnel to understand that for some highly truant students, there may have been a point in which the student could have made different decisions that would have enabled them to attend school more frequently and therefore experienced high school in a more positive and less challenging ways.

In education, I have found that I have been rarely presented with an "either-or" scenario. As I draw upon my own personal experiences as a middle school educator and high school administrator, I am reminded that life experiences are synthesized on a continuum and do not represent dualisms. These direct experiences then—whether my own growing up or what I learned as a middle school teacher and then high school administrator—led me to the questions considered in the remainder of this document. As the literature review (Chapter 2) helps explain, I increasingly realized, this bifurcation between success and failure was too simplistic. I begin this study looking at ways my school addresses student-adult relationships and the impact of truancy on the educational experience of Latino students. I noticed in the literature that researchers did not mention at what point in the students' life the research participants gained an identity as highly truant or chronically absent.

Relationships with a school adult

When I became an administrator (and was already a graduate student considering my comprehensive exams and dissertation), I often engaged in conversations with educators at my school. I soon realized that I was listening for how each educator built

relationships with students. What I was learning from my practitioner peers echoed the writing of researchers who describe how strong relationships between student and teacher have a powerful impact on academic achievement (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002; Milliken, 2007; Wilson & Corbett, 2001; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005; Finn, 1989; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Ryan, & Deci, 2000). In a school with over half of the student population participating in the Free/Reduced school lunch program, over 30 percent of the student population as students of color, and a high mobility rate, it was critical to the academic achievement to have educators who have strong relationships with students. During those conversations, I would recall how former students came back to see me at the middle school where I had taught before becoming a high school administrator. They would tell me stories of not knowing their teacher's name, not being as academically successful as they had been in middle school, and their issues of skipping or truancy. I listened to see if any of my new colleagues would share accounts that showed evidence of their relationships with students.

What was atypical about the high school I moved to was the teaming concept for all of our 9th and 10th grade students. The school had been teaming for 6 years. The purpose of teaming was to create a smaller environment where English, Social Studies, Science, and Special Education teachers were responsible for a shared group of students assigned to their team. The teaming concept existed in the district's middle schools (where I had taught) so I was very familiar with this concept. I was hired in part because I had a background in teaming and expressed a concern for how schools addressed the transition of 8th graders to 9th grade.

As an administrator, my duties were to help communicate with parents about their student's current academic situation, to attend two weekly team meetings, to work with student discipline issues, to organize school events, to supervise events, and to appraise teachers in relation to teaching techniques, classroom management, interpersonal relations, and professional responsibilities. The appraisal process places teachers on a two-year formative plan followed by a one-year summative appraisal. The formative could be done with a short classroom observation where I would stop in for 5-10 minutes. In the summative appraisal, I observed the classroom twice and completed the formal Summative Appraisal Form that went into the educator's permanent file.

As an administrator, and undergirding all my different tasks, I felt responsible for student success regardless of whether the student was on my team or not. I never turned a student away who came to my office and likely earned a reputation among at least some student groups as 'someone you could talk to'. The underlying reason to assign administrators to students was to have consistency in the work done with each student and to address each student's social, emotional, and academic needs. Some of the non-team students, who would stop in, did so, because they were former middle-school students of mine and felt comfortable talking to me and knew I would help them if I could. I did learn to ask other administrators for their permission to work with their student if it was a disciplinary situation.

Working with parents and students in disciplinary situations was certainly "learned by doing." Simply having this position, I assumed a role with inherent power by gaining the ability to assign consequences for disciplinary infractions. As I disciplined students for major or minor rule violations, I would look for clues as to how the educator

had (or had not) worked to build a relationship with the student prior to the infraction. I specifically looked for the interventions used with the student. In the intervention section of the referral form, I looked for positive interactions, parental communications, and other methods that helped the student feel cared about despite the involvement in a disciplinary action.

From this participation, I concluded that in most disciplinary situations, the student who misbehaved in class did not feel cared *for* by the classroom teacher and had already disengaged from the curriculum. Noddings (1984) writes about the importance for students to feel cared for by their teachers. She describes the difference between being cared *about* and being cared *for*. Caring *about* is a more general term but involves a compassionate affect, as it is not always a face-to-face interaction, yet, is the foundation for a sense of justice that fosters a caring *for*. What Noddings (1984) describes as feeling cared *for*, Valenzuela (1999) would describe as *educacíon*. She adds that Latino students do need to feel cared for but also need to feel respected. Caring *for* occurs on a more intimate level with individuals with whom we have relationships and factors into the cultivation of social capital. Social capital becomes an important aspect because relationships do matter, whether it is a social aspect through various entities or civic virtue with reciprocity (Coleman, 1994; Field, 2003; Putnam, 2000). The use of phenomenology will allow the capturing of vivid, lived experiences within a school setting through narratives (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

I remember a couple of conversations that I had with a student on my team about why he was failing a class and why he was not in class at that moment (a class which was near my office). He did not say that he did not feel cared *for*, nor did he directly

reference the building of his social capital. But I think both of those are in play in these reconstructions (below) of our conversations:

> Conversation 1 (in paraphrased reproduction)
> Ms. Diaz: "Tell me what is going on in class."
> Student: "The teacher does not like me."
> Ms. Diaz: "Why do you think that?"
> Student: "When she hands out papers, she doesn't give me the worksheet. She says that she runs out or just forgot me."
>
> Conversation 2
> Ms. Diaz: "What are you doing out here." [Note: student was sitting outside the classroom at a desk]
> Student: "The teacher says we can't walk in when people are giving speeches."
>
>
> Conversation 3
> Ms. Diaz: "Why are you out here again?" [Note: student was sitting outside the classroom at a desk]
> Student: "I got here late and they are giving speeches again."

I am not always in my office at the same time every day and I just happened to be in my office during the period the student had class the following week. I saw him outside the classroom several more times. But then, he was not in class when another administrator tried to find him on many occasions. It was the end of the second week from when I first spoke to him and he was absent again. Now, he might have been absent for a legitimate reason, but he had not been absent much that semester and I was curious as to where he had been and the reason for these absences this one particular week. Instead of being kicked out of class, now he was skipping it on his own volition, and, perversely, that meant school not treating him well was about to become about what *he* was doing wrong (rather than how he was being wronged).

Whether this explains this specific case or not is unclear, but at least sometimes when students do not feel cared about it leads to class tardiness, if that tardiness is reacted

to negatively, then that can propel being truant altogether. Valenzuela (1999) found that foreign-born Latinos who acculturated quickly, resembled their U.S. born counterparts in becoming detached from their own education. Students 'who don't care' are often viewed by school personnel as resistant. The least mutually created problem becomes the student's problem.

Another aspect of this situation was that this student was a Latino male who lived with his single mother. The student's mother spoke Spanish. This limited how a non-Spanish speaking educator could communicate with her. Our school did have a Spanish liaison whose job was to help school personnel communicate with all of our Spanish-speaking parents (and Spanish-speaking parents at several other schools) and that person may have been called in, in this instance. I don't know what happened next, but it's worth pointing out some limitations in what could have happened. In a case where student disenchantment quickly spirals into student truancy, time is of the essence when dealing with communications between school and home, but the prospect of delay here was high. Having to e-mail or call our liaison was one more step in the process with the real potential for not receiving an immediate response. The delayed communication can become a barrier for prompt interventions. Moreover, the liaison, if reached, would need to be informed of what was going on, with the teacher's version likely to be the first and most thorough explanation and the student's version, if elicited, more tentative and skeptical. The likelihood of effective, substantive, trust-restoring, seems small. As Kozol (1991) suggests, schools must operate beyond a system of procedures and create a school culture of care. It is difficult for one to be engaged in a school when there is lack

of care. According to Wehlage et al. (1989), high student engagement negatively impacts truancy, which lessens school withdrawal.

Truancy viewed as school withdrawal

> *The problem with American schools has not been their lack of purpose but their continued commitment to purposes rooted in social inequality and its attendant culture.* (Katz, 1987, p. 144)

Every week, administrators attended an Attendance Meeting where each received a printout of the past week's truancies and absences. We looked for patterns that caused concern and, as needed, called students into our offices to discuss why they had been gone. Sometimes, it was the mistake of the teacher (or a sub) by marking the student incorrectly or the parent forgot to call in excusing the student. Sometimes, however, the patterns we were discussing were just the beginning of a larger issue.

Through my school's Attendance Policy, once a student reached 12 absences in a semester from a class, regardless of their current grade, the student would receive an "F" or what was called an "Attendance Failure." This policy and the procedure that followed teetered along a fine line of inequity. Some students successfully appealed Attendance Failures while others did not. Our school was an English Language Learner (ELL) site and all announcements were done in English. Some students were less likely to have understood the Attendance Failure appeal process and therefore, did not return the appeal form in on time. Thankfully, in my 3rd year at the school, we ended the use of Attendance Failures.

When working with kids in poverty, immigrants, or refugees, breakdowns in home-school communication occur, unfortunately, easily. My district had hired bilingual

liaisons and translators to help communicate in the majority of the 50+ languages that were spoken in our district and teachers and administrators (or parents) could obtain help from a bilingual liaison to facilitate communication between school and family. The district also provided interpreters for the major languages spoken during Parent-Teacher Conferences. It was my school's belief that family engagement and participation was important and resources to support this value were supported financially.

When parents did not have access to the school, such as knowing how to report a parent approved absence, knowing the date of parent-teacher-student conferences, even knowing how to fill out all the forms written only in English and could allow a family to qualify their child/ren to receive Free/Reduced lunch, they can become vulnerable and/or dependent on their student/child to be the liaison for that information (Orellana, 2009). Moreover, for kids from households that spoke languages other than English at home, there was often a further imbalance of power between the student and parent as soon as the student began to learn English and would be absent from school to serve as the family translator. Even with these resources, it was readily predictable that the school could more easily and successfully communicate with some families more than others (Valdés, 1996).

Along with the dropout rate conversation that was occurring not only in our school, but also recently across the city where I worked, there was a push to view the dropout rate as a community issue. I agreed with that sensibility. At a 'Community Conversation' I served as a facilitator for a session and the theme that came out was if the community has resources that the schools did not have, then the marriage of meeting needs with resources was what was needed. In an effort to think of ways to reform

current practice, the community was saying there was a need to fix our low-performing schools but the schools could not do it alone and the city needed to be responsive and change. Although Anyon (1995) was referencing a national challenge rather than the particular crisis of the city where I worked, her words apply: "Attempting to fix inner-city schools without fixing the city in which they are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door."

I have known students who have dropped out, but subsequently I usually have not had access to those students to ask them, "Why?" "Why did you drop out of a high school that has been known for its diversity, quality theater/drama program, music program, International Baccalaureate program, and teachers who verbally express love for their students?" So, "Why?" I ask the question again and wonder how a school that is known for so many great programs is still failing to keep some students in school.

Dropouts are the academic deaths that occur in schools every day, but, per the metaphor, they are usually the final outcome of a longer-term 'academic sickness'. Because academic success happens when students learn, it makes sense that the more the students miss instruction the less likely they have learned as much as the others who were present. The lesser amount of time in class also affects the relationship between student and educator. The classroom experience cannot be recreated the exact same way for a student who was absent nor can a relationship build between two individuals when only one is present. My task is not only to help prevent 'academic death', but also to reduce or head off 'academic sickness,' which often manifests itself as truancy. I am interested in truancy because I want to know "the why" when students stop coming to school.

Truancy is also referred to in the literature as school withdrawal and is an issue that manifests itself in the dropout rate and is influenced by the two areas of student engagement and social bonding (Wehlage et al., 1989). There are numerous reasons why students dropout that have been presented in the literature, such as poverty. My school, in the 2009-2010 school year, had a poverty rate of 57 percent. This figure was based upon the Free or Reduced Lunch data that had risen 16% since 2003-2004. So it followed that increased poverty likely exacerbated my school's truancy and dropout rates, but saying something happens because of poverty feels like it leaves a lot unexplained. Individuals are not defined by their socioeconomic status (SES) and it is important to me to be able to see the individual not only for their SES but as human beings who have lives. So, how does poverty interface with truancy? To be able to answer that question is a key reason I chose to pursue the phenomenological inquiry that forms the bulk of the remainder of this dissertation.

Another exacerbating factor often discussed in the dropout conversation is mobility. My former school also had mobility issues, although they were becoming slightly less fierce towards the end of my tenure. The school's mobility rate was 24.6% in 2009-2010 and had decreased roughly 3.8% over the past four years (NDE, 2011). Still, a teacher could expect nearly one of out every 4 students in their class to change over the semester due to the role that economics plays on families. Actually, that is misleading, not all students were equally likely to be mobile. Mobility intertwined with poverty and with struggles at school. So the teachers of the lowest performing kids were likely to have to deal with much more mobility than the teachers of the International

Baccalaureate program, the theatre program, and some of the other features of my former school that I mentioned earlier.

Changing schools can be difficult for students and can cause gaps in learning when curriculum is both discontinuous and insufficiently adaptable to welcome a student with different prior experience. My school district has proactively implemented the streamlining of the order in which mathematics was taught. The impetus for this plan was to lessen the learning gap due to mobility. One can argue that if every 8th grade math educator teaches each objective in the same order and within a similar window of time that, moving to another school (within the district) should allow for less curriculum disruption for the student. Of course, it could also mean that if a student is struggling in one location and changes to another school in the same district that student will continue to find the same difficult curriculum taught at the same pace.

Even with these attempts, many Latino students were not finding academic success. Their struggles also channeled my curiosity about the classroom experiences Latino youth were having as well as understanding what factors into their decision to leave school. In 2010, my school had a 10.3 % Latino population of nearly 1,700 students and only 33% of those 171 students graduated in four years (LHS Staff Development, 2011). These data included students who were newly arrived into the country and who therefore did not have enough credits to graduate in four years and might have need an additional year, but 33% percent remains a tragically low percentage that international mobility does not completely explain. So because of these data too I wanted to better understand why some Latino/a students graduated and others did not.

The problem was not just that only some Latinos graduate, while others do not. It seemed to me, per the earlier metaphoric comparison of 'academic sickness' and truancy, that even for those who struggled but eventually made it, something might have been lost, or been inadequate. Their education was less than it should have been and harder. I realized that I wanted to know more about how and why Latino high school students struggled and what practitioners like me ultimately might do about it. I decided I did not want to talk to those for whom everything was successful (i.e., those who graduated in four years), nor those for whom it was a complete failure (i.e., those who dropped out and never came back). Rather, I wanted to better understand those who struggled but did eventually finish. What went wrong? But also, what went right? Why did they stumble, but how and for what reasons did they eventually persevere?

In chapter 2, the literature supports the notion that students go to school every day on a regular basis and with this widely public assumption brings forth the danger of overlooking the issues of truancy. If the public is unaware of the truancy epidemic, there are challenges to bringing resources to combat truancy and the onset of dropping out. In chapter 4, research participants, who were highly truant students, will share their schooling experiences. The participants respond candidly about their struggles with truancy, peers, adult relationships at school, and their feelings of alienation. But, they also speak how and who supported them and how those relationships enabled them to persevere and complete their requirements for a high school diploma.

CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature

This literature review will provide a context of the challenges of assessing truancy, and the impact of truancy on one's education. The literature supports a juxtaposition of dropping out in terms of a student who just leaves school one day versus the notion of leaving school as a process over time. The literature also presents resources that schools implement as a way to respond to high truant students. These resources range from programs (e.g. community, school re-engagement strategies, etc.) to creating a culturally responsive school culture. The literature on programming offers insight into the effectiveness of large scale programs, whereas my study serves to understand what schools might do that is effective and addresses the needs of individual students. The phenomena of being a highly truant student nearly dropping out will be studied on an individual student basis.

In contemporary America, there is a broad public assumption that 'adults go to work' and 'youth go to school'. The public assumes youth are attending school on a regular basis with just occasional exceptions for the typical reasons, such as, a doctor's appointment, a family emergency, a special event, or an illness. Compulsory education laws follow the public assumption, which in turn reinforce the assumption. While the public can access a school's report on graduation rates, dropout rates, test scores, and even average daily attendance, they cannot access a report on the number of students who have missed, either 10 percent of their school year, or have missed a month or more of school. Common definitions of chronic absenteeism are missing 10 percent or more of school, which is roughly equivalent to 20 days, or a month, of school. What underlies the numbers of a school's average daily attendance are numbers that represent students who

are chronically absent (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). What also lies beneath are individual accounts of depression, trauma, difficult household circumstances, and/or not being acknowledged or cared for by school.

Unexcused absences are often defined as truancy. Truancy is not equivalent to chronic absences because truancy totals often underestimate the total days a student is absent. Chronic absenteeism numbers will include both excused and unexcused totals. Chronic absenteeism is a better assessment of how a students' education has been impacted because the reason a student is absent, regardless if the parent/guardian was aware, still impacts learning. Truancy totals alone are problematic it two ways. First, there is no standard recording of truancy that is uniformly used across states. Secondly, truancy numbers do not include excused absences, which unmediated also have an impact on learning (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Much of the literature uses the word truancy rather than absenteeism or chronic absenteeism. When reading the word truancy, read with the lens that not all absences are accounted. Regardless of the terminology used, the underlying issue remains for whom does missing school matter most? In Ready's (2010) research on the loss of learning during summer, schooling is most beneficial for students living in poverty. We can make the correlation that school attendance benefits students living in poverty the most. Another way to state this would be that students living in poverty have the most to gain from regular school attendance.

A familiar and common philosophy of schooling, with roots as least as old and embedded into national mythology as Ben Franklin (Proefriedt, 2008) is hard work brings success and upward social and economic mobility (Hamovitch, 1996; Hondo, Gardiner & Sapien, 2008). The basis of the philosophy, hard work will pay off, is also true in

academic achievement. Life chances can be determined through schooling and schools may serve as an exit out of poverty and into the middle class. What is critically left out of this notion is the understanding of how race and class impact those educational outcomes (Fine & Burns, 2003; Proefriedt, 2008).

The United States has an educational dropout rate at an epidemic level. According to Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006), each school day, 7,000 students are added to the dropout numbers. Nearly one-third of our nation's seniors do not graduate in 4 years. The highest impacted populations are students of color whose dropout rates have been nearly 50 percent nationwide. These staggering numbers represent young people whose lives may be forever affected when dropping out. Dropouts are more likely to live in poverty, have poor health, and earn $9,200 less each year. The potential for negative outcomes for dropping out not only affects the individual, but also the community, state, and nation.   It is estimated that for every dropout that finds themselves in a life of crime, drugs, or prison, costs between $1.7 and $2.3 million.

Difficulty in Assessing Truancy

For many U.S. schools, student truancy is a serious issue (Heilbrunn, 2007). The U.S., as a country, is not alone in this educational dilemma. Social workers in schools throughout the world have been focusing on the issue of truancy (Huxtable, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education reported that while they collect data on attendance that they did not collect data on truancy until the implementation of No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001.

The Uniform Management Information and Reporting System (UMIRS) provisions in Title IV of NCLB ask for states to report their data on incidences of school violence and drug-related incidences, as well as truancy (U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2006). In 2006, the National Forum on Education Statistics Attendance Task Formed created the Truancy Working Group. In the Fall of 2007, the Truancy Working Group aimed to establish a national definition of truancy but found it was impossible due to the varying factors such as what was considered excused, how often attendance was taken, how much of the day a student had to be at school to be considered a full day, and how attendance was recorded (Bye, et al., 2010). Moreover, teacher inconsistencies of recording attendance due to natural human error and judgment such as marking a student absent and not changing that marking when the student arrived later in the class period (National Center for School Engagement, 2005).

So what is considered an unexcused absence and the number of unexcused absences where a school is mandated to classify a student as truant varies based on states' statutes (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). What complicates absence classifications is the inability to compare truancy rates between states to be able to determine if prevention efforts are effective nationally (Levy & Henry, 2007). Truancy data are often difficult, if not impossible, to find on state department of education websites. However, truancy rates and dropout rates are associated because students who have high truancy rates are the ones most likely to dropout, a conclusion based upon data from 2005-2006 that compares all U.S. states' graduation rates and Dropout rates (National Center for Education Statistics (2009b). If we knew better how many students were truant,

however, we still might not know why they are so and absent that information truancy intervention strategies can be hampered.

The absent students

In 2005, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (USGAO) encouraged states to record attendance data in a timely manner and to create a reliable system. The USGAO offered a *suggested* set of three guidelines that schools could use when creating or revising procedures in recording truancies.

1. What constitutes an excuse? Need it be written? If so, is an e-mail message good enough? Will a phone call suffice? Must the excuse be verified by a school official?

2. How many truancies can occur before the school is required to intervene with parents, sanction students, and make court referrals?

3. How are parents notified that their child is truant?

(National Center for School Engagement, 2006a, p. 2)

In the Spring of 2007, the Truancy Working Group became the Attendance Task Force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a). Under this new name and new mission to create an "exhaustive, mutually exclusive set of codes" for attendance, these codes enabled school districts to have common codes for the reporting of attendance (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009a, p. 2). These efforts, while not ending in a common definition of truancy or unexcused absence did, however, create uniformity in the reporting of absences. As states continue to work with different definitions of truancy

and uneven record keeping of absences, it is very difficult to determine the degrees of truancy.

Nonetheless, students who are truant are at greater risk for other negative outcomes. These negative outcomes come in the form of repeating grades, substance abuse, pregnancy, gang affiliation, criminal behavior as well as dropping out of school (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2007). Some have said the U.S. cannot begin to funnel resources to states to address the most severe groups with unexcused absences if those students cannot be accurately identified to address their needs (Smink & Heilbrunn, 2005). My tiny qualifier to that idea is that states cannot do so accurately or adequately (although they can begin).

In addition to the three guidelines that were created to aid in better data collection, the Attendance Task Force created categories for schools to use to identify the reasons students were absent from school.

1. Non-instructional activity recognized by state or school

2. Religious observance

3. Illness, injury, health treatment, or examination

4. Family emergency or bereavement

5. Disciplinary action, not receiving instruction

6. Legal or judicial requirement

7. Family activity

8. Student employment

9. Transportation not available

10. Student skipping school

11. Situation unknown

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2009c, pp. 1-2)

Of these, #10 and #11 are the most concerning (and most likely to be counted as truancy), although categories #8 and #9 give pause to the economic familial needs.

There can be outwardly symptoms a student may exhibit that can help in the identification of truant students at the secondary level. Students who suffer from unidentified mental health problems as well as illegal substance use, gang affiliation, and disbelief of the relevancy of education as a way to situate themselves to achieve goals will often become disengaged. This disengagement can resemble the symptoms of truancy (National Center for School Engagement, 2009b).

Difficulty in Assessing Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism has not been routinely measured and reported because states have not been required to report absences. Through NCLB re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), states are reporting schools' average daily attendance. This is problematic when a school can report a 90 percent average daily attendance and yet have underlying data where at least 10 percent and perhaps as much as 40 percent of the student population who are chronically absent.

According to Balfanz and Byrnes' (2012), in a comprehensive search to find which states were reporting on chronic absenteeism, only six states defined and reported on their chronic absenteeism. The states of Georgia, Florida, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon, and Rhode Island provided chronic absenteeism data. Four of these states – Maryland, Georgia, Florida, and Rhode Island, provided school level data through

websites. Unfortunately, many more states do not collect individual attendance that is necessary to calculate and analyze chronic absenteeism. Additionally, chronic absenteeism is not a component of the accountability and reporting systems through NCLB and therefore is not accessible in longitudinal data systems. (Fortunately, for my purposes, the research I describe in Chapter 4 describing six students who struggled with truancy, comes from a state that apparently does collect adequate data.

Even as collecting data on chronic absenteeism has gained acceptance, it has not reached a magnitude that would drive policy changes at both the state and federal levels. The push for tracking, in the states that collect chronic absenteeism data, has come primarily from mayors and school superintendents. The states and schools that are tracking their chronic absenteeism recognize it as a crucial early warning sign for dropping out, but a better sense of where the problems are is only useful if there are resources, other means, and the requisite understandings to do something to ameliorate them.

Conditions that contribute to truancy and chronic absenteeism at secondary level

One reality of U.S. schools is the growing population and proportion of students of color. Yet the demographics of educators and administrators do not reflect this same growth nor proportion (Landsman & Lewis, 2006). Public schools in the U.S. were not created with considerations for students of color or low-income students (Proefriedt, 2008). Consequently, schooling of these populations has often not been successful. This has always been problematic, but if anything it is more critical now than ever before as the consequences have become starker for not receiving a diploma whereas the job

opportunities for non-high school graduates are less. The consequences have harsh implications towards one's economic and social well-being (Fine, 1991).

Grade Level Truancy. Each state defines three areas of attendance; 1) age of students mandated to attend school, 2) age of students who can legally dropout of school/un-enroll, and 3) the amount of unexcused absences before the school must take legal action (Heilbrunn, 2006). Overall, there are three critical periods for truancies: kindergarten, transitions (from elementary to middle school and middle school to high school), and twelfth grade (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Early Elementary Impact of Chronic Absenteeism. Truancy during early schooling (pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade) can be consequential in significant ways. In national data, chronic absenteeism during kindergarten correlated to lower academic achievement in first grade. If the life experiences of living in poverty are added, the negative educational impact was twice as great. Children with chronic absenteeism in kindergarten who lived in poverty also had the lowest academic achievement in fifth grade (Chang & Romero, 2008). In nationally representative data, chronically absent first graders compared to students with average attendance measured having 12 percent lower mathematical skills and 15 percent lower literacy skills in first grade (Ready, 2010).

Elementary Impact of Chronic Absenteeism. The Georgia Department of Education completed a statistical analysis that found that an increase of five extra days of school would have increased the passing of end-of-year standardized exams in English and math by 55,000 students in grades 3-8. For students who missed one to two weeks,

there was a considerable negative impact on their academic achievement (Barge, 2011).   A methodically advanced study in New York City found that in schools with high chronic absenteeism, the absences not only affected those who were absent but it affected the students with better attendance as well (Musser, 2011).

Secondary Impact of Chronic Absenteeism. Secondary truancy versus elementary truancy impacts the student in different ways. At the secondary level, the end outcome may put the student at risk for lifelong consequences. Students who do not graduate from high school are at greater risk for being incarcerated. Additionally, failing to graduate also puts individuals at greater risk of being unemployed, having poor health, and being imprisoned (Laird, DeBell, & Chapman, 2006). In 2003, 41% of incarcerated individuals did not have a high school diploma or GED (Harlow, 2003).

New York City's attendance data suggest that while test scores are correlated to graduation rates, in fact, it is attendance patterns that have the stronger correlation to graduating from high school in four years (Kieffer, Marinell, & Stephenson, 2011). A study of four middle school cohorts of students in high-poverty Philadelphia schools that controlled for teacher quality, behavior, prior achievement, effort, demographics, and teacher quality, found that students who were chronically absent had a considerably lower chance of closing the academic gap in mathematics than to those who attended school regularly. The data in a national survey by the National Center for Education Statistics ELS 2002, which surveyed nearly 3,411,000 tenth grade students throughout the United States, determined students with 10 or more absences were three times as likely to drop out of high school. Twenty-five percent of these high-absence students

who managed to complete the tenth grade nonetheless eventually dropped out (Balfanz, & Byrnes, 2006).

Data analysis, provided by Everyone Graduates Center at Johns' Hopkins University and the National Governors Association from multiple states and school districts, also found a correlation between chronic absenteeism and dropping out of high school and found that attendance also correlated to course performance. In turn, students who had lower test scores but were absent a week or less were far *less* likely to fail a course than a student with higher test scores who was absent two or more weeks (Allensworth & Easton, 2007, italics added). The impact of absenteeism in high school does not stop there. For many students with high absenteeism rates, the educational impact can affect post-secondary enrollment (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2006).

While there is a depth of research that suggests that high truancy students are more likely to drop out, yet, some do not. Included in this study are six students who overcame the statistics and graduated. How and why they persevere can be better understood. Perhaps there are commonalities and with these shared experiences presents opportunities for schools to be responsive.

Post-secondary Impact of Chronic Absenteeism. The data in a national survey by the National Center for Education Statistics ELS 2002, which tracked nearly 3,411,000 tenth grade students throughout the United States, illustrated how high absenteeism affects academic achievement in ninth grade, upper-grade achievement, and later post-secondary enrollment. Using a regression model, these data verified the negative impact on academic achievement for students who were absent 10 or more days. The statistically significant correlation between moderate to high levels of

absenteeism and the negative impact on academic achievement was profound after controlling for such variables as ethnicity, gender, English language acquisition, and family income. The data illustrated devastating effects on students with moderate to high rates of school absences. Ninety percent of the students did graduate from high school. However, only sixty percent were positioned, after graduation, to enroll in college. Only half of the students who had missed 10 or more days of high school in tenth grade and managed to graduate had enrolled in post-secondary education. To this end, there are devastating implications for students with moderate to high levels of absenteeism in high school to even be able to be in a position to enroll in post-secondary education as reported in Balfanz, & Byrnes (2006).

Who Is Absent From School Most Often?

Data analysis by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), covering 4 states—Georgia, Maryland, Nebraska, and Oregon—and additional information from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten (ECLS-K) survey, supported the finding that students who were chronically absent from school were economically disadvantaged and lived at or near poverty. The research also indicates that chronic absenteeism rates were similar for females and males as well as urban and rural areas.

Common Reasons for Truancy

Wesley and Duttweiler (2005) suggest that while truancy is often a complex issue where there can be several reasons for why a student has unexcused absences, schools can sort the issue of truancy into three main categories. The categories are 1) individual

aspects, 2) school aspects, and 3) family aspects. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) offer another option for categorizing truancy data. Their broad categories are 1) student cannot come to school, 2) student will not come to school, and 3) students did not come to school. There is some overlap between Wesley and Duttweiler's work and that of Balfanz and Byrnes, but they will be addressed separately.

Individual Issues. Any students who are truant from school: have mental health needs that are unmet, are users of illegal drugs, or have an affiliation with gangs. These students have common characteristics of not being connected to school, being academically disengaged, and not seeing school as a way to achieve their goals (National Center for School Engagement, 2009c). Often exacerbating these issues are additional factors such as lower socioeconomic status, race, disability, and sexual orientation (Planty et al., 2009). While some of these (e.g., race) are clearly bigger than an individual issue, I note them here because they concurrently are experienced at the individual level (as my autobiographic accounts in the first chapter helped trace).

Students are affected by how they are perceived by school personnel. Indeed, an argument can be made that the learning opportunities and classroom environment that teacher's create are driven by their perceptions of the students in their classroom. If students are perceived as lower achieving or violent, as students of color in particular too often are, then such students can become disengaged from school (Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). After years of continued negative school experiences of feeling ignored, being treated differently, and feeling unwelcomed, students will exhibit disinterested behaviors. These behaviors manifest themselves in not turning in school assignments, skipping class, and often, eventually, leaving school by dropping out

(Oakes, 1985). These negative experiences in school play out in different ways with different students. The sense of inequitable treatment can manifest as disengagement, anger, or being silenced (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2007; Fine, 1991). The realities of issues involving school, family, absenteeism, and school resistance are well documented. These issues and how they manifest into truancy will be presented.

     School Issues. Male students of American Indian and Latino backgrounds have long been negatively stereotyped in the United States. Latino and African American males have historically been viewed as very aggressive and violent. These negative biases are mirrored by schools' classificatory actions—e.g., in the disproportionate rates of special education identification and suspension rates (Haynes, 2005). Often the behavior displayed by students who are marginalized due to negative bias is school resistance (Foley, 1990; Hopkins, 1997). Educators are challenged when students' anger is manifested in resistance. Students of color may also experience being invisible (Proefriedt, 2008). As an example, Latino students are subjected to schooling that understands their heritage language as a 'foreign' language and their history as invisible, even though the establishment of St. Augustine (Florida) and Santa Fe (New Mexico) both predate Jamestown and the Pilgrims Plymouth Colony (Hopkins, 1997).

     What is critical for all adults who work with students of color, in particular, males of color, is to be able to distinguish the different types of angry reactions and help students learn strategies to work through their anger in a positive manner. Students can show anger through silence, verbally expressing their objection, to skipping classes. Only the first of these keeps them out of the discipline system and yet it does not relieve the core problem either. For some students who leave school by openly protesting

the inequities can be subjected to more suspensions, which can lead to expulsions (Planty et al., 2009; Raible & Irizarry, 2015).

School climate is another important factor in student success in school. Students have unique needs in what they search for in school climate. For one community, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) community, members are subject to a widely accepted philosophy that shames their lifestyle and worldview and leads to a greater risk for truancy (Bye et al., 2010). Schools are tasked with creating policies that keep students safe. While schools become more tolerant of LGBT issues and students, schools continue to lack in solid policies that protect these students (Olson, 2008). As schools address and train staff to be culturally competent, competence in LGBT issues is often left out of those trainings. Staff should be comfortable identifying LGBT students who are experiencing unsafe school environments and be able to provide resources (Bye et al., 2010). Though there are important differences between being LGBT and being Latino/a (and none of the focal students I describe in Chapter 4 identified with both communities), the LGBT experience is a reminder that schools can overlook and leave unprotected groups of students who are deemed marginal or different.

School climate can contribute to the truancy for Latino students. School climate influences range from areas of curriculum to the way students feel while at school. Climate includes the ways schools provide (or do not provide) safe learning environments, show care, and nurture all students regardless of their background circumstances. What has to be evaluated in schools is what that climate is and whether that climate is negatively impacting some populations. When schools can identify their issues, the issues can be addressed (Bye et al., 2010). The more students feel connected

to their school, the more likely they will attend and not be truant (Belfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Gentle-Genitty, 2009). All students must see themselves being valued at school. Students should not feel that some peers can act entitled while they feel like unwelcomed guests in their shared learning environment (Tierney, 1993).

Low expectations are another condition that can generate school disengagement and truancy and low expectations are often based on ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, ability, and even parent's level of education. The low expectations and negative stereotyping of students by teachers can affect students' abilities to advocate for themselves. That continued isolation leads to truancy that then leads to dropping out (Bye et al., 2010). Low expectations are also housed within course placement. Low expectations can lead to academic tracking where curriculum and instruction is differentiated based on ability level or interest but inhibiting students from having access to other tracks outside their track (Baker, et al., 2001). Tracking to basic, remedial, or lower levels occurs more often to those from lower socioeconomic communities. Nieto (2004) goes on to assert that tracking the poor and students of color takes place, not because of inability but because of discrimination based upon ethnicity, culture and class. When there are a disproportionate numbers of; students of color, working-class, and single parented students being tracked, this does not happen by chance but because of the cultural, racial, and class discrimination that occurs within our educational system (Curtis et al., 1992). The systemic issue of negative bias by adults in schools that is not addressed can become the school's climate and therefore have an adverse impact on students.

Family Issues. The area in which students live and go to school has an impact on their academic achievement, and their academic success is directly related to their attendance. The area where students live is associated with their parent/guardian(s) income level, which also impacts their attendance (Baker, Simon, & Nugent, 2001). A higher percentage of Latino students live in poverty and therefore attend high poverty schools (Pew Hispanic, 2011). High poverty schools, as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (2009d), are schools where at least 75% of the student population qualifies for the Free and/or Reduced lunch program through the Federal Government. Furthermore, the parent/guardian's educational level is an important factor in the child's academic success. The higher the educational level obtained by the parent/guardian, the higher the academic success of the student (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009).

Another important factor that affects student achievement is after-school supervision (or lack thereof). Many parents/guardians of low-income students work full time. Some may also work the late shift or multiple jobs, which only heightens the prospect that children are unsupervised. Supervision can also be weakened/curtailed by mental health issues and chemical dependency. These too create difficulties monitoring the daily educational needs such as homework and making sure there is food in the home, which are all necessary in helping the student be successful at school (Henry, 2007).

Student Cannot Go To School. The number one reason why a student cannot go to school is due to illness. While the common cold and flu impacts every school, these reasons are not the undergirding reason behind chronic absenteeism. A recent federal

survey indicated that less than 6 percent of students with illnesses missed more than 11 days. In some rare cases of on-going health issues, school attendance can be adversely affected. In high poverty areas where students may have chronic conditions, the level of medical care may not meet the needs of the students that would support regular attendance. Some neighborhoods have environmental hazards that exacerbate asthma or increase exposure to lead and mercury (Grant & Brito, 2010), but usually chronic absences have other explanations such as school avoidance or the student believed they would not miss anything if they attended school.

Housing instability is another possible 'cannot go' factor that can increase school absenteeism. With the recent economic downturn, many students' families have been impacted by home foreclosure and temporary home displacement. Other areas of temporary home displacement include temporary homelessness, foster care, and detention within the juvenile justice system (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Furthermore, a need for children to act as child interpreters for their parents (Orellana, 2001; Valdés, 2003) can be another reason that links residential instability with heightened absences.

Student Will Not Go To School. For many students the idea of missing a school day due to staying up too late the night before, not having an assignment complete, or simply avoiding an event is common. However, for some students, this desire to miss school occurs more often as their perceptions of harm or dangerous situations become their reality. Students will not attend school as a means to avoid situations that put them in harms way or make them feel uncomfortable. For instance, students avoid school to avoid being bullied. Others avoid school so as to not reveal lack of academic skills amongst peers, such as, inability to read at grade level (Wilhelm, 2008). Some will not

go to school to avoid sanctions for being tardy to school rather than absent all day. New environments also cause disruptions to school. This is demonstrated by the increases in chronic absenteeism occurring at transitional educational periods such as kindergarten, sixth grade, and ninth grade. Some students need time to adjust to their new environments (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Student Does Not Go To School. As this title evokes a sense of vagueness, the students are portraying the same vagueness and apathy. This third category describes the student who misses school for no obvious or particular reason. This student chooses not to attend and may not have parents/guardians who see the value of school and regular school attendance. For high poverty urban schools, chronic absenteeism has become a vicious cycle. Many students take public transportation and have parents/ guardians who see them off to school but may not know if they attend. Students who were chronically absent reported they were absent because they didn't feel like going, wanted to be with friends, or they were not missing much from school. Half of the survey participants reported they would not be missed by their teachers when absent (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

On any given day, students are absent for a variety of reasons that fall into all of the aforementioned categories. Regardless of the categorical reasons (individual/family/school, cannot/will not/does not go to school), we know that by the time a student becomes a senior, there likely has been a pattern of attendance or non-attendance set since kindergarten. The increase in absenteeism for seniors may be the culmination of a past history of non-attendance revealing itself in lack of credits to

graduate. Once students realize they will not graduate when they expected too, they cycle of absenteeism continues (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

Schools must now equip themselves with systems that address the variety of needs and circumstances of truant students, including validating or attending to those students' feelings. The longer their feelings go unaddressed the more anger will set in. When students do not feel their presence is valued the feeling of alienation and isolation become issues of disengagement and being silenced (Bye, 2010; Fine, 1991). The adopted strategy of resistance is disengagement, truancy and ultimately dropping out or being pushed out (Flores-González, 2002; Osterman, 2000; Willis, 1977). Analyzing the participants' narratives will position me be to better understand their shared experiences of how they remember their schooling experience. There will be attention to the resistant behaviors by way of disengagement, truancy, or being pushed-pulled out.

Pushed, Pulled, and Falling Out. Another structure to categorize reasons why students leave school is a framework developed by Jordan et al., (1994) and Watt and Roessingh (1994). This framework takes into account the general student experience and historicizes them in relation to larger social phenomena. Shifts in who drops out have occurred simultaneously with the educational standards movement, the human rights movement, and the growing need to have dual incomes for a household to enjoy at least middle class socioeconomic status. As Rumberger and Larson (1998), Rumberger and Thomas (2000), and Valenzuela (1999) note the drop out problem has continued even as overall school completion rates have increased. The aspect of these changes finds disturbing rates for students who come from diverse backgrounds both culturally, and

linguistically, as well as immigrants. Both African American and Latino students continue to have higher dropout rates than students of other backgrounds. As the pressures of students are discussed, the locus of what compels the dropout is a central issue

Pushed Out: These students drop out because of pressures from school that push them away. At school students may feel, alienated, afraid, embarrassed, and/or uncared for by peers and educators. These pressures may co-exist with poor test scores, attendance issues, behavior issues, or other issues that occur during the school day, but the emphasis of the decision to dropout is what the student is leaving behind, not what they are going to. It's the school that pushes the student (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt and Roessingh, 1994).

Pulled Out: Pulled out students drop out for another type of pressure. Pulled out students drop out because of financial worries such as needing to help their family financially or they find working as having a greater value than completing school. Or they are pulled by caretaker responsibilities, perhaps to their own child if they have become teen parents, but possibly also to siblings, parents, or grandparents. These students may quit school to help their family with their needs. In 'pulled out' situations, the student puts a greater value on something outside of their education. There are pressures/responsibilities outside that entice the student away from school. Unlike pushed outs (who need school to stop what is alienating them), pulled outs need school to be sufficiently compelling/flexible that the external attraction/responsibility does not compel leaving school (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt and Roessingh, 1994).

Falling Out: These students are the ones who become apathetic because of poor academic matriculation. Falling out is a process over time where disengaged behaviors gain their own momentum and are increased. The student is neither pushed out nor pulled out, so much as ignored. Eventually, they disappear from the system. For the falling out student, neither the student nor the school is the agent. It's the outside circumstances that affect the student in ways they cannot be reconciled (Jordan et al., 1994; Watt and Roessingh, 1994).

Are Latino Truancy Issues Different?

Students' experiences are shaped by their environment, some of which includes; demographics, economics, and opportunity. In this chapter, I will address the areas of poverty, schooling experience, silencing, and counter-school culture and their connection to truancy.

Poverty. A large-scale, national, and longitudinal study completed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) ELS 2002 showed that chronic absenteeism was similar across ethnicities. The NCES study that was composed of roughly 13,420 students who were in 10th grade in 2002 and then were in 12th grade in 2004, from the following states: Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Nebraska, Oregon, and Rhode Island. The population most negatively affected by truancy, were the students living in poverty. It can be argued that students 18 and younger who are living in poverty are included in the ELS 2002 data that reported poverty was the identifier of most of the students who had chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Still Latinos and Blacks had higher child poverty rates than Whites and Asians. The poverty rates in 2010 for the aforementioned states, were as follows: Latinos (32.3%) or 5.5 million, Blacks

(38.2%) or 4 million, Whites (17%) or 8.4 million, and Asians (13%) or 419,000 of the total population of the above six states. If these statistics were believed, Latinos and Blacks would have the highest rates of poverty when taking into account their portion of the total population and therefore would have the highest rates of absenteeism. .

According to the *Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), states Latinos had the highest event dropout rate in 2009. The *event dropout rate* is defined as the percent of students who left school between the start of one school year and the start of the following school year without earning a diploma or an equivalent credential. The average event dropout rate for all students in the US who attend a public or private school from October 2008 to October 2009 was 3.4 percent. The Latino event dropout rate in 2009 was 5.8 percent of the Latino population, whereas Blacks were at 4.8 percent of their total population and Whites at 2.4 percent of their total population. The event dropout percent trend for Latinos was constant from 1972 to 1995 but there was a decline from 1995 to 2009. Even with the decline, Latinos continued to have a higher event dropout percent as compared to Blacks and Whites.

Schooling Experience. For Latino students, and students of color in general, truancy issues may be different because of their schooling experiences. Despite educational claims of equity and equality for every student, the realities are not the same for all students (Raible & Irizarry, 2015). There is continued stratification of marginalized populations (Planty et al., 2009). Monocultural views are present in school policies where students from the dominant culture are conditioned to believe they are the

norm whereas students not from the dominate culture begin to internalize a feeling of being inferior (Nieto, 2000).

While often unspoken, a powerful ethos of schooling has been the conformity of dominant culture expectations that exists within textbooks, curriculum, educators, and school policies (Fleras, 2001). Another example, of how the dominant culture influences the student experience, is how identity is shaped through others. If schools continue to ignore the historical relationship between the dominant group and others, then schools propagate identities of non-whites through a European lens and definition. This reconstructed identity of non-whites can lead to alienation, disengagement, and increased truancy rates for Latinos and other non-white populations (Henry, 2007).

Valenzuela (1999) introduced the notion of *subtractive schooling* from her three-year ethnographic research in a Houston, Texas school. Subtractive schooling refers to the formal and informal organization of schools that strips students of their culture and language. These Houston students did not reject schooling per se; rather, they rejected the substance and delivery of their educational experiences. This study suggests that newer Latino immigrants were out performing those from generations with longer-term backgrounds in the United States. That said, however, her study was not about how achievement declines with later generations, rather, it was about how schooling subtracts assets from Latino youth.

Silencing. Fine (1991) described a schooling experience of silencing as an institutional structure of policies, practices, and ideologies that *discharge* students long before they physically leave. In schools with higher populations of poverty, silencing can shape the schooling experience even by the subjects that educators believe to be the safe

discussions to have in a classroom setting. For example, educators working in a higher income school may feel it is safer to discuss the conflicting realities of social upward mobility to students who are already benefiting from economic privilege. Cummins (1986) takes a more poignant approach to systems in schools and deems silencing as a way of deciding "who can speak, what can and cannot be spoken, and whose discourse must be controlled" (p. 33).

Counter-School Culture As School Oppposition. Willis (1977) studied a working-class town in the center of England. He brings forth the idea of trying to understand some students' oppositional behavior towards authority and how that impacts upward social mobility from students of working-class backgrounds. More importantly, for educators to understand: Why do students allow themselves to continue this trajectory and how do schools foster this expectation? Class identity is only affirmed and reproduced if accepted by the individual and the group. A group identity also comes with a culture, which often is a counter-school culture. Willis refers to the students' identities based primarily in social class, in his research, as, "lads" and "ear-oles'. Lads are the students who oppose school culture and authority and come from working-class backgrounds. The lads have a distinct look in how they dress, and the way they wear their hair. The ear-oles associate with school culture. Lads see ear-oles as conformists and non-expressive. The human ear is not expressive but responds to others expressions, hence, the naming of the ear-oles.

In Willis' explanation, the lads 'partially penetrate' (p. 28) the hegemonic reality that embeds low expectations for them; they know that school is not likely to be a successful vehicle for them and 'have a laff' (p. 29) or otherwise mark their nonchalance

related to its role in their prospects. Yet these very behaviors that inoculate them against some of the psychological pain of subordination contribute the social rationale for that same subordination; that is, the lads' behavior that marks their skepticism of school concurrently marks them as poor students rationalizing the same low expectations that initiated the vicious cycle. Opposition to the system's unfairness boomerangs and explains the skeptical lads' low achievement. What Willis (1977) describes and what Foley (1990) will describe is how school counter-culture can manifest itself as school oppositional behaviors.

In similar research set in a Texas community with a large population of Mexican students (Foley, 1990), there were student identities that were shaped by both economics and race. Those identities shared similar social class statuses from previous studies (Hollingshead, 1949; Coleman, 1961; Schwartz & Merton, 1967; Cusick, 1973; Brake, 1980; Varenne, 1982; Canaan, 1987) but this research added the layer of race. Within this study too, there were high and low-status groups. The high status group was the jocks who were athletes and typically from wealthy families. The kickers wore clothing typical of cowboys/girls and were from working-class families. Lastly, the vatos, also working-class, wore clothing similar to *pachucos* (Mexican hipsters) but were considered a lower class than the kickers because they were Mexican. The *vatos* did not see themselves as good students, but as street-kids who could fight, be lovers, and be laborers (Foley, 1990). School, which prefers the stereotypical behaviors such as politeness and passivity for Latinos (Valenzuela, 1999), was unimpressed by *vatos*' skepticism of what was actually available through school. That said, Mexican-descent students do not appear to be resisting school from a working-class consciousness (Willis, 1997; Giroux,

1983), except perhaps in vague and incoherent ways, feeling pulled out, pushed out, or allowed to fall out, but not mustering an insistent contrarian critique. As referenced by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), examining ways that students perceive school as unresponsive when they do not view themselves as scholars, can begin the dropout process through being pulled out, pushed out, or fall out.

For students exhibiting counter-school culture may reflect that of the shop floor culture. The shop floor culture is supportive of varied expressions where school culture often tries to block them. Working-class culture often does not honor the advancement through higher education or certifications (Spener, 1988), but does honor skill building. School attendance can be affected in a negative manner when students do not see themselves moving on to higher education after high school.

Another aspect of counter-school culture is evident in a different kind of absent student. While this pattern cannot be coded as truancy, the student is not in class and may be missing instruction. For an example, a student who identifies with a counter-school culture may ask to run errands for the teacher, which could last most of the class period. Schools must also consider students who may not be coded at truant but find ways to not be in class. Willis (1977) states that truancy is meaningless because it provides an inaccurate count of school rejection or disengagement. As an example, students who are rejecting school can find ways to do errands or jobs for teachers that allow them access out of the classroom.

In an update to Willis' (1977) work in relation to Latino students, Flores-González (2002) concludes that youth create their identities in relation to *others*. The *others* are the schooling experiences of each student. It is in school where identities

become either "school kids" or "street kids." What Flores-González brings to the forefront are considerations that educators can use to reflect on their own teaching as well as the school's structure that prevents students from becoming school kids. Educators have the ability and responsibility to create caring school environments where students leave their struggles behind, even while, for a short time. Negative school experiences can further alienate vulnerable students and push them towards a street kid identity or even right to dropping out.

When describing a metaphor, the author of *Latino Dropouts in Rural America*, Sapein stated, "Quieres tapar el sol con un dedo", which translates to "You are trying to hide the sun with a finger." (Hondo, Gardiner & Sapien, 2008, p. ix). This saying refers to how schools hide or mask their dropouts, but the numbers will expose those who have silently left school (Fine, 1991). In Valenzuela's (2005) edited book, *Leaving Children Behind: How "Texas-Style" Accountability Fails Latino Youth*, McSpadden McNeil, explores, *how* the state of Texas collected and reported educational data in ways that could conceal as much as it exposed (e.g., counting students who stopped attending school as transfers rather than dropouts). This is an example of how education offers equal access and yet delivers unequal outcomes often masked by data reporting.

Because truancy is an early identifier for students at greater risk of dropping out or being *pushed out or pulled out*, schools should identify areas where the school is looked upon as unresponsive to student needs and their voices (Hondo, Gardiner & Sapien, 2008; Quiroz, 2001). School dropout rates are a concern for educators, administrators, parents as well as policy makers and are near crisis levels (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Orfield, 2004). Despite new programs and efforts to address the dropout

rate, Latinos continue to dropout at higher rates than any other ethnic group (Fry, 2010).

As Bill Milliken (2007, p. 7), the Founder of Communities In Schools, explained,

"Programs don't change kids – Relationships do...A good program creates an

environment in which healthy relationships can occur."

The bottom line and current reality is that schools cannot affect change in the

lives of students alone (Nieto, 2010). Factors that facilitate or discourage the prospect of

going to college start before a child is born. Factors such as parent/guardian's economic

reality, his/her academic success as well as the neighborhood in which a family lives, all

impact the child's preparedness before they even began their schooling (Gándara &

Contreras, 2009).

Most Promising Programming

When schools and communities can use their local attendance data to build a

school culture of regular attendance, improve policies, modify their actions, and build

relationships with families to cultivate a common culture of regular attendance, students

will benefit in multiple ways (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). Unfortunately, due to the lack of

common tracking and reporting of truancy, it is difficult to identify the best programs. If

attendance improved, some programs would have had a greater positive impact. Yet,

there will be programs that self-report substantial improvement in reducing truancy in

their community without necessarily having changed much (Bye et al., 2010; Balfanz &

Byrnes, 2012).

On the website of the federal Institute of Education Sciences' What Works

Clearinghouse, program interventions can be found along with an evaluative index for

effectiveness. The What Works Clearinghouse has identified four domains in which

programs are evaluated. The domains include: dropout prevention, completing school, progressing in school, and staying in school. A program search that included the four aforementioned domains, included grades 9-12, as well as positive and potentially positive effects was done. Yet, it was difficult to compare programs or even identify the programs with a high, positive impact due to the scarcity of multiple-site studies, which is a program review standard for What Works Clearinghouse. Another factor that complicates the comparisons is the varying number of participants. Some programs and or curriculums, show great results, but were documented just once and had less than 100 participants. Other programs and or curriculums had nearly 2,000 participants but showed promising results and yet may have only been studied once or twice. Several of the top programs and or curriculums that were listed with all the domains will be discussed further in next interventions section.

Interventions: Tier 1, 2, & 3. The work of a social worker is immersed in the life circumstances of students. Involving the perspective and expertise of Social Workers in school-wide interventions and shaping school policies can have a powerful impact in meeting the needs of students. Schools classify interventions as Tiers. Tier 1 interventions are school-wide and are interventions where 80-90% of the students respond to this intervention. Tier 2 interventions address the next 5-10% that do not respond to Tier 1 and are more targeted to a group of students. The remaining 5-10% will need Tier 3 interventions, which are intensive and individualized (Bye et al., 2010).

Tier 1 interventions address 80-90% of the student population and are applied to all students in the school (NASP, 2002). When identifying a school-wide intervention program some considerations should include; best practice, best fit, funding, and

community collaboration (Bye et al., 2010). An example of a comprehensive study of attendance involves using the program, Response to Intervention (RtI). This program gives schools a framework to work in when responding to Tier 1 interventions as well as building Tier 2 and 3 interventions. It is a an evidence-based, multi-tiered framework that guides schools in determining the best interventions to foster a positive school climate, academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success (Tilly & Clark, in press).

Tier 2 interventions are applied to a smaller group of students that are unaffected by the Tier 1, all-school interventions. Kearney and Bates (2005) suggest that these students who are considered unaffected by Tier 1 interventions may exhibit more school refusal behaviors (Kearney, Lemons, & Silverman, 2004). With this intervention, schools should also include progress monitoring where data is collected and reviewed to measure progress in relation to the response to interventions. Future decisions should be based on data that is continually collected. Also at this tier, parents should be involved and informed of their student's intervention and may participate in parent groups or workshops as a part of the program intervention (Kearney & Bates, 2005).

Tier 3 interventions are going to be applied to individual students and are customized to their needs because about 5% of the students will not respond to the Tier 1 or 2 interventions. Some similar interventions can be performed at Tier 3 but will be more intensive and more in-depth. Both the progress monitoring and the FBAs can be used with more intensity and used to guide the individual interventions that will decrease the frequency of the undesirable behaviors (Ellingson et al., 2000; Ingram, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 2005; Meyer, 1999; Repp, Felce, & Barton, 1998). Understanding the root of

school refusal behavior is critical to creating an effective and meaningful intervention (Lyon & Colter, 2007).

Another tool to assess behavior is the School Refusal Assessment Scale for Children (SRAS-C) (Kearney, 2007). This is similar to FBA as it looks at school avoidance (Dube & Orpinas, 2009; Kearney, Lemons, & Silverman, 2004). Other resources to be used are mentors, continued parent/guardian involvement, and more supports from support staff (Bye et al., 2010). One of the most promising programs is *Check & Connect*. This program increases school engagement and targets school refusal behaviors such as truancy, tardies, and suspensions (Evelo et al., 1996). The key to Check & Connect is the monitor. The monitors are the individuals who keep communication open between the student, parent/guardian, and school administrators in regards to school attendance.

There is compelling evidence how the factors of absenteeism, and poverty impact academic achievement. Because of this strong connection, schools would be remiss to ignore or even lessen the importance of these factors on any program implementation used to close the achievement gap. Efforts to close the achievement gap that have appeared to be moderately successful, or not successful at all, may have had greater gains if absenteeism had been reduced. The strong connection between academic achievement and school absence should not be overlooked as accountability systems evolve (Balfanz, & Byrnes, 2006).

In the last four or five pages, the direction and tone that I have presented has shifted. Presenting my study with a sample size of six students versus programs found on the What Works Clearinghouse website with a significantly larger sample size, can

conflict one another. By presenting the What Works Clearinghouse introduces two variables into the equation that deserve comment before we turn to the final three chapters. The first is the assumption that 'evidence-based' interventions will be tested models (rather than design principles). With a legacy that stems from federal investment in education reform models in the late 1960s and early 1970s and then again as a public-private partnership during the term of the first President Bush, school interventions have increasingly come as externally crafted pre-packaged 'models' (Coady et al., 2003), which consequently discharges the individual. In sync with this change, the What Works Clearinghouse weighs evidence of how well those models perform. Per their research lens, however, if an intervention is pursued differently at different sites, this variation is proof of the design's weakness (as opposed to, say, its customizability or responsiveness to context). My point is not that models are bad (or good), but rather to point out that they depend on seeing students as types (e.g., a Tier 1 type, a Tier 2 type, a Tier 3 type), which is in contrast to the six different stories that my focal participants reveal in Chapter 4.

The insights that my qualitative study illuminates would not meet the sample size requirements for the What Works Clearinghouse and therefore would not count as evidence. What can be problematic is when students are reduced to types or categories, the individual can be lost. Previously, I mentioned Tier I, and Tier II interventions. Both address a population based upon a behavior. There is a sense that when casting the intervention net over Tiers I and II, that the applied interventions will garner data showing improvement of a particular behavior. Yet, it is not until Tier III, when the last

5% receive a customizable intervention where the individual is the focus of the intervention.

The second point is the behaviorism overlay that crept into the last four pages. Students show, for example, "school refusal behaviors." Behaviorism (which by definition focuses on overt, measurable behavior) allows the emphasis to be on what the student does or does not do, rather than on the circumstances which make one or another path more or less compelling. My point is not that truancy and dropout behaviors should not be challenged, nor that students' agency should be discounted. Rather, unlike the What Works Clearinghouse's emphasis on behavior changes, I think a more holistic perspective is useful. The rhetoric and empirical evidence both suggest, at least at a macro scale, that staying in school is good. Why does that point, at least to some students some of the time not seem adequately compelling? As Belfanz and Byrnes (2012) would suggest, it is worth considering how those who struggle, those who feel pushed or pulled out, or neglected enough to 'fall out,' make sense of what is welcome, what is desirable, and what is possible. As the narratives of the students in this study are analyzed, the notion of push, pulled, and fall out will be considered.

Cultural Proficiency. While not a formal program, educators' often work towards being culturally responsive in both teaching and leadership – an approach that is gaining momentum. Cultural proficiency is a mind-set, a worldview, and a manner in which individuals and organizations make assumptions and interact effectively in culturally diverse environments. An emergent solution to educating a diverse student population, a population that is taught by predominately white educators, is to understand and know the cultural backgrounds of their students (Delpit, 1995). To help students

construct a "school kid identity," schools can and should provide curriculum that celebrates diversity, but more concretely, schools should fully integrate the students' cultures in the schooling experience (Flores-González, 2002). When students feel valued, their academic worth can be reinforced to help shape a positive school identity (Bye et al., 2010).

Schools can create a system in which students, who are at risk of being chronically truant, can be identified early. Educators have a professional responsibility to discontinue the constant negative effects of school failure on students and be attuned to students who are experiencing negative schooling incidents. Students may also show a resistant identity, which manifests as classroom disruptions (Gilligan, 1982; Walsh, 1991). Schools with large Mexican student populations would benefit from understanding how to capitalize on family identities as a means of motivation (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Valdés, 1996). Students' reactions to failure manifests in various ways. If students are not validated and affirmed, they often will either disengage, dropout, or feel pushed out (Quiroz, 2001). The reactions can be silencing where students no longer participate in the schooling experience (Fine, 1991), but such patterns are not inevitable. The continued improvement towards culturally responsive schools will have a positive impact bringing students out from the silence and out of resistance through schooling experiences where students are validated, and affirmed in their language and culture.

In summary, my extensive review of research suggests a number of conclusions regarding student absenteeism that inform my research.   Many communities have defined what excessive unexcused absences are in terms of days absent from school,

however, the way in which communities address their truancy problem varies. All US states have created state guidelines and consequences for unexcused absences/truancy. In some cases, such as in Nebraska, students are automatically referred to the County Attorney after 20 absences regardless of those days being excused or not.

There are programs around the U.S. that not only address truancy but also some that were designed to promote college preparedness which lessened truancy rates for some students but were not designed with a focus on students with high truancy. It is difficult to compare programs across states or even know what programs are being used. None of the department of education websites that I viewed mentioned programs being used to address truancy or chronic absenteeism.

What Needs To Be Better Understood

Much of the research on truancy and chronic absenteeism focuses on locations that have had long histories of high Latino populations, such as Texas and California, but none have researched Latino students growing up in the "New Latino Diaspora" (Hamann & Harklau, 2010). Kozol (1991, 2005) and Nieto (2004) suggest that schools evaluate their organization, culture, and policies as a means to removing stratifying inequities within the school's walls. Regardless of urban or rural, East or West Coast, high or low Latino population, or the Midwest, all studies need to attend to the inequities and unresponsive environments that schools produce (Hondo, Gardiner, & Sapien, 2008). One systemic intervention would be for schools to implement staff development to grow educators' culturally responsive teaching. As previously referenced by Noddings (1984), who defines being cared *for* versus cared *about*, ultimately, when a student feels

cared *for*, a stronger relationship can be built which Flores-Gonzalez (2002) describes as being foundational in how schools can integrate students' culture into the schooling experience. Bye et al. (2010), reiterate the necessity for students to feel valued and this can happen when educators have a deeper understanding of their students.

The ways schools and school districts implement staff development in working towards being culturally responsive is important to the learning of populations that have historically not been academically successful (Dentler & Hafner, 1997). The most vulnerable students must have frequent schooling experiences that validate and affirm their culture (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). I will now examine three areas to consider in improving the student schooling experience: culturally responsive schooling experiences, identifying problems, and a caring and relevant environment.

Culturally Responsive Schooling Experiences. Schools must address the student demographic changes in a culturally responsive manner. Every adult in a school building shares in the responsibility for the schooling experience of students. Fullan (2003) describes these responsibilities as moral imperatives of school leaders. Culturally proficient work is never complete. It is an on-going process. Terrell and Lindsey express this ongoing process as a continuum of values and beliefs or the policies and practices of an organization. The values and behaviors are listed in order of least proficiency to greatest proficiency: Cultural Destructiveness, Cultural Incapacity, Cultural Blindness, Cultural Precompetence, Cultural Competence, and Cultural Proficiency. In table 1, the definitions and behavior of each culturally proficient level on the continuum are presented. School personnel must think reflexively to understand one's own biases or

beliefs and assumptions of other people who are not from the same cultural group (Terrell

& Lindsey, 2009).

Table 1. Culturally Proficient Level	Definition	Behavior
Cultural Destructiveness	A behavior, policy, or practice that essentially eliminates any evidence of culture	The individual can see differences and they want to eliminate those differences.
Cultural Incapacity	The treatment of a historically dominated group of people based upon stereotypes that they are inherently inferior	The individual can see differences and acts as if the differences are wrong
Cultural Blindness	The failure to acknowledge the differences between people	The individual will see the differences but say that they don't.
Cultural Precompetence	The recognition of one's limited interactions with other cultural groups	The individual will see the differences but respond inappropriately.
Cultural Competence	The acceptance and respect for differences and the continuous expansion of cultural knowledge that transforms a belief system, policies, and practice.	The individual will see the differences and understand the contributions of others.
Cultural Proficiency	The capacity to learn and teach about other cultures that holds other cultures in high esteem	The individual will see the differences and affirm those difference.

This important work, yet the most impactful on student engagement and academic

achievement, is done with the educators that interact with students on a regular

basis. Culturally responsive schools must help all adults in the building understand what

are and what *are not* culturally proficient behaviors. Understanding the continuum and

being honest with where one is on that continuum can transform behaviors. The process

of understanding is the inside-out process, which is a different type of staff development

that impacts the work in schools. The challenge becomes the task of undoing what

educators have been conditioned to expect from staff development that has involved

curriculum and not to learn about one's self (Eisner, 1992). Educators often go to staff

development to learn a new program or a new strategy for their "toolkit" or "bag of

tricks". A hurdle of the cultural proficiency work may be in moving adults in education

to take a personal journey of looking inward in an honest and sometimes painful manner

of addressing their own experiences of alienation. There is danger in lowering

expectations of students when the faculty and staff of a school do not acknowledge the

student's culture while recognizing their own biases, generalizations, and assumptions

about the student. The negative outcomes of schools that do not validate and affirm the

cultural contexts in which students learn, may find lower academic achievement, higher

dropout rates, along with poorer attendance (Nieto, 1999)

Caring versus uncaring environment

In the analysis of the research done in three Idaho schools with varying Latino

populations (25%-58%), the reform from NCLB (2002) did not have a positive effect in

all three schools. Students in the study had internalized a lack of connection to the adults

in school and did not feel the adults cared about them. Students also did not see the

relevancy in the work they were doing which resulted in disengagement (Hondo,

Gardiner & Sapien, 2008). Students also felt that educators had low expectations of

Latino students and therefore accepted the higher dropout rates of this population (Jordan

et al., 1999).

In Valenzuela's (1999) study of Seguín High School in a Houston, TX, she notes

the community demography had changed to a majority Latino (mostly Mexican and

working-class) from a majority white middle-class population. While the student

population was majority Latino, the staff was majority white. With a shift in the school's

demographics, it once was a high performing school and then became one of lowest

performing schools in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) as the

demographic shift presented new challenges around English language acquisition needs

and immigrant student needs.

An important concept came from Valenzuela's (1999) work. The student's

expressed opposing definitions of care. Teachers did not believe the students cared about

school while the students believed the teachers did not care about them. Another way to

view care is *aesthetic* versus *authentic*. Teachers view student care through an *aesthetic*

lens and see care as academic productivity where students desire an *authentic* care where

there is reciprocity in the student-teacher relationship. What complicates this relationship

is the inability of teachers to connect with students for a variety of reasons. There is also

a disconnect with how students present themselves that conflicts with teacher's idea of

what a scholar looks like and behaves like. These Latino students described care

similarly as they would the Mexican concept of *educación* which was schooling based on

respect, and care.

Educación (Valenzuela, 1999) is similar to authentic caring (Noddings,

1984). Authentic caring is continual as well as an understanding of having a relational

reciprocity. If a teacher attends to a student's welfare and emotional well-being, then

accessing a student's full reality can be achieved (Noddings, 1984; 1992). The danger

schools can find themselves in is not putting into place a system of caring. If educational

experiences become reduced to only procedures then schools are at risk for not being able

to respond to students as human beings, which can create an uncaring school culture
(Kozol, 1991; Bartolomé, 1994; Prillaman & Eaker, 1994).

The next two concepts are extra layers that can create a feeling of an unresponsive
and uncaring schooling experience. As presented in Chapter 1, several students
expressed their feelings that school was unwelcoming and unresponsive place. I would
like to address both naming and silencing as means to creating an unwelcoming and
unresponsive schooling environment.

Uncaring Environment

Naming. The fear of *naming,* in an academic setting, can become a systemic and
fundamental practice as it relates to various areas of the school experience such as
curriculum conversations and school policies. Naming is the practice of identification
and discussion as it relates to stratified communities.   To not name implies there is not a
problem and therefore the problem never gets discussed and worked through. The fear of
naming often becomes silencing which has a profound impact on low-income students
and students of color (Fine, 1991).

Silencing. When studying silencing, there are three areas to consider (1), whom
is protected with silencing; (2) systemically how silencing becomes institutionalized, and
(3) examining how the silencing of students destabilizes educational empowerment
(Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983; Shor, 1980). Silencing can be an example of how students
do not feel cared *for* (Noddings, 1984) by their teachers and in turn can aid in the process
of being push, pulled, or falling out (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2012).

The voice of students is powerful and gives meaning to what happens in school, both intentionally and unintentionally. The student voices create sense of urgency in me as I reach back to the work of Delpit (1995) and call to mind that students are the children of someone and those parents/guardians assume that their child is well-cared for at school. I feel an incredible burden and responsibility to ensure that I do my best to meet the expectations of my students' families.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

"We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs." (Delpit, 1995, p. 46-47)

This chapter describes the research approach in this qualitative study. Further, this chapter offers background on the qualitative research tradition as influenced by phenomenology, discusses data collection methodologies, details the research site, outlines the data collection procedures. Further, there will be a discussion of validation and reliability measurements and addressing the ethical considerations as well as examining the role of the researcher.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the overlapping experiences of highly truant Latino high school graduates who nearly dropout. Few researchers have examined the experiences of highly truant students whose regular school attendance deviates in high school. This study looked intimately at the experiences of six Latino graduates who offer an insight as to how his/her dropout trajectory was interrupted. The responses gained through interview question may help school personnel gain and understanding of what schools do that creates an environment where students feel like they are being pushed out, pulled out, or fall out.

Research Design

This study was completed within a qualitative framework that was influenced by a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research aids in the development of an

understanding through an inquiry process that explores a social or human problem. The

final report of findings uses the voices of the participants, the reflexivity of the

researcher, as well as a description of interpretation of the problem (Creswell, 2007).

While the literature review has built from both quantitative and qualitative sources, the

new research pursued for this dissertation was qualitative. Collecting qualitative data

allows the researcher to seek an understanding of the participants' experience and

perspective (Merriam, 1998; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Additionally, within the domain

of qualitative research, it is recognized that "individuals act on the world based not on

some supposed objective reality but on their perceptions of the realities that surround

them" (Hatch, 2002, p. 7). Moreover, there is an absence of research being conducted

with high school graduates whose non-attendance deviated in high school. Therefore, the

data collected will offer insights on existing obstacles to graduate (that led to student

alienation and high truancy) but perhaps also promising practices (as the students I will

interview did ultimately persevere).

Qualitative Methodology

Bogden and Biklen (2003) suggest the researcher's goal is not to make judgments

on a situation but to add to the body of knowledge that already exists. Consequently, I

examine the phenomena that the participant narratives generate as they discuss their high

school experiences as Latino students who nearly dropped out. The value of the research

"is the degree to which it generates theory, description, or understanding" (p. 33). I

intended my study to generate such refined understanding. According to Creswell

(2007), the five traditions within qualitative research include: case study, ethnography,

grounded theory, narrative, and phenomenology. The approaches and a brief description

of each are in Table 2 which defines qualitative approaches.

Table 2.	
Type of Qualitative Approaches	**Major Attributes**
Narrative	Mode of inquiry with a specific focus on the stories of an individual
Phenomenology	Mode of inquiry that describes what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon
Ground Theory	Mode of inquiry that moves beyond description and generates a theory of a process
Ethnography	Mode on inquiry tin which the research describes and interprets the shared and learned patterns of a culture sharing group
Case Study	Mode of inquiry that provides an in depth understanding of a case or cases

Phenomenological Study influence

This study is influenced by phenomenology, Creswell (2007) states that a problem

is best suited for a phenomenological student when the problem is important to

understand. Phenomenology was chosen for the purpose of presenting the data analysis.

Phenomenology as such a paradigm provides a meaningful description of the research

setting and focus on the contextual meanings asserted by the participants. There are two

questions that can be answered through a phenomenological study and include, 1) what

do the participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon? And, 2) what is

the meaning of those commonalities? While there are several approaches to the

application of phenomenology, Creswell (2007) highlights an approach which focuses on

the meaning of experiences with particular attention to individual experiences. Creswell

(2007) explains that the researcher is tasked with determine what an experience meant for an individual, provide an inclusive description from the individual's descriptions, and then create a universal meaning.

The analysis of the data centers on significant statements, emergent themes and through the narrative structure, the findings become the crux of the described experience. The overarching purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand how the individual experiences a phenomenon as a conduit to gain a more universal meaning. Through the analysis of the emergent assertions of school experiences for Latino graduates a potentially larger understanding of students will be understood.

Data Collection Procedures

Sampling Method. I employed a "snowball" sampling method. This strategy is used when relying on key informants to help locate other informants (Creswell, 2007) who they consider to have had a similar educational experience. Through this process, a variety of participants' names were brought forward. However, the first six students who were interested in participating were chosen. The participants who participated offered rich information about their schooling experience.

Data. Multiple sources of data can be collected to gain an overall understanding of participants' perspectives through interviews, observations, or document analysis (Merriam, 1998). Creswell (1998,) suggests qualitative data is organized in four ways: audio-visual materials, documents, interviews, and observations. The qualitative data in this study were collected through interviews, journals, and audio recordings that were transcribed and analyzed.

Site. This research was done in a Midwestern community that contains urban, comprehensive high schools and smaller alternative settings. These schools, where all the focal students began, have between 1,400-2,100 students. Of the total student population in the district, in 2010, more than 4000 were Latino, which was more than 11%. That same year, nearly half of its students (i.e., more than 15,000) applied and qualified for Free/Reduced priced Meals (NDE, 2011).

Interviews. The purpose of the study was restated to the participants. I anticipated no risks and encountered none. However, participants were assured that should there be discomfort he or she could withdraw from the interview at any time without adversely affecting the relationship between the participant and the investigator. All identifiable information remained confidential. At the time of the interviews, none of the participants were still K-12 students and all had reached the age of consent. Each signed the consent form prior to an audio taped interview. The audio-recordings were stored in a locked cabinet in my office and were only listened to by the investigator. Once this dissertation has been approved, the tape recordings will be destroyed. The information obtained was used for this dissertation and may be republished in educational journals or presented at educational conferences. The interviews took approximately 45-60 minutes to complete at a place designated by the participant. The time varied because it was intended to let the former student tell his/her story and such narrations varied in length.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative research can use an inductive method. This method is a "bottom up" approach. It begins with making observations/collecting narratives, examine the observations/narratives, and then finding the themes that emerge from the narrative data (Johnson & Christensen, 2007). Through the transcription of the participant interviews, I began to uncover the emerging themes (Stake, 1995; Creswell, 1998). I employed five steps of interpretive analysis from Colaizzi (1978):

1. Dwelling with the data

2. Extracting significant statements

3. Formulating meanings into clusters or assertions

4. Creating an exhaustive description of the phenomenon.

5. Reducing the description to a statement of the fundamental structure of the phenomena.

I was able to dwell with the data as I listened to the interviews at least twice as well as after the transcriptions were complete, I re-read the transcriptions another two times. I transcribed each interview and I began to extract significant statements that elicited emotion from me or the participant. I also referred to my journal notes during the interview to add additional notations of participant's emotion and thoughts that were provoked. From these statements, I referred back to the literature to inform the creation of categories or assertions, which then led to the descriptions of the phenomena. The descriptions were then narrowed to a statement.

Validation Procedures

Some argue that qualitative research cannot be validated, although Maxwell

(1992) and others disagree. To validate my findings, I used triangulation. Triangulation

is the method of substantiating evidence from several sources. Stake (1995) refers to

"data source triangulation" when using three consistent data sources. Data were collected

from the participant narratives, my journal, and member checking. After the interviews, I

reflected on my perspective and thoughts that I had written in my journal where I noted

emotions from participants as well as my emotions as I responded to the telling of the

participant's memories of their educational experience. Member checking is the method

of asking a number of participants in the research to verify the accuracy of the findings

(Creswell, 2008). This was an organic process as I wove the participants' and

researcher's emotions, literature, and my personal experiences while attending to new

emergent themes that perhaps are not documented in the literature.

Ethical Consideration

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the entire process. Each participant

signed an IRB Consent Form (Appendix A) that was designed to inform the participant of

the purpose of the research, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to

withdraw at any time during the study without consequence. Permission to audio-tape

the participant was included in the consent form. Participants were reassured that this

research is unlikely to harm the participant. Anonymity was promised as a means to

protect participants from being vulnerable (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Pseudonyms

were given for each participant to ensure anonymity.

Biases versus Research Insider

The word bias is not typically used in qualitative research (Creswell, 2008), however, while interpreting the findings, I had to put aside my personal memories of any of the participants. In some cases, the former students I interviewed came from families that I have previously known in various capacities. There is an argument that this would increase bias but there is an equally strong argument that having a strong relationship with research participants makes for more meaningful qualitative data (Toma, 2000). To increase the likelihood of student being more candid, I want to take advantage of my insider perspective as much as I can.

Toma (2000) further elaborates that in order to be an insider, I have to place myself in the middle of the research participants as a partner. These partnerships aid in providing good qualitative data when researchers "care deeply about what and whom they are studying" (p. 177). This is a subjective relationship and the product of good data is birthed from strong connections where I will garner rich descriptions. What I may have caution is the possibility of making leaps in sense making because participants' histories sound familiar (like the ones of the students I sketched in Chapter 1, for example) and I take for granted what the reader knows, but the paramount task is to collect students' perspectives on their school experiences; the more they trust me and the process the more they are likely to share and the more sincere it is likely to be. As a precaution to eliciting participant responses where they tell me what they think I want to hear, I made an intentional insulation procedure during the interview to not positively respond to them by smiling, nodding, or any voice response.

The research reliability and validity are important factors into providing trustworthy findings. This study was designed to give voice to Latino graduates who

nearly dropped out and to honor their perseverance through alienation and truancy challenges. The findings of this study will be presented in Chapter 4 by presenting the five emergent assertions from the data. The data will be reported in narrative form to give life to the graduates' experiences. The narratives from multiple students will be combined under the emergent assertions noted through the coding process. Within each assertion, the shared experiences of several students are woven together to support the assertion.

CHAPTER 4: Participants Vignettes

"When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing." Adrienne Rich (cited in Rosaldo 1989, p. ix)

Participants in this study included two males and four females all of whom had attended and graduated from high schools in an urban setting in Nebraska. The graduates that were interviewed ranged in ages from 19-23. While these high school graduates were happy and felt fulfilled that they graduated, the undergirding story line is that they all almost did not graduate. The purpose of this study is to better understand and acknowledge, the graduates' perspectives in what schools did or did not do to help them complete high school.

Although it is unconventional, I intentionally use the present tense in this chapter. Many of the students continue to have a relationship with me. Many of them continue to contact me through social media when they need guidance with current schooling situations, or personal familial needs. While they were describing memories of past experiences, those memories had current import, still shaping how these former students thought of themselves and that merits emphasis. Graduates openly shared their obstacles and sources of resilience/perseverance during their high school experience. When I write about their stories, I write their words with confidence. There is a layering of story lines of varied struggles, even some not highlighted through this chapter's identification of and consideration of five emergent assertions.

Still, identifying five assertions from the data helps organize what participants wanted to share. For each participant the prospect of graduation was jeopardized by a high number of absences. Second, those absences represented a change in their

involvement with school; all had previously had high attendance rates in elementary and middle school. Third, peer influences (some positive some less so) were remembered as important for how they negotiated high school. Fourth those key peer influences were almost always also Latino, despite the heterogeneity of their high schools' enrollments. Finally each also recounted getting on a negative trajectory (i.e., a path to delayed graduation or dropping out) before a trusted adult helped intervene. Before turning to these assertions, however, let me first further introduce each participant, each of whom chose their own pseudonym.

Kobe

He was born in the US to parents who came from Mexico. He is 25 years old and is the second oldest of four children. He is working because he is not sure what he wants to study in college. He is moderately content with his current situation. Once his younger brother graduates in May 2015, all the children in his family will be high school graduates. Kobe, along with his siblings, will have graduated from the same comprehensive high school. He reports that when he started high school that he was the one who told his Latino friends to get to class on time and he would rush off to class so he wouldn't be late. However, shortly into his 10th grade year he, too, began to skip classes.

Kobe is currently working in manufacturing job where his father works. He is conflicted because he wants and is ready to go to college but he doesn't want to leave his father behind in the poor working conditions without an advocate. Kobe speaks to the dangerous work environment as he shows me a large burn on his hand that happened

while at work. He has been told by several of the workers, who speak limited English, that he is their advocate with the supervisors because he can speak English (and Spanish). Kobe feels the burden that the men he works with have placed on him and, so far, he chooses to stay to help them to have a safe work environment that he often has to fight for. Ironically, while the use of his bilingualism and skills as an interpreter are highly relevant to his current employment and sense of solidarity with his coworkers, they were not particularly valued in high school and were not reasons for his ultimate perseverance at that level.

Natalia

She is now 23 years old, a mother of two children, and a stay-at-home wife. Her parents are from Mexico and she was born in the US. She was the second one of her five siblings that graduated from high school or completed a GED, but she didn't feel like her parents were proud of her. She mentions that when her younger brother graduated after he struggled with drug addiction and had two children, her father expressed his pride for him. Natalia did not suggest this notion, however, what could be playing out in Natalia's family is a traditional gender role expectation, which is an external dynamic that can undercut resilience to persevere in school (Villenas, 2002; Wortham, 2002). She knows in her heart that her parents were proud of her, but she was never shown any outward displays of emotions. Natalia loves her parents very much and wants to honor their sacrifices by going to college and being the first in her family with a college degree. She wants her parents to be overtly proud of her, but she struggles with finding the motivation to start.

Natalia exemplifies the storyline of graduates who barely graduate. The question that resonates is how much better off is she for having a high school diploma? She has attempted several times to attend the local community college and is hindered by her lack of confidence that she can pass math? Getting this far (i.e., graduating high school) was a struggle. Natalia is very shy and she finds it hard to communicate with people she doesn't know well. During high school, she struggled to advocate for herself. It all came to a head when she became pregnant during her 5th year in high school. She knew it was now or never and that she needed to focus on graduating. She didn't have a working relationship with her guidance counselor and would procrastinate going in to visit with the counselor about her class schedule. Had Natalia not finished before the child was born, she would have had an opportunity to enroll her child at her school's childcare facility located at the school building. She, however, did not want to disappoint her parents more than she already had. Having a child before she graduated may have been the final wedge between her and receiving a high school diploma. Nevertheless, she continued to attend her comprehensive high school and finished before her first child was born.

Elizabeth

She is a 21 year-old married woman with two children and works outside of the home. Her parents divorced when she was 7 years old, and she was mainly raised by her father, in a town 6 hours away from her mother. As a high school freshman, she came to live with her mother. Adding to the stress of her transition to a new city, school, and living environment, her older sister, who was raised by her mother, chose to run away

from home shortly after Elizabeth arrived. Elizabeth describes her mother as losing her motherly instincts of not caring whether she attended school or not, which created an environment where Elizabeth soon leaned on her boyfriend (now husband) and her mother's friend as her support systems during high school.

Elizabeth started her ninth grade year focused on doing well so that she would graduate in four years. Elizabeth shares an undertone of how her school focus quickly waned as she began to listen to her new peers and she stopped caring about attending school. Her experience matches the description by Valenzuela in *Subtractive Schooling* (1999) where Dr. Valenzuela states that when students respond to an uncaring school environment, their actions can be perceived as school resistance, initiating a spiral of school underperformance. Even after Elizabeth lost all of her 9th grade credits, the difficulty of the coursework was never an issue and she managed to graduate in the first semester of year five at an alternative high school.

Carla

She is 22 years-old and would have been in her senior year in college when I interviewed her. However, it was a family decision after her second year of college for her to quit college to stay home and take care of her father who is battling cancer. Her parents are from Mexico and she was born there as well. She identifies herself as a DREAMer, as her citizenship status allows her to access higher education but does not allow her access to federal financial aid. (DREAMer refers to those encompassed by the proposed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, a federal legislative initiative that has been proposed every year since 2001, but not yet made into

law. DREAMers are undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children and generally know no other country as 'home'. Most DREAMers are currently protected by President Obama's 2012 executive action called DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.)

Carla is the middle child of three girls. Carla was an excellent academic student in middle school and entered high school believing she would graduate in four years. She found school difficult, not because of the work, but because she had no friends who were serious about doing well in school. This, along with her questioning her immigration status during high school, created a mindset that getting a college degree would be meaningless so why try. By her own account she struggles with being a shy person and has to be intentional in social settings to gain confidence in that setting. Carla has a love for learning and was an A-B student in middle school. However, while in high school, the lack of adult relationships early in her high school career did not help engage her with the curriculum. Consequently, she lost an entire year and graduated at the end of year five at an alternative high school.

Adrian

He is 19 years-old and is working a construction job. He is the oldest of four children. His mother and stepfather were born in the US and are still very connected to the Latino culture. His parents chose to have their children speak Spanish at home. His mother moved their family from a large inner-city environment in another state to avoid the violence and drugs in that urban community. Most of their family members in the

previous community did not graduate from high school and many had been or were currently incarcerated.

He respects his mother and is grateful to her for her sacrifices so that he could finish school in a community that was safe. Adrian was involved in football all four years of high school. By his account, this is what kept him connected to school. His family moved to this new area when he was a freshman in high school. He would like to go to college but doesn't know what major he would pick. He says he is content with working as a cook at various fast food restaurants at the present time. Adrian graduated in the first semester of year 5 from his comprehensive high school.

Raquel

She is a 22 year-old mother of one and is in a committed relationship. She is the second child of four daughters. Neither of her younger sisters graduated from high school. Both ran away during high school, and she has lost communication with one of them. Her parents are from Mexico and she was born in the US. She has been a support for her mom and would like to go to college, but doesn't have the motivation to go.

She is in a unique situation as her oldest sister has children Raquel's age and she grew up with her nieces and attended school with them. Raquel reports that she did not make many connections with any teachers and, just a few years since graduation from a comprehensive high school, she claims to recall only three, two of whom were 'mean.' She doesn't remember her entire freshman year and has decided that she didn't do her part in building relationships with teachers or fellow students. Her case reminds

us of the challenges of promoting higher education for young adults whose high school experience was decidedly negative and desultory (even if sufficient to acquire a diploma).

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

Five Emergent Assertions

These six Latino students shared their thoughts and feelings about their high school experience and nearly all commented that they wish they could go back in time and redo high school. All struggled with truancy. All had challenges outside of school as well as at school that inhibited their attention to academics. None described feeling 'authentically cared for' (Valenzuela, 1999) at the beginning of high school (or at least for long swaths of it). Yet, as I will return to at the end of the chapter, all persevered and made it. As such, their cases concurrently document how high school can so easily break down for Latino students, but also how that breakdown can be overcome or transcended.

There were painful truths that were shared by these graduates about their experiences. In turn, as an educator myself, it was painful to hear that when these students began to disengage from school, few adults intervened in a relational manner that showed true care and concern. Some graduates recalled teachers telling them to be at school, but no teacher pulled them aside to probe their situation to be in a position to offer real support and guidance. From their stories, there emerged five common assertions that all six graduates shared in their schooling experiences. Rather than continue with the presentation of each student one at a time (as it the beginning of this chapter), it makes sense to introduce the themes and then, assertion by assertion, clarify how it encompasses what each of the focal students related. The assertions are as follows:

A. All nearly didn't graduate because they missed a considerable amount of school.

B. Regular attendance deviates once in high school.

C. Peer influences impacted their school attendance (peers being older friends or siblings)

D. Close peer friendships of the participants were all Latino

E. Trusted adult prompted students to reconnect to school

There is also a subtheme, related to the final one, that several of the former students related: there was an incident (a subtheme) that led to the turning point from their negative trajectory because of intervention by a trusted adult (the theme). Each student spoke of an incident or event when a particular adult intervened and assisted the student to get back on track and re-engaged in school. These interventions successfully ignited the hope that they would complete high school. Let me examine each of the five themes in more depth, before turning to the more optimistic subtheme.

Assertion A: All nearly didn't graduate because they missed a considerable amount of school

This assertion emerged as a result of large numbers of unexcused school absences for all the participants. It is difficult, and few students are successful at passing classes when they do not attend regularly. So much of the school experience (e.g., classroom conversations, inquiry lessons) cannot be recreated. Consequently, missing school results in poor grades, which can lead to failing courses.

In the city where these graduates attended high school, once a student missed twenty days of school, the school would send a referral to the county attorney for students 17 years-old and younger. Once the county attorney received the referral, a court date would be set for the student and his/her parents/guardians. From my observation and working with students who had been referred, the first intervention was a court assigned individual who would make periodic surprise visits to school and keep in communication with the student and family to monitor attendance. This court appointed individual is referred to as a tracker. The next level of intervention would be an ankle monitor and then eventually detention in a youth facility. So missing school was largely addressed by the school and community punitively (rather than viewed as a student expression of agency related to any non-welcome at school) and literally could match the school-to-prison pipeline that Raible and Irizarry (2015) have written about, even though for the six focal students being on the beginning of that pathway did not mean they ended up where it heads.

Elizabeth was a participant in the court-ordered tracking system due to having more than 20 days of absences. She shares her memories of her involvement:

> Once I left court, I had to finish the school year. I had to check in with a woman once a week. I had to report to her, and she had to check my attendance and see if I was in school. It was a tracker. I know I had to check in for a while - more than a couple of months. I would say it was way over 5 months. After that year, I didn't have to check in because my attendance improved.

Similarly, Natalia struggled with her attendance, however, she did not have a court ordered tracker. She shares her memories of school attendance early in high school. She recalls:

I was a good student in middle school. It was in high school when it was more difficult. My 9th grade first semester, I only passed one class because I never went. I had my 15th in Mexico and I left early. [15th refers to the *quinceañera,* a coming of age ritual and party when a young woman turns 15 and accepts the doctrine of the church.] I think I did do finals. The next semester I was like, 'Oh my gosh, I only passed one class.' So I did a little better the next semester. Then my sophomore year, I dropped out twice. I knew I was failing and the semester was going to end, so I was like, 'I am just not going to go anymore because I am not going to pass anything.' Then my junior year, I got married and he moved in with me. My attendance was a little better that semester because he would get mad if I skipped. I tried to go to school. Then my senior year, at the beginning, my husband left for Mexico so I felt like a regular teenager and I started to skip again. By then, I knew I wasn't going to graduate on time and would have to go an extra year.

Raquel got to a point in her life where partying was more important than school. She speaks of her relationship with her father when she knew she was not on track to graduate on time:

To me partying and hanging out with my friends was more important than school. Being in school was just not a priority for me. During this time, my dad

was taking me to school and I would fake being sick. I would tell him that I didn't feel good. He would get mad at me and tell me, "I know you are faking it." I would say, 'no, I am not.' We would 'get into it,' but I would usually end up winning. I think this was my biggest problem when I found out towards my senior year that I was not on track to graduate, I would tell my dad I was sick. He eventually quit arguing with me and would call me in [parent approve her absence]. He had to call me in because I wasn't 18 [19 is the age of consent/adulthood in this state]. It was like a free pass and I didn't really care.

For Natalia, she believed she still had to go to high school when she was nineteen and worked off that premise. During her 5th year in high school, she states her turning point, which will serve as a subtheme this assertion:

I wanted to finish school. Then my super-senior [5th year] year during 2nd semester is when I found out I was pregnant. So, then I was in the Transition Program. I kinda knew I was going to graduate and then I found out I was pregnant and then I thought, 'well, I really need to graduate.'

Like Natalia, Raquel also mentions a turning point when she made the conscious decision to finish high school. But her journey included feeling like she didn't belong in the high school she had always attended. She stated:

Especially towards the end when I was falling behind, I felt most like I didn't belong and I shouldn't be here [high school]. I was embarrassed of how old I was and still in high school and the students were so immature. It was annoying. The fact that I only needed 27 credits (5 semester classes plus a quarter class), I can't just let that go and go do a GED and do everything over again. If I would have

had more credits [to complete], let's say another year, I probably wouldn't have

done it. I would've probably gotten my GED or maybe not even that. I felt like I

was so close so why should I give up.

While I only present stories from Elizabeth, Natalia, and Raquel, all participants

shared their memories of skipping and their struggles with regular attendance.

Attendance ebbed and flowed for Natalia and Raquel. As for Elizabeth, she made

significant improvements immediately. Turning points surfaced as subthemes both

Natalia and Raquel, however neither turning points was induced by the school, rather

induced by personal choices. Initially, parents/guardians were unable to interrupt the

increasing absences from school as were peers, however, as time towards graduation

grew near, these relationships had a more positive influence on behavior.

Assertion B: Regular attendance deviates once in high school

Graduates share that once they were in high school, their attendance lessened

compared to middle school. The reasons varied but they all shared this

experience. Some shared that they were too scared to skip school until they attended high

school. Others spoke of gaining access to individuals who had vehicles and could drive

off campus. Of course, as various studies related to high school reform have noted (e.g.,

Sizer, 1984), high school tends to be bigger and more anonymous than earlier tiers of

schooling, with teachers having bigger student loads and not well positioned to know and

create relationships with most of their students. As Chang & Romero (2008), suggest,

truancy during the early schooling (e.g. pre-school, kindergarten, first grade) years can

have a negative impact on academic achievement. None of the participants reported

having truancy issues at the early schooling years. Similarly, they also did not report having difficulty with course work.

Truancy during early schooling (pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade) can be consequential in significant ways. In national data, chronic absenteeism during kindergarten correlated to lower academic achievement in first grade. If the life experiences of living in poverty are added, the negative educational impact was twice as great. Children with chronic absenteeism in kindergarten who lived in poverty also had the lowest academic achievement in fifth grade (Chang & Romero, 2008). In nationally representative data, chronically absent first graders compared to students with average attendance measured having 12 percent lower mathematical skills and 15 percent lower literacy skills in first grade (Ready, 2010).

In response to the question of describing the participant's attendance from elementary through high school, I recall Kobe pausing before he shares his thoughts on, specifically, his high school attendance because he had regular attendance up to that point. As he is thinking about his response, he has a slight smile and he begins:

> As a freshman, I was that nerd. You know, the one who told everybody to go to class. When the warning bell would go off, I would tell all my friends, 'alright, let's go to class.' That eventually changed as my friends were able to drive.

Adrian speaks vividly about his attendance patterns and his family's expectations. His mother and stepfather moved from a bordering state so that all the children would have a better life experience and that included graduating from high school; Adrian remembered:

Everybody in my family wasn't graduating material. I felt like I was the one of the ones who made it the farthest without getting into trouble or dropping out. I had a lot of pressure on me and I felt like I had to do it. We [family] wasn't expected to graduate. Nobody expected us to graduate, [not] our family, community, or our friends. In 7th grade, my attendance started going down. I started skipping and being lazy. I didn't wake up. In 8th grade, my attendance was pretty bad. My mom worked in the morning, so I would have to walk myself to school. It was pretty close, so sometimes I would go to a couple of classes and just come back home or I wouldn't even go.

Elizabeth spent her elementary years in a smaller community than where she lived during the majority of her high school years. She lived with her father from elementary through middle school and then moved with her mother at the start of her high school years. When asked to share her memories of her attendance throughout school, she commented:

In elementary school, I always got awards for 100% attendance. I was always there no matter if I was sick or not. Then in junior high, I only had to miss a couple of days because of an eye appointment and stuff. Then once I hit high school, I was gone like 75% of the time. I took advantage of the fact that people [older sister] said Freshman year was your year to do whatever. I skipped all the time - I never went to school and then I got in trouble with the school and had to go to court for that.

Carla had a moral compass that was based upon her sense of fear of her parents finding out about her skipping school but she eventually lost that compass. As she recalled that transition:

In elementary, it [attendance] was good and then middle school, it was also good until my last year. The only time we would be gone was when we were going out of town. We would go out of town a lot. Other than that, we would never miss school until my 8th grade year. This was my first time that I skipped, the first and only time. It was because I would see my older sister who was in high school would always talk about how they would go to the lake, or they were driving around and I was like, I want to do it too. But when we actually did it, we were really scared. It was me and three other [middle school] girls. It didn't go as we planned. They scared me, and then my mom called me. She told me the cops were looking for us. That made it even worse. But then, when I got to high school, my first semester, I did really good. I think for the same reason - I was still kinda scared from what had happened during 8th grade. But, my sister was going to the same high school and she was skipping school and not going so I ended up doing the same thing too.

It was in the recall of school attendance throughout the participant's schooling, that I recognized what was missing from the literature; the attention to a population of students who would not have been identified as highly truant prior to beginning high school. This is a special population within the set of students who are classified as highly truant in high school. This subset can be separated from the set that includes students who have been chronically absent from school from an earlier age. The interventions to

re-engage this population of newly classified truants can look very different than the interventions for students who have consistently been absent from school from early on.

Assertion C: Peer influences impacted their school attendance (peers being older friends or siblings)

This assertion emerged as all graduates mentioned how the individuals they associated with and spent the most time with impacted their attendance. There was an underlying notion that the peers influenced a change in the participant. The participants all mentioned that when entering high school, they imagined themselves graduating in four years (a pace that actually none of the six focal students were able to achieve). Gradually, that view shifted with exposure to peer influences.

Adrian was new to the community where he attended high school. He moved from a neighboring state right before his 10th grade year. His mother and stepfather moved him and his three younger siblings to the new community to find better jobs and to raise their children in a safer environment. Adrian shared this about his attendance challenges:

> In high school, I would skip, unless I was playing football. I have to have good grades and attendance to play. I skipped in high school because of my girlfriend. All I really cared about was making her happy. I just wanted to be with her. So during school - she went to a different school for a while - so I would skip and go see her. She knew how she was impacting me, but didn't really think about it, because she wanted to see me [too].

Influence by others was evident with Adrian. Carla shares similar account. Carla was an excellent student in middle school. She and a few friends skipped once during middle school, and her parents found out. Her mother told her that the cops were looking for her. This was enough to scare Carla the remaining time during middle school and into the start of high school, but she then describes her older sister's influence on her attendance. "My sister went to the same high school that I was going to and she was skipping school and not going, so I ended up doing the same thing too. She never wanted me to go with her. I think that's why I did it [skip]."

Raquel, like Carla, also mentions how she was influenced by others, in particular her sister, to skip school. School was not difficult for Raquel, but she did not like going. She did not build any relationships with her teachers because she did not like them and did not like the students at her high school. She also enjoyed the new freedom of being out doing things that her parents would not allow. She indicated:

Most of the students were immature. As a 9th grader, I was going through the stages of where I wanted to be the 'cool kid.' I followed everyone else's step. I saw everyone skipping also, so I was skipping. My sister was skipping also so I was skipping with her. The 'cool kid' would skip, party, smoke, and drink. Pretty much they were never in school. I was never in school.

Both Raquel and Carla expressed that their peer influences primarily involved peer influence by a family member. They both added a nuance; when it was a family member, there was no need or attempt for convincing. Both young women just imitated what they saw a sibling act out.

While all of the participants mentioned peers as having a negative influence, I should note that their peers influenced their negative trajectory in the beginning. With how schools require a certain amount of credits/units for every year attended, once a student was off-track to graduate, depending on how many deficient credits/units he/she had, summer school may not be enough to get back on track. The status of being off-track can continue for several semesters or years. While peer influence was initially negative, many of the graduates mentioned that peers eventually encouraged them to continue with school and graduate. It is more accurate to call peers a factor (pro and con) than a problem.

Assertion D: Close peer friendships of the participants were all Latino

None of the research I reviewed mentioned whether in other sites, with other struggling Latino students, the struggling students' peer groups were all Latino. I presume at least some of the time this may have been so for logistical reasons, because those research sites had mainly Latino student populations. However, being in the Great Plains presents a different setting as few locations have a majority Latino population. The school district site for my research had nearly a thirteen percent Latino population, which slightly lagged the proportion of Latinos in the state's overall school enrollment. Thus, in this environment, for students to only have close peer relationships with other Latinos was not just happenstance. Either these students did not welcome friendships outside their peer group and/or there was a larger hostility/inhibition toward such relationships in the larger social milieu. Simply put, Latino students choose other

Latino students because a Latino peer group supports their Latino identity (Gándara and Contreras, 2009)

Carla had a brutally honest opinion of the lack of diversity of her friends that she chose to associate with in high school. She stated clearly:

They [friends] were all Hispanic. I didn't hang out with any non-Hispanics. I think that was another reason why I was so closed and wasn't open-minded because I always hung out with the same group of people and they were always Hispanic. If I thought, 'Well, why am I going to school if I can't…,' they thought the same thing too. I think if I would have hung out with difference races, I would've gotten different ideas. I see my little sister. She hangs out with all Caucasians and she's all about school, sports, and everything. If I would have gotten that experience, I would've...I'm not saying that Hispanics are lazy or anything, but we don't tend to get into a lot of sports and stuff like that. None of them [friends] finished [high school] on time. Most finished a year later.

Natalia describes herself as shy. It was and continues to be her personality to keep to herself until she knows someone well. In a social or school setting, she has never spoken to someone first. She will speak to someone when spoken to. She recalls her friends in high school who were all Latino:

My cousin went to my school and we started skipping a lot. One of my friends, Sofia, was already married and we would go to her house. We wouldn't do anything. It was stupid. I would skip with Camila, Isabella, and Erianna. Some of my friends had to go to other schools. We all graduated but some of us took one extra year and some took two extra years.

Raquel is a shy person and being social was not easy for her. Her older sister was attending the high school where she attended and her sister's friends became her friends. She doesn't recall any of her Latino friends graduating on time, but believes most graduated a year later:

> I wasn't social with anyone in school. I am not a people person. Most people I talked to were Latinos and like a small amount of them. That was our little group. Those were the only ones I talked to in school. If I had any other friends outside of that circle, it was maybe 2 or 3, but they weren't in my close circle. I talked to this group because my older sister was talking to this group.

It is difficult to interpret this intra-ethnic social group pattern and its role in these students' struggles. The research (e.g., Garcia, 2001) suggests how important cultural pride and preservation are to Latino school success. But that may not be what this pattern is reinforcing (or contradicting). Here the homogenous social clustering may point to an 'unwelcome' (Gitlin et al., 2003) by the larger community and a clustering that comes from an inadequately interrupted exclusion from other ethnic groups.

Assertion E: Trusted adult prompted students to reconnect to school

The graduates overall could not recall a single teacher's name during their early high school years, but they all could name at least one adult who helped them reconnect to school so they could graduate. The relationships with adults varied among graduates. The graduates who eventually attended the smaller alternative school could name many teachers whom they connected with and built relationships. The graduates who attended the large comprehensive high schools could name one or two teachers with

whom they had built relationships. They all mentioned at least one adult that helped them stay the course and continue attending school enough to complete their requirements for a high school diploma.

Two of the female participants refer to their experience in the district's Transition Program (TP). This program was designed for students who were entering the school system at times other than at the beginning of a semester. The TP is staffed by one certified teacher and one paraprofessional. The idea of the program is twofold: (1) to help transition students back into the mainstream classes after arriving at a non-standard semester break, and, (2) to help seniors who are close to graduating but are not achieving academically in the ordinary classrooms. There is a referral process to the Office of Student Services which makes the final decision of who is placed in the TP.

Natalia only passed one class during her 9th grade year. At the time, she was not worried and it was not until her senior year when she realized that her poor attendance had impacted her graduation status. She did not like school and never tried to get to know many people in class. It was not until her senior year when she built a relationship with her administrator and her TP teacher. She mentions these two adults helped her finish high school: "Before [her Latina administrator] got there, nobody really ever talked to us. It was more that [the administrator] really wanted to help us. I felt more comfortable with [her] and the TP teacher."

Raquel was approved for the TP program because she was senior who was close to graduating but had poor attendance. Raquel highlights the impact the TP had on her graduating:

Me and my sister were put there and we actually went. Also, I think the TP

overall helped me because she [TP teacher] pushed me a lot. She would

constantly be on my case. She would call the house, text me, call my mom, and

she was always on me, and it helped me a lot. I told my TP teacher, "if you

wouldn't have pushed me, I wouldn't have done it - like seriously." Because

when I was in that program, I was gone for 2-3 months and every single day, she

would text me, "Are you coming? Are you coming? Are you going to hand in

these assignments?" Yes, every day [Raquel smiles and giggles]. I would never

answer her texts, like ever, yet every day, without fail, "Are you coming today?"

or "Make sure you are doing your work at home." [Raquel smiles].

In an account reminiscent of the study 'Counselor as Gatekeeper' (Erickson &

Schultz, 1982), Kobe shares a story where he tried to get back into school but faced

several roadblocks until he reached out to his former soccer coach who had moved to a

different school building. Kobe recounts this connection:

I had leg surgery at the end of first semester. I tried to come back second

semester and got the run around. I was told by the counseling office that I can

come back second semester. Then when I tried to get back in, I was told it was

too late. I finally talked to my [former] soccer coach, who works at a different

school. [He] called my school and got an appointment for me to reenter school.

What Natalia, Raquel, and Kobe recall as their experiences with a trusted adult

illuminated the idea of *educacíon* (Valenzuela, 1999). What they really are sharing is

that the relationship with the adult is one of care and respect. The students may not have

appreciated the attention some teachers gave them on a frequent basis but have come to understand and can appreciate those efforts by teachers.

These six students have shared their memories of their high school experience of challenges and successes. I recall from my journal notes more of the emotion and additional comments that did not fit into the emergent assertions. Some of their memories brought smiles to their faces while other memories created images of sadness due to moments of lost hope. Every single student when they entered high school had the intention and believed that they would graduate in four years. They all wished they could go back and do high school over. They now see how their choices took them down a path that they now see as less fulfilling in ways that could have positioned them to enter college more prepared. They are proud students for their accomplishments but many are unhappy with not being enrolled in college right out of high school. Several are parents and have family duties and responsibilities. Some work outside of the home and others are stay-at-home mothers. All in all, they are healthy and happy individuals who are members of a loving family unit while knowing their high school experience could have been different.

CHAPTER 5: Data Implications

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how the six Latino students who struggled with alienation and regular attendance somehow made it to graduation despite everything they had experienced.. I was particularly interested in discovering factors that influenced their attendance issues, as non-attendance generated academic problems for all of my participants; I also attempted to uncover factors that influenced their eventual decision to pursue schooling until graduation. As the Latino population continues to grow, it is critical that we examine what Hondo, Gardiner, & Sapien (2008) describe as the inequities and unresponsive environments that schools produce. I wanted to recognize and acknowledge what schools did and did not do to help study participants complete their high school graduation requirements. The schooling experiences of these six Latino graduates are reflected in the literature, which represented cities with higher Latino populations. Yet, as my research site varied with previous studies in terms of the proportion of the Latino population, the experiences of my participants were similar to the findings reported elsewhere.

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will address the data implications as well as discuss what schools can do to better serve their Latino students. One aspect to consider as an underlying thought in all of my findings is that these six students graduated, but barely. The aspect of their stories that most resonates with me is the question: What could have been? What might these students have achieved were it not for their initial academic stumbles? I have become convinced that researchers need to study further the issue of whether such students are indeed better off than those who did

not find the one adult who helped them re-engage into school, given that they would then barely finish their studies.

Findings and implications

The stories of my six participants illuminate the schooling experience that is common and shared. What they share is critical for anyone in education to understand. Their schooling experience in high school was the point at which they all became disconnected and began to skip school. These Latino individuals all graduated from high school but what resonates in my mind is the question: "Could their educational experiences have been better?" From the participant stories, we can learn what comprehensive schools can do "more and better" for their Latino students (particularly in terms of relationship-building); and what policies and practices comprehensive schools should reconsider; particularly in terms of missed opportunities for students.

What can schools do more and better

Cultural responsiveness. Before I begin with what comprehensive schools do, I would like to place ownership on the schools of higher education that are preparing our future educators. Once a school hires anyone to works with students, the school district is responsible for how that individual works with the Latino population. Additionally, schools of higher education should want to prepare all their education majors to be culturally proficient. As Terrell & Lindsey (2009) remind us, culturally responsive work is a journey that should involve a process of understanding our biases from inside-out. Anyone working with students should begin to look at their biases, and how those play out with students, early in their education preparation. Until schools of higher

education expect education majors to take multiple courses in culturally responsive teaching, K-12 school districts will find it difficult to meet a primary responsibility: providing an education for all students.

School districts can measure a candidate's culturally responsiveness through a questionnaire, often done through an online service provider such as Gallup. This would enable school districts to employ individuals who are further along on the continuum of being culturally responsive. Latino students are not graduating at the same rates as their White counterparts, and the negative economic impact this has can last a lifetime for Latinos. From the recent 2013 Survey of Consumer Finances report, Demos (2014) compared the median wealth by education and ethnicity. He states Whites who drop out of high school are more economically advantaged than Latino students who graduate from college. While graduating from high school is an accomplishment not to be dismissed, for Latino students who barely graduate, the outcomes can be economically devastating as if they had not graduated at all. As school districts evaluate the belief that all students can be successful; the educational experience of Latino students must be addressed and monitored by school officials.

I am reminded that schools must be equipped with a variety of cultural norms that address the needs of students because no student should ever feel that they are not valued in an educational setting. This can create feelings of neglect and invisibility. Schools must now equip themselves with systems that address a variety of needs students that validates their feelings. Bye (2010) and Fine (1991) support this notion and propose that this feeling of alienation creates isolation, which can then become disengagement with the school experience. Providing professional development opportunities to generate a

culturally responsive school environment can help educators create a space in the classroom where they can be their authentic selves and where students have an opportunity to feel cared for in a genuine way.

Relationship building and Caring. The students who graduated from their comprehensive high school and did not transfer to a smaller alternative school did not speak of having more than two adults with whom they had a relationship. Both students who attended the smaller school spoke of the "family like" environment with all of the ten teachers at the school. Valenzuela (1999) posits that Latino students need to have a schooling experience as *educación* where they feel cared for as well as respected. This is similar to Noddings (1984) authentic care definition where caring relationships are continually built and there is a relational reciprocity. Noddings adds that with relational reciprocity, educators can access a student's full reality. The converse of this statement brings me back to our 6 students. They were "barely graduated" students; might their trajectory look different had they had a schooling experience where they had *educación* rather than a traditional education.

Two of the female participants, Elizabeth and Carla, transferred from their comprehensive high school to attend an alternative school with less than 150 students. The values of this school are grounded in relationship building, teamwork, and increasing personal development skills. Both of these young women talked about the nurturing and caring environment they found at this site. One mentioned there were roughly 10 teachers and she was known and felt cared for by each one even though she did not have everyone as a teacher. When Elizabeth talked about the last school she

attended, she was thankful for that experience. I could feel how much she missed those adults in the school as she reflected:

> The only school where I really felt comfortable with all the teachers was at the smaller school. It's a first name basis. You walk in and the teachers want to know about your life, they want to know about your faults. You can have a bad day and they are okay. They will say, "it's okay, let it out and don't hold it in." I connected with all of my teachers from there. They are your friends and your teachers at the same time. This school was welcoming. I loved going to school. I loved it once I started there. I wish I could've stayed longer. I wish I would've failed a class so I had to stay longer. You really want to go to school there. The environment is just amazing.

Relationship building takes two interested individuals: a teacher and a student. Both, Carla and Raquel, reflected on their lack of relationship building with their teachers in their previous schools when they were not attending school. Carla eventually learned the importance of building relationships and learned how to build relationships with her teachers when she transferred to a smaller school where teachers she did not have still, made efforts to get to know her on multiple levels. Carla states:

> The second school that I went to, we called each other by our first names, even the teachers. I think that's something that helps you. It feels more like a second family than a teacher. That made it more easy to become trustworthy of your teachers. It wasn't always about school. They actually took the time to talk to you about other things other than just studies. You build a bond with them. You get to know them like a friend. That's why it is easier for me to talk to them.

The male participants, Adrian and Kobe, talked about not feeling cared about particularly when they had many absences from school and then showed up in class. Adrian speaks of the phenomena of invisibility from two teachers during high school:

> Two teachers basically gave up on me. They basically cut me out of their class- basically erased me from their class. Sometimes I would actually show up and they would joke around, "oh, look who showed up." I just felt uncomfortable there.

Kobe also speaks of the relationships with teachers and shares the invisibility that Adrian perceived. Kobe states, "I remember that I felt invisible going to classes. Teachers wouldn't help me so if they weren't going to help me, I didn't care [about the class]." In other studies, graduates expressed their schooling experience in high school as being pushed, pulled or falling out of school (Jordan et al., 1994 and Watt & Roessingh, 1994). My participants shared vivid memories of these experiences. All mentioned negative experiences that fell into the categories of pushed, pulled or fell out. Many were on a negative trajectory until a trusted adult intervened in various ways.

What policies/practices might comprehensive high schools reconsider

  The messaging of a diploma in regards to its meaning and lifetime earnings. In the 17 years that I have served in education, the messaging about the importance of receiving a diploma was the same. Most often the message contained phrases such as, 'get into college' or 'better paying job.' These messages suggest that the questions that stand before us are: Have our expectations as a nation changed in regards to the importance of a high school diploma and therefore, what does a diploma gain access to? The reality in the US is that jobs that once hired individuals without a high school

diploma, no longer operate in that manner. Sending the a priori message that a diploma will gain students access to a higher income over a lifetime can be misleading. I want to preface this notion based upon the variation of graduation requirements in school districts. Some districts have two requirements, while others have one. Some school districts have a course completion (perseverance) requirement and a graduation exam (content mastery) and other states the diploma signals only the completion of courses.

For my participants, who barely graduated, was the message of gaining a higher income over their life and getting into college a false reality? In comparing human capital theory versus signaling theory, Becker (1964) states that individuals invest in their human capital via education. The connection being made is that education will increase one's productivity and hence increase their income. Additionally, Moretti (2010) suggests the widespread use of this theory has been used to explain the income and productivity between states and cities. Signaling theory has been used as an alternative rationale for productivity and uses education as one indicator for income but also uses productivity as an additional indicator (Moretti, 2010). Spence (1973) proposes that corporations have imperfect data about worker productivity. Both human capital theory and signaling theory have a basic flaw in their theories, which is the implication that education has a positive effect on income. This flaw supports the notion that increasing one's education could have a positive correlation to increasing one's income.

A Texas study examined the economic impact of a credential, the high school diploma, because it is the mostly highly held credential as well as it is simply a piece of paper that cannot determine productivity (Lee, 2008). This research studied the seniors who took their "last chance" high school exit exam, comparing students who *barely*

passed and received a high school diploma with students who *barely failed* and did not receive a high school diploma (Lee, 2008). The results were statistically insignificant. Similar results were found in a Florida study as the sample was analyzed by sex, race, as well as data from a similar high school graduation exit exam. The Florida schools did offer a certificate of completion for meeting the course requirements but not passing the exit exam (Lee, 2008).

Changing the messaging of what type of diploma a student is receiving and the current reality of how that diploma may gain them access to opportunities is important to schools being transparent. With the change in demands in the expectations of schools, there is a growing purpose of schools to prepare students to be college and career ready. Perhaps, high schools should reconsider a new message, along with students meeting the graduation credit requirements, there are also important college-ready behaviors. Conley (2007) identifies four main areas of skill development that are important in preparing students to be college ready: content knowledge and basic skills, core academic skills, non-cognitive skills and norms of performance, and college knowledge.

Educacíon and missed opportunities

As per Valenzuela's (1999) description of a caring school environment, schools can reconstruct their policies and practices to reflect the undergirding value of education where care and respect meet. The six study participants saw themselves as being high school graduates when they began their high school years. Over time and with many unexcused absences, they came to the realization the high school completion was hanging in the balance. While these students made the conscious decision to skip school, that

choice was influenced greatly by their desire for their teachers to notice them and acknowledge their absences. This attention that they hoped for from their teachers would make them feel like they were valued learners. Kozol (1991), Bartolomé (1994), and Prillaman and Eaker (1994) warn educators that, if educational experiences are reduced to simple procedures, there is a danger of not being able to engage students as human beings, thus releasing students from any connection with school and any commitment to attend classes. Natalia expresses her concern about her school guidance counselor that illuminates the phenomena of guidance counselor as gatekeeper (Erickson & Shultz, 1982), in her statement: "Nobody ever told me about all the classes that I needed later, not even my counselor. She was kinda mean."She also testifies a lack of genuine care and respect by teachers early in her high school years:

> During the start of my 6th year in high school, I found out I was pregnant and I wasn't with my class. I felt like a loser. When my new administrator came, it was a big help and the TP teacher would push me and say, "you have to graduate for this reason or that reason." I realized that I have to graduate for myself to be more successful.

Similarly, Raquel recalls wanting to be pushed by someone to be more involved in school but that the person telling her would need to be constantly on her to get involved. She shares:

> I wished I would've been more involved in clubs or sports or something. But there wasn't really anyone to say, "do this or do that." I would've listened if they were pushy about it. If they were constantly on my butt with, "you need to do it." I probably would've done it.

Additionally, what I found interesting is Raquel could only recall 3 of her teachers'
names. Raquel also identified another uncaring school experience by a teacher after
having several unexcused absences from school:

> I think my math teacher called home. She didn't really care if I was there or not.
> Whenever I went in, I would sleep in that class. All she would do is wake me up
> but she never said anything like, "where have you been?" or " you missed this,
> here are your assignments" or nothing. So that's why I was so far behind in math.

What is important to recognize from my participants' recollections viewed
collectively is not that a single graduate mentioned the coursework being too difficult or
too easy. Perhaps the coursework was boring and not compelling enough to engage the
student regardless of the relationship between student and teacher. We do not know that
based upon participant comments. Some students are academically successful despite of
the teacher and yet what is evident from the participants in this study is that every student
mentioned an immense disconnect with the majority of the adults in their school. This
disconnect for all of the participants not only created a roadblock that was eventually
removed by an apparently caring adult, illuminating the importance of authentic
caring. What the participants have made clear in their memories of high school was the
importance of relationships and relational responsibilities (with peers, parents, partners,
children, and teachers) that support the students' perseverance to complete the
requirements for a high school diploma.

In Conclusion

The outcomes of this research have real implications for the schooling experiences of the fastest growing ethnic population in the United States. It is imperative to improve the educational experiences of Latino students and increase graduation rates. For that to happen, remembering that students decide to leave or persist with school (based on their understanding of their school's viability, their welcome, and their capability), we need to account not only for what schools do, but also how what schools do as experienced and made sense of. Ultimately, all those responsible for educating students can learn through students' experiences as to what happens in school that supported or did not support them.

What schools should take away from my research is that one group of Latino students (that I do not believe are atypical) sought respect from their educators. Valenzuela's conception of *educación* creates and supports an environment where students feel an authentic caring that can be reciprocated. The relational reciprocity is foundational for students to have their social and emotional needs met. As Noddings (1984, 1992) states, a student's emotional wellbeing must be addressed for a student to be able to achieve his/her full potential. What schools need to recognize is how their systems silence students and then identify the ways in which they do so. Alienation is devastating when one believes his/her voice or classroom contributions are not acknowledged or validated. Ultimately, when students feel their school is unresponsive to their needs, a sense of being *pushed out* becomes their reality.

Considerations and Recommendations

Truancy is an underpinning of all of six participants' memories of their high school experience. There eventually was an interruption to the graduates' trajectory to

dropping out and I want to consider the questions, could the interruption have occurred earlier? And if we agree that non-attendance occurs slowly then was there a point in which a specific interruption would have changed the discourse of the students' alienation and truancy issues?

Truancy is a community issue and when an issue meets resources, the issue can be addressed in ways that a non-funded issue cannot. The issue of non-attendance manifested through alienation will eventually impact the community's economy and resources in other ways such as funding the legal system through the city's tracker program. A community can also research the college preparedness programs that reported a reduction in absences as unintended consequence.

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APPENDIX A

Internal Review Approval & Informed Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF
Nebraska
Lincoln

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN
Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher

Latino Graduate Informed Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of Latino High School Graduates Who Nearly Discontinued Their High School Education

Identification of Project:

Examining how Latino graduates, who nearly discontinued their schooling, found ways to continue.

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this study is to understand the schooling experiences of former Latino students who nearly discontinued their high school education, why they almost quit, and what compelled them to stay. The outcomes of this research will help us know more about the schooling experiences of the fastest growing ethnic population in the United States and one that is too often vulnerable at school. Drawing from their accounts as a way to improve the educational experiences for more Latino students and increase graduation rates could have a significant positive impact on a lot of lives.

Research Participant Procedures:

Participants will be interviewed at an agreed upon location. You will answer questions while the interview is recorded by audio. There may be probing questions to garner more information. The taped interview will range from 30-60 minutes with a possibility for a follow-up interview (at participant's request) that would be another 30 minutes.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts associated with this research. Should there be discomfort, you can choose, without consequence, not to continue participating in the research.

Benefits:

The benefit of this study is to learn more about your schooling experience as well as improve schooling experiences for other Latino students.

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Initials

Latino Graduate Informed Consent Form

A Phenomenological Study of Latino High School Graduates Who Nearly Discontinued Their High School Education

Confidentiality:

You will be selecting a pseudonym, which will not identify you. Any information obtained during this study, which could identify you, will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office and will only be seen by her during the study and for two years after the study is complete. The information obtained in this study may be published in educational journals or presented at educational conferences, but only with identifying information removed. The audio-tapes will be destroyed once the interview has been transcribed (using pseudonyms). No identifying names (including participant, school or community) will be transcribed or used in the dissertation or any subsequent publication.

Compensation:

$10 Barnes and Noble Gift Cards will be given.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate. You can also ask questions any time during the study. You may call the researcher at any time at (402) 5701339 or Dr. Edmund Hamann, who is co-principle investigator at office phone, (402) 472-2231. If you have questions concerning your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the researcher or to report any concerns about the study, you many contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board, telephone (402) 4726965.

Freedom to Withdraw:

You are free to decide to not participate in this program/study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the researcher or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your decision will not result in any loss or benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you will participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep. You are welcome to withdraw your consent at any time.

Please check the box if you agree to be audio recorded.

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____   *Date:* _____

Name and Phone number of researcher
Chandra Diaz-DeBose, MEd, Principal Researcher   *(402) 570-1339*

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APPENDIX B
Interview Protocol

Participant Questions

The central research question for this study will be: What supports were in place, from school, from family/community, and/or from self, that helped the studied former student gain a high school diploma? Specific interview prompts will ask the numbered questions, with the lettered sub-questions possibly used to elicit more of a response (per phenomenology's tenets, the more the participant volunteers the more the interviewer can step into the background). Any response where you refer to an individual, only use their first name.

1. What was challenging about completing high school?

   a. Describe your attendance to school from elementary through high school.

   b. What was your attitude towards school?

   c. What negative behaviors contributed to your challenges?

   d. How would you characterize your academic performance?

2. What helped you overcome those challenges that enabled you to complete your high school diploma?

   a. Were you expected to participate in a specific program because of those challenges? If so, explain the program.

   b. Which supports did not help?

3. Were there specific adults that helped (in or out of school)? Who were they? Did they seek you out or you did you seek them out? What did they do?

a. How did you decide this adult (or adults) was trustworthy or an advocate for you?

4. Were there missed opportunities by adults when you wished they had reached out to help you? Describe those instances.

5. What factors made high school hard? In other words, why did you 'almost not make it'?

6. Describe your various experiences during high school (e.g., social, academic, extracurricular)?

a. Where there spaces at school that you steered away from or that you knew were 'bad news'?

b. Were there any classes or activities that you really didn't like? Why not?

c. Were there any classes or activities that you really looked forward to? Why?

7. Do you think any of your classmates had similar experiences as you, both good and bad?

8. If you had to do high school all over again and knew then what you know now, would you have done anything different?

9. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your high school experience?