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TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT
AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

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Daniel James Kaczynski

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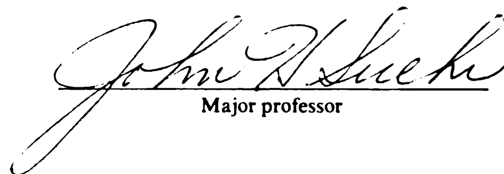

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TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

By

Daniel James Kaczynski

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ABSTRACT

TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY AT AN ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

By

Daniel James Kaczynski

Traditional high school dropouts attending an alternative high school represented the research population in this study. Qualitative research provided an effective means to understand the school dropout problem from the perspective of these young people. Two key questions were formed during the study:

1. Why do traditional school dropouts attend an alternative school?
2. How does student control impact the effectiveness of an alternative school?

This study found that the students at the alternative high school have established a significant level of informal control. Additionally, four major assertions are supported:

1. These students experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.
2. Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of the alternative school.
3. Students, as a group, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.
4. Students enjoy the experience of success while attending the alternative school.

There are implications of this study for social policymakers. Clearly, society cannot bear the social and economic costs associated with the dropout problem. The best solutions to this social problem can be found at the local level. Looking for a non-local solution only diverts attention away from the needs of the dropouts. While the issue of dropouts has been studied previously, the perspective of the dropout at the community level must be heard. Using applied qualitative research as part of local educational needs assessments can result in more effective intervention strategies. The local policymaker must be willing to listen to the local high school dropout. In doing so, a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of the dropout problem is possible. A commitment to act must accompany this descriptive understanding by the local policymaker. Only through such understanding and action can education hope to prevent students from dropping out.

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Dr. John Herrick, as my dissertation chairperson, committed himself in a most supportive way. Step-by-step his guidance helped mold the final product. The other members of my doctoral committee, Dr. James Coster, Dr. John Suehr, and Dr. Casmer Heilman enhanced my studies and strengthened this research. Gary Rackliffe provided qualitative research assistance and countless hours of support.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1.	INTRODUCTION	1
	Statement of the Problem	1
	Rationale for this Study	2
	Background Debate	4
	Chapter Summary	5
2.	REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	7
	Introduction	7
	Definition of Dropout	9
	Characteristics of Dropouts	11
	Cost to Society	16
	Effective Intervention Strategies	22
	Locus of Control	30
	Chapter Summary	35
3.	METHODOLOGY	37
	Theory of Qualitative Research	37
	Development of Research Path	39
	Researcher Biases and Insights	44

4. RESEARCH PROCEDURES 49
Field Site Selection 49
Community Characteristics 50
School District Characteristics 51
Description of School Research Site 51
Description of Student Population 54
Description of School Day 57
Collection of Data 58
Analysis of Data 62
5. FINDINGS 65
Introduction 66
#1 Freedom to Negotiate 73
#2 Student Choice 79
#3 Student Monitoring 87
#4 Student Success 95
Overarching Theme 104
Chapter Summary 106
6. CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS 107
Research Audience 107
Introduction of Conclusions 110
#1 Freedom to Negotiate 111
#2 Student Choice 112
#3 Student Monitoring 113
#4 Student Success 113
#5 Informal Student Control 114

Summary 115

Recommendations 116

Implications 117

LIST OF REFERENCES 119

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure Page

1. COOLIDGE ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL 53

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Schools are a major institution in the lives of youth. Attainment of a high school diploma has become a symbol in our society of a right of passage into adulthood. Sizer (1985) recognized the significance of this passage:

> All societies, even the most 'modern,' need their folkways, social signposts to mark citizens' progress through life. Entering high school is one of these; leaving is an even more important one. Not getting a diploma is a catastrophe. (p. 209)

Many young people, however, do not complete high school. Former Labor Secretary Brock referred to the "insane inadequacies of public education" when 700,000 youth drop out of American schools each year (1986, p. 3). The social and economic incentives to graduate apparently are not enough to offset the decisions of the youth who drop out. This represents a social problem in that a failure to obtain a high school diploma becomes a barrier to independent, productive participation in society. As young people continue to drop out, the need to understand "why" becomes increasingly critical.

Rationale for this Study

Within education a common approach in addressing the school dropout problem is to create various forms of alternative education. Community characteristics, such as population density, standards of acceptable youth conduct, or traditional high school goals and objectives, influence the types of alternative programming offered. Young people who have been unable to conform to the traditional high school often attend the alternative school. The role of the alternative school therefore is dependent on community support for services to dropout youth and an acceptance of the school by the youth.

By better understanding the interrelationship of the traditional high school dropout with the alternative high school, a basis for effective long-term intervention strategies may be revealed. Traditional high schools, in this sense, represent the source of a serious social problem. Can effective intervention strategies used in an alternative high school prove to be of value in the traditional high school setting? Additional questions which emerge from this line of thought are: How is the term dropout defined? How many young people drop out? All three of these questions reflect a fundamental uncertainty concerning the central problem of the high school dropout.

Uncertainty is even evident among established intervention strategies. For example, defining an

alternative school is problematic. Jurgens (1985) explained:

> There is no unanimity of agreement among educators as to what actually constitutes an alternative school. The definition of the term 'alternative' is usually unique to the individual using the term. (p. 181-2)

Jurgens continued by generalizing that:

> Most alternative schools are designed to attract the dropout back into an educational setting. . . . The student found most often in an alternative school is one who has opted to sever relationships with the traditional school. (p. 182)

In this dissertation, a single alternative education high school was used as the research site. The students' perspective is used to define this "alternative" school. This approach, however, may generate unexpected results. What is it that a youth wants out of an alternative school? Answers to such a question would likely vary with the individual. An alternative school, however, serves many individuals at one time. The multiple perspectives of many young people can offer valuable insight. The educator's perspective of the role of an alternative school represents only one viewpoint. Perhaps the perspective of the alternative education student will communicate a different viewpoint to the issue.

Preliminary site research was conducted to ascertain youth perspectives at an alternative school. Two key questions emerged:

1. Why do traditional school dropouts attend an alternative school?

2. How does student control impact the effectiveness of an alternative school?

This dissertation asked these two questions using qualitative research techniques.

Background Debate

The following position is presented as a means to introduce the scope of the dropout problem. This debate is presented in greater contrast than may well be the case. Further, some terms such as 'undeserving' and 'best' are used in a subjective manner. Hopefully, this hypothetical debate will clarify pertinent issues.

Some argue that traditional schools engage in various strategies that push out undeserving youth. In a sense, dropouts are the result of an accepted practice. Limited resources within the school represents the justification to divide the student population according to worth. The school 'system' thus becomes the deciding force as to which student is worth more than another. This process, coupled with a growing public interest in quality education, translates into the 'best' students receiving first option on available resources. Does the traditional school place a high priority on meeting the needs of the 'best' students? The contention here is that many alternative programs exist within communities only because such programs do not drain resources away from the 'best' students.

The role of the alternative school thus is to take the less desirable youth so that the traditional high school may

fulfill its mission with the 'best' youth. A community would, therefore, be willing to allow alternative programming in addition to the established traditional high school. How all of this is viewed by the young person may well be expressed in different terms. The one being "pushed out" of the traditional high school is in a different world from that of the educator responding to the priorities of the community.

Chapter Summary

This dissertation focuses on understanding why traditional school dropouts are attending school. Policymakers are offered the viewpoints of students who attend an alternative high school. This information, obtained through qualitative data analysis, is scientifically sound, and as such can support informed policymaking. By increasing our understanding of youth at an alternative school, the effectiveness of the alternative high school as an intervention strategy is revealed. Mayer and Greenwood (1980) conclude:

> Evaluations based on effectiveness are particularly appropriate in school planning, where the knowledge needed to predict effects is less well developed. (p. 14)

As such, policymakers who understand why some young people need alternatives will be better able to plan for the needs of all youth.

As a result of this research, the primary means by which this alternative high school meets the needs of

dropout youth can be better understood. Further, findings which enhance this understanding can support a more informed social policy decision-making process.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

The literature available on the topic of school dropouts is extensive. This array of literature addresses a complex topic from diverse academic fields. For the purpose of this dissertation, this examination of literature includes sociological and educational research. By focusing the literature review in this manner, a comprehensive analysis of one portion of a complex topic is addressed. Five general questions were asked as a guide to analysis. Each of these questions represents a subsection of this chapter:

1. Is there agreement on the definition of dropout?
2. What are the characteristics of dropouts?
3. What is the cost to society of dropouts?
4. What are the elements of effective intervention strategies with dropouts?
5. Can locus of control research assist school-based strategies with dropouts?

All five questions relate to this dissertation. Questions one through three present a broad review which establishes an understanding of dropout youth as a social problem. Question four introduces alternative education as a vehicle for solving the problem of dropout youth. This is

essential to this study because the perceptions and beliefs of the youth were gathered through participant observation at an alternative education school. The final question examines what is presently known about those decision-making forces which influence the behavior of dropouts. Each question therefore explores essential information related to the problem of dropout youth. By moving from general questions to more focused inquiry, relevance to this dissertation was enhanced. In essence, I used the review of related literature as an analytical tool to help me see what I had found.

In addition to the focused inquiry within the five areas, a second, more specific level of investigation occurred. All five areas, as a group, represent a single path of inquiry designed to compliment this dissertation. Mailick (1977) uses Kurt Lewin's field theory to explain this process:

> In order to understand behavior, it is necessary to start with an examination of the total situation in which the individual is found and then to move toward a more detailed analysis of its components. (p. 405)

This approach of grasping the whole before analysis of the parts is based on earlier theory in which:

> the analysis of each individual component in a system did not adequately account for what happened when the components interacted with each other. (p. 405)

This literature review therefore enables us to understand five separate aspects of a single social problem. In this dissertation, a detailed analysis is represented by the

research findings presented in Chapter 5. Together, the components of the literature review and the research findings present a comprehensive analysis of a social problem.

Definition of Dropout

Informed social policymaking regarding the dropout problem suggests the need for a sound understanding of who the dropout is. An accurate definition of school dropout is therefore necessary. By looking at the total youth population through demographic characteristics, as Hodgkinson (1985) has done, a rather explicit definition can be applied. He described a dropout as "any youth that is not attending one of the community's recognized majority traditional high schools" (1985).

Inconsistent definitions of the term dropout are frequently found in the sociological and educational literature. A commonly accepted definition of who a dropout is has not been established. Hammack (1986) presented examples of difficulties in determining how many young people drop out:

> Some districts include special education students in their reports, while others do not; some include all students enrolled in any type of program offered by the district, while others include only those enrolled in regular day high schools. The specific dropout codes that are used vary, so that in some districts, a transfer to a business or trade school is not registered as a dropout, while in others it is, at least if the school does not offer a high school diploma program. Finally, as the structure of educational systems varies both within districts and between

> them, there is no consistency in the grade levels included. (p. 327)

Inconsistency in definition causes skepticism about the reliability of the data. To illustrate this, Hammack used the districts of Houston (the seventh largest district in the country) with a reported dropout rate of 5.4% and St. Louis (forty-second largest) at 15%. Compared to the combined national dropout average for urban and rural of 28%, these urban dropout rates are questionable.

Fine (1986) discovered, in the course of her ethnographic study of dropouts in New York City, the ambiguous nature of such data:

> To determine a dropout rate, the Discharged No Records Sent were combined with the Not Founds, adding a generous estimate of 50 percent of the transfers, military/business schools, and GEDs who might graduate. Using this calculation, a 65.6 percent dropout rate results for this cohort. This figure stands in striking contrast to the principal's claim that "80 percent of our graduates go onto college." But both "facts" are true and coexist as the central contradiction of the school. (p. 395)

In an effort to resolve the controversy, Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A) conceded that:

> A precise figure for the current national dropout rate is difficult to obtain because procedures differ across the country. However, it is reasonable to assume that at least one quarter of our nation's adolescents fail to graduate from high school. (p. 374)

Clearly, it is difficult to determine an exact figure because of a large number of variables influencing the definition of dropout. Wehlage and Rutter expressed the national dropout rate as an approximate percentage. By so

doing, they suggested that agreement on the number of dropouts could resolve differences in a definition. By not knowing who is defined as a dropout, the exact number of dropouts remains unclear. These shortcomings in consistency support the need for further research.

In summary, a dropout can be defined in a number of ways. The lack of a consistent definition, however, does not negate the presence of a social problem. Young people are dropping out of high school. Precise knowledge as to how many are leaving is lacking. Knowing more about these youth would aid our understanding of the issues related to this social problem.

Characteristics of Dropouts

Considerable attention has been given throughout the literature to the characteristics of the dropout population. Natriello, Pallas, and McDill (1986) referred to the works of Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A) and Fine (1986) in concluding that "more studies that simply link dropping out to student characteristics are unlikely to move us closer to solving the dropout problem" (p. 432). They, however, went on to list four reasons why continued monitoring of dropout characteristics is valuable:

1. The dropout population is changing.
2. Control of background characteristics requires an understanding of the influences.
3. Measurement of educational effectiveness requires an understanding of how dropouts are affected.

4. New school reforms may be aggravating inequities in society, thus, causing the dropout rate to increase.

Glaser and Kley (1982) demonstrated in their review of characteristics of potential dropouts the numerous paths already taken by research. They found:

> The most universal characteristic is low socioeconomic level. (p. 3)
>
> For females the greatest reason for dropping out is pregnancy. (p. 3)
>
> Minority youth are especially dropout-prone . . . Urban, inner-city dwellers are especially dropout-prone and non-English speakers usually terminate their school careers. (p. 3)
>
> Extensive and numerous absences, truancy, tardiness and skipping class or classes. (p. 3)
>
> School mobility is negatively correlated with academic stability. (p. 3)
>
> Potential dropouts are usually the children of dropouts and have siblings who have dropped out. (p. 3)
>
> Students from broken homes are twice as likely to drop out early as are students living with both parents. (p. 3)
>
> By high school, potential dropouts are usually two years behind grade level in reading. (p. 4)
>
> Mental retardation or lack of genetically determined potential is considered a very reliable measure of the probability that a pupil will not finish high school. (p. 4)
>
> Peers influence dropping out or graduating. (p. 4)
>
> Low self-concept and aspirations. (p. 4)
>
> Their basic needs are unmet. (p. 4)
>
> They exhibit language deficiencies. (p. 4)
>
> They react physically and are reacted to physically, as opposed to verbally. (p. 4)

> Another variable contributing to dropping out is suspension, expulsion, or exclusion from school. (p. 4)
>
> Schools with custodial, as opposed to humanistic, climates also influence the dropout rate. (p. 5)

This extensive list can be bewildering to someone researching the high school dropout problem. It is important to recall the first justification Natriello, Pallas, and McDill (1986) made regarding the need for further research on dropout characteristics: "The dropout population is changing," (p. 432) and the influence of change upon the dropout population is constant. As reported by Glaser and Kley (1982), some of the above characteristics are based on research that is 25 years old. Over this period of time, social and cultural influences on the dropout population has undergone significant changes.

In a more recent review of dropout characteristics, Hodgkinson (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985) supported many of the earlier findings:

> High school drop-outs have a rather typical profile. They are usually from low-income or poverty settings, often from a minority group background (although not often Asian-American), have very low basic academic skills, especially reading and math, have parents who are not high school graduates and who are generally uninterested in the child's progress in school, and do not provide a support system for academic progress. English is often not the major language spoken in the home, and many are children of single parents. Drop-outs are heavier among males than females--males tend to leave school to get a job (which usually turns out to be a failure), while females tend to drop out in order to have a child. Drop-outs are generally bored in school, they perceive themselves accurately as failures in

> school culture, and are usually very alienated from school. (p. 11)

Although many similarities exist between both examples, Hodgkinson has introduced differences such as the success of Asian Americans and the concept of a school culture. Research efforts must continue to respond to changes in characteristics if an accurate understanding of social and cultural influence is desired.

Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A) found in their literature survey that the majority of research has a very limited focus:

> Most of the research on high school dropouts has been based on the desire to find the causes, correlates, or motives underlying the actions of dropouts. Typically, it begins by looking at the characteristics of those who drop out. The questions guiding the research (as well as the thinking of most educators) are directed at finding those characteristics or qualities of dropouts that make them different from those who complete high school. Social and personal categories are scanned to find those that separate the dropout from the stay-in. Dropping out is construed as a form of social deviance, and an explanation of this deviant action is sought in the characteristics distinctive to the dropout group. (p. 375)

One such example is referenced in "California Dropouts: A Status Report":

> A literature review for the Association of California Urban School Districts (1985) listed 20 known characteristics of dropouts and grouped the characteristics as cognitive, affective, family, and demographic. (Padia, 1986, p. 3)

By viewing the characteristics of dropouts in this manner, the social problem is isolated from other social factors. Dropouts are seen as negative by-products of an essentially

good social order. Presentation of characteristics therefore can be used to communicate more than descriptive data.

Stafford and Warr (1985) concluded from their research on public perceptions of social problems that people must consider a phenomena, such as students dropping out of school, mutable before it is considered a major social problem:

> We have shown that the degree to which different phenomena are considered social problems is a function of the social condemnation, perceived frequency, and perceived mutability of those phenomena. Social condemnation and perceived frequency are both positively related to the perceived magnitude of social problems, but the effect of perceived mutability is strongly contingent on the type of problem. (p. 314)

Social deviance and mutability is based on the belief that afflicted youth should be quarantined so that the problem does not infect healthy students. In this scenario, the dropout is viewed as the problem. Ryan, in his book Blaming the Victim (1976), considered this a cultural weakness:

> We cannot comfortably believe that we are the cause of that which is problematic to us; therefore, we are almost compelled to believe that they-the problematic ones-are the cause and this immediately prompts us to search for deviance. (p. 13)

A classic example of this rationale was produced by Jackson and Getzels in a 1959 research grant from the United States Office of Education. The authors set out to look at the linkage between school failure and school dropouts by

measuring dissatisfaction with school. A major conclusion of the study was:

> Dissatisfaction with schools appears to be part of a larger picture of psychological discontent rather than a direct reflection of inefficient functioning in the classroom. (p. 299)

Ryan (1976) cautioned that research which recommends changes for the victim distorts reality:

> And the task to be accomplished is not to revise, and amend, and repair deficient children but to alter and transform the atmosphere and operations of the schools to which we commit these children. Only by changing the nature of the educational experience can we change its product. (p. 61)

The dropout problem is defined and identified by the social institution of education. A perceived behavior of deviance and mutability of dropouts is also generated from within education. This one-sided viewpoint creates an unrealistic perception. By studying the victim's perspective, a more realistic presentation of the characteristics of dropouts can be achieved. Characteristics of dropouts provide the means to see who the dropout is. Why this person dropped out is a question which the social institution of education must answer realistically. An understanding of the dropout's characteristics represents an essential research step toward that end.

Cost to Society

The scope of the school dropout problem is typically presented in the literature as a percentage of the total youth population. These numbers are then used to show the economic cost to society. Natriello, McDill, and Pallas

(1985) estimate that "approximately 25 percent of all 18 year olds have not graduated from high school" (p. 11). They go on to cite 1972 economic estimates of these dropouts' cost to society:

> $71 billion of lost tax revenue from high school dropouts aged 25-34, welfare and unemployment costs of $3 billion, and crime and crime prevention costs of $3 billion. (p. 11)

Both the percentage of youth dropping out of high school and the actual economic cost to society can be debated. Hess and Greer (1986) found in a study of dropouts from the Chicago Public Schools that "the highest dropout rate at any school was 63%" (p. ii). At the other extreme, the authors reported that "Bogan High School had the lowest dropout rate at 11%" (p. iii). Hammack (1986) summarized these extremes in his research:

> While national estimates of rates of leaving school before a diploma range from 18 to 25% of eighteen year olds, estimates from large cities are often double these rates, and, for some subgroups of urban students, rates have been reported at 60% or higher. (p. 326)

An accurate estimate of the actual cost to society is therefore questionable when the actual number of youth dropping out is unknown.

Hodgkinson (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985) avoided the use of an actual or estimated number of dropout youth when he discussed the cost to society. His approach addressed economic cost by referencing the actual expenditures of social programs:

> Such programs are not inexpensive. But compared to the cost of neglect, (it costs about $25,000 to

> have a prisoner spend a year in a state penitentiary . . .), dealing with potential high school drop-outs early may turn out to be one of the biggest bargains available. (p. 13)

This economic argument also suggests a comparison-approach to different social problems. The cost to society can be determined by comparing dropout costs to other social costs. Such methods are effective in defining the problem in comparison to other social problems. The end result, though, is a "lesser of two evils" understanding.

At the 1987 National Governors' Association summer conference, an agenda of "Keeping Kids in School" was adopted by the governors (Echlin, 1987). A key element of the agenda supported efforts to reduce the national dropout rate of 14 to 25 percent. Governor Perpich of Minnesota supported this concern by pointing out that his state had the lowest dropout rate and the second smallest prison population. His argument was that "a large number of inmates are illiterate" (p. 3). By drawing this comparison, Governor Perpich was suggesting that keeping kids in school would reduce the number of prison inmates. He stated:

> In Minnesota, it costs $23,490 to incarcerate an adult male for a year, more than the cost of one year of a Harvard education. We can invest in young people today or pay the cost later. (p. 3)

Political support of a social policy addressed at dropouts is presented here by the nation's governors. Dropping out of high school has been compared economically to costs incurred in the prison system. This represents one method of establishing the cost to society.

A report to the Michigan legislature (Runkel, 1987) used the same approach while presenting characteristics of the dropout population:

> Dropouts tend to be more likely to engage in criminal activity. The Michigan Department of Corrections has reported that nearly 70% of first-time inmates are school dropouts. (p. 3)

This report goes on to suggest:

> Dropouts also have higher costs for health services and are likely to live a life dependent on state and federal government services. (p. 3)

The cost to society is generalized in this argument as a long-term problem. Dependence on state and federal services is presented to the reader in conjunction with the social concern for criminal activity. By comparing the dropout problem to other social problems, action through informed social policymaking is established.

Placing the dropout problem on the social policymaking agenda involves serious long-term implications. The relationship of the dropout problem with other social problems suggests that the cost to society may become more serious. Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A) expressed this concern:

> The problem is not simply to keep educationally at-risk youth from dropping out, but more importantly to provide them with educationally worthwhile experiences. Those who lack basic skills, career skills, and the social presence to be successful in the work place will encounter unemployment and welfare, with the frustration and indignity this status confers on them. Previously the labor market was able to absorb most of those with a limited education, but increasingly the lack of a high school diploma is tantamount to a denial of employment. In order to be employable in other than the most menial work, those entering

> the labor market will certainly have to master the core competencies that should be acquired in high school. (p. 375)

A June 1986 report to Congress by the U.S. General Accounting Office identified the labor market consequences of dropping out:

> For high school dropouts, labor market opportunities are poor. Their unemployment rates are far higher than those of their graduate counterparts, and they are less likely even to be seeking work. Dropouts who are employed have lower earnings, are more likely to be in semi-skilled manual jobs, and report being in lower quality jobs (for example, with poorer working conditions). (p. 22)

The long-term implications of underemployment and unemployment clearly demonstrate a high cost to society. This cost is not only felt by the high school dropout but by society in general. Former Labor Secretary Brock (1986) suggested economic stability in the year 2000 is dependent on a properly trained work force. "Each year American Schools turn out 700,000 functionally illiterate graduates and an equal number of mostly illiterate dropouts" (p. 3). His concern was "a lack of basic learning skills could keep workers from adapting to new technology in the work place and lead to a shortage of skilled labor in this country by the year 2000" (Brock, 1986, p. 3). Hodgkinson (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985) went further in his assessment, "We are more aware than ever that if large numbers of youth fail in school and work, the consequences for us all are severe" (p. 11).

The cost to society of high school dropouts, therefore, involves defining a social problem as a threat to the present social order. Characteristics of high school dropouts can clarify this definition. By using comparisons to define a social problem, other social issues are introduced. The societal response to the problem then becomes a political process of deciding how to respond to multiple problems with limited resources.

Awareness of a social problem in itself does not generate social change. If the cost to society, however, is sufficiently threatening to the present social order, action through social policy may result. Lindblom (1968) suggested that such action may be unpredictable:

> A policy is sometimes the outcome of a political compromise among policy makers, none of whom had in mind quite the problem to which the agreed policy is the solution. Sometimes policies spring from new opportunities, not from "problem"s at all. And sometimes policies are not decided upon but nevertheless "happen." (p. 4)

By looking at a definition of public policy by Dye (1987), the idea that policy may be the result of compromise, opportunity, or that it may just "happen" can be better understood:

> Public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do. . . . We contend that government inaction can have just as great an impact on society as government action. (p. 3)

Failure to address the high school dropout problem then would represent a policy of inaction. Hornbeck (Vobejda, 1987), Maryland's superintendent of schools, warned:

> It used to be the case that the victim of our failure with youngsters was only the youngster. Today, because we need all the kids, we all become the victim. The demographics . . . no longer permit any throw-away or disposable children. (p. 6)

A social policy of action is therefore critical not only for the dropouts but for society in general.

A common element in the social policy literature is the awareness that policy may be established through any number of methods. The role of research, such as this dissertation, is to aid policy formation by providing the means for informed understanding. Mayer and Greenwood (1980) emphasized this role while defining the act of policymaking:

> Policy making can be defined as the social process in which multiple actors, aided with technical information, interact to formulate policy. It is the function of policy-oriented research to facilitate that process by providing relevant technical information, without which an analysis of implications would be impaired. (p. 5)

Policymaking, therefore, is strengthened through the use of research. Awareness of the cost to society of the high school dropout problem may be a catalyst for change. However, as suggested by Dye (1987), "inaction" can also be defined as a form of policy making.

Effective Intervention Strategies

Seeking solutions to the dropout problem necessitates a thorough understanding of the complexity of the problem. Research on dropout characteristics continues to inform us on changes within the population. By considering the cost

to society of high school dropouts, the need for social-policy action is apparent. Given the complexity of the dropout problem, a number of strategies have emerged. A report for policymakers titled Dropouts in America: Enough is Known for Action (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1987) cautioned against partial intervention strategies:

> When "second chance" efforts are fragmented, compartmentalized and in chaos, and when there are great delays and gaps in the delivery of the training, the programs reinforce the youngster's underlying sense of incompetence. Rather than offering a "second chance," they deliver a final blow against the youth's already fragile hopes for the future. (p. 60)

As this suggests, applying the proper intervention strategy involves a comprehensive understanding of the problem.

A report on female dropouts by Earle, Roach, and Fraser (1987) stressed the need for such understanding:

> Program designers who address the issue of female dropout need to be aware that girls may need special attention: attention to enhance their self-esteem, attention to remediation that takes into account some of the differences between boys and girls, attention by teachers to how they respond to students in the classroom, attention by administrators to create school environments that are flexible enough to meet student needs, and attention by the community so that those in health, social services, and employment closely collaborate with schools to assure students access to a variety of needed services. (p. 1)

Effective intervention strategies require competent design. Failure to address these numerous factors may cause more harm than good.

Community networking and informed program design are essential steps in serving high school dropouts. In an intervention strategy targeting dropout-prone youth,

Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) (1986) found "local educators were unlikely to work willingly with an externally imposed program unless they had themselves elected to use that program" (p. 34). Bailin, President of P/PV (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1987), referred to problems such as this when he described the need for networking:

> P/PV's experience is that the separate goals, procedures and identities of the various youth-serving institutions--in short, their "turf"--are critical barriers to achieving integration and coordination. In fact, these barriers are equal to if not greater than the problems of resources and commitment. (p. 68)

Involving schools in this networking process represents a key ingredient to successful intervention strategies.

Education, as a social institution, responds to changes within society and therefore has the potential to significantly influence the dropout problem. A national report by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (1985) demonstrated this point. It described an educational trend which has adversely impacted intervention strategies:

> In response to different social and economic conditions, policymakers have from time to time adjusted the requirements for high school graduation. (p. 3)

As a result of present trends toward stricter academic requirements, the report warned that many of those students who are having difficulty will drop out.

> Students' self-esteem and sense of fate control will ultimately deteriorate, further depressing achievement and initiating an unhealthy downward spiral. Consequently, many of these borderline

> students may drop out of school earlier and in greater numbers. (p. 13)

Changes by education, therefore, reflect a larger social agenda. In this example, repercussions from change demonstrate a detrimental effect on a portion of the students attending the traditional high school. A thorough understanding of changes, therefore, should be pursued.

The Austin Independent School District undertook a survey (Jordan-Davis, 1984) of dropout youth to ascertain "what the issues were that may have influenced their decision to withdraw" (p. 4). Ninety-five young people were personally interviewed at home. A general finding of the study was:

> No one issue, whether it be school or personal, can fully explain the reason for withdrawal. A student's social, personal, and academic life are intricately interwoven; however, a school related issue was the most common reason mentioned for withdrawal. The primary issue noted was inadequate academic preparation. (p. 6)

Although this study failed to sample a large number of the available dropouts, the findings are revealing. Not only were numerous forces influencing a dropout, but the school itself stood out as the most recurrent influence on the youth's decision to drop out.

Strategies designed to successfully serve the dropout population must not only appeal to the youth, but they must also address the role of education in society. To accomplish this, further research is needed on intervention strategies pursued by the education system. Wehlage and Rutter (1986, B) stated:

> It is now the case that we know much more about who drops out of high school and why they do so than we know about what school efforts can be effective in preventing dropout. (p. 1)

A school-based intervention strategy therefore not only addresses the needs of a dropout, but also represents the role of the educational institution in meeting those needs. Integrating the youth's perspective with that of education's may reveal how effective strategies function.

Hodgkinson (Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985) pointed out the isolated approach of many present intervention strategies:

> Given the basically local nature of such drop-out prevention programs, there exists a major need to coordinate and share information on what works and why. If each of the 14,000 school districts has to begin their drop-out prevention program from scratch, much inventing of the wheels will be done. (p. 12)

School-based efforts at addressing the dropout problem can improve through further research. A U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report to Congress (1986) summarized this need:

> Based on our review of literature summaries, it is not generally known "what works" to prevent youth from dropping out of school or to encourage their return. The identification of programs "that work" would be very useful to school districts. (p. 2)

In a separate federal report, the U.S. Department of Education (1986) cited four major findings in search of a key to effective dropout prevention programs:

1. Early identification of potential dropouts, so that services can be provided to at-risk students prior to high school.

2. Greater efforts to bring young people back into the educational system after they have dropped out.

3. More flexible high school programs, that allow youth to stay in school while meeting family or job responsibilities.

4. It is important to know who receives alternative high school credentials, and what the consequences of obtaining these various credentials might be. (p. 2)

Specific intervention strategies are not presented in this report. Rather, general areas of concern were highlighted. As the GAO (1986) report suggested, a need is present to specifically know what works and to share such knowledge with schools. Establishing a criteria for knowing what works is the first step in this process.

In an apparent effort to address this very concern, the National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (1986), with the support of the National Education Association developed Operation Graduation. This collaborative program for dropout prevention has been designed to involve listening, then acting, at the local level. The foundation's document A Blueprint For Success reported that no one, successful model fits in every community:

> Such local tailoring is essential for the educational system to provide quality education in harmony with the needs of the community. Then and only then will all students have the opportunity to realize their potential. (p. 4)

Sizer (1985), in his book Horace's Compromise, used a different approach to understanding the high school dropout problem. In determining "what works," the viewpoint of those most directly involved in the intervention strategy

was sought. Using participant observation research techniques, Sizer found that:

> Most adolescents attend school for a collection of reasons, not very well defined in their minds. Most powerful is tradition: one goes to high school because that is what one does from the age of fourteen to seventeen. Furthermore, the alternatives to school are not attractive. In some communities, one not in school is disparagingly called a "dropout" and is ridiculed. (In others, where truancy is widely accepted, the reverse may be true: cutting school may be cool, a rite of passage in its own way.) For many, school is the social center, where one meets one's friends. The price of the party is going to class. (p. 59)

Sizer's holistic research approach enables us to get a richer understanding of the forces affecting the dropout problem. For some youth, the "price of the party" is too high. Based on this participant observation approach, Sizer concluded that high schools throughout our society must be restructured:

> Better schools will come when better structures are built. Those structures have no inherent merit, however: their sole function will be to provide apt and nurturing conditions that will attract students and teachers and make their work together worthwhile and efficient. (p. 217)

Effective high school dropout intervention strategies ultimately serve the needs of society. Determining what those needs are however requires a thorough understanding of the problem from a number of perspectives. By combining strategies which address the needs of both the dropout and the school, greater opportunity for success is obtained. An understanding of this process is essential to overcome

inherent resistance to effective intervention strategies. Sizer (1985) described this barrier to change as follows:

> Trying to change one piece affects every other, causing all sorts of political flak. Accordingly, things remain the same because it is very difficult to change very much without changing most of everything. The result is sustained paralysis. (p. 211)

Combining the needs of the dropout with the resources of the schools complements efforts at overcoming "sustained paralysis."

The social factors which are entangled in the high school dropout problem are complex. Effective intervention strategies overcome resistance to change through an understanding of this complexity and properly implementing a social change process. Alteration of one characteristic of the dropout problem impacts others. Sherraden (1986) revealed this complexity of characteristics while describing the fluid process of dropping out of school:

> Dropping out is frequently only one step in a downward spiral that might include unemployment, crime, extreme apathy, abuse of drugs or alcohol, and teenage pregnancy. At some point in this downward spiral, young people become too far removed from the educational system to get back to it. (p. 28)

Local educational intervention strategies must understand the complexity of the dropout problem to be effective. Young people caught in a "downward spiral" may be able to help concerned educators toward such an understanding.

Locus of Control

As educators seek an understanding of the forces impacting the dropout, inquiry turns to the actions of the youth. Research has typically focused on the dropouts themselves rather than on the educational system. By considering a youth's self-control, more may be revealed about both the dropout and the school.

The concept of self-control encompasses a number of influences which potentially impact the youth's decision to drop out of school. This concept of self-control is defined by Rotter (Lefcourt, 1982) as "locus of control":

> The generalized expectancy of internal control, refers to the perception of events, whether positive or negative, as being a consequence of one's own actions and thereby potentially under personal control. The generalized expectancy of external control, on the other hand, refers to the perception of positive or negative events as being unrelated to one's own behavior and therefore beyond personal control. (p. 35)

The relevance of this concept to the high school dropout is demonstrated in a range of student perceptions. Based on a literature review in the area of locus of control, Riter (1984) described this sense of control perceived by students:

> It is important to realize that if a person recognizes little relationship between his/her actions and their outcomes, then a feeling of helplessness may occur. From this feeling of helplessness, it often follows that passive acceptance of failure, or aversive stimuli occurs. On the other hand, a student who perceives control over him/herself and the world around him/her will likely strive more adamantly for 'valued reinforcements' whether they be money or grades. (p. 16)

The behavior of students may be affected by their perception of control over the events in the school. In a sense, control within the school may offer the incentive for some youth to stay in school rather than drop out.

As a result of his review of current research literature, Riter (1984) suggested a need for further study:

> The locus of control concept has been the subject of a great deal of research and that research has centered around the construct's relationship to student achievement. If this relationship between locus of control orientation and achievement can be, along with numerous other variables, established, then we may be a little closer to understanding how to motivate students to learn with greater effectiveness and efficiency. (p. 30-31)

Riter went on to argue:

> More research must be attempted if we are to clearly establish the relationship between locus of control orientation and achievement. If further research can clarify this relationship and if students' locus of control orientations can be both measured and manipulated in intellectual-academic situations, then the possibility of affecting student achievement may increase. The locus of control construct could become a powerful tool for school personnel. (p. 32)

The focus of Riter's research involved a locus of control comparison of two groups of high school youth. College-bound and alternative school student differences in locus of control orientation were measured using a standardized questionnaire. As a result of this research, Riter found:

> The results of this study tend to support other studies which found that students who are low achievers and drop out of school tend to be more external than higher achievers who remain in school. (p. 71)

Riter concluded that by establishing a relationship between an external locus of control and dropping out of school, effective steps can be taken:

> Negatively affected students could be placed in programs which would help correct external locus of control orientation. The results could be fewer dropouts and higher achievement for at least some problem students. (p. 73)

In this case, an education-based intervention strategy would specifically address the measurable characteristic of locus of control orientation. By shifting student locus of control from external toward an internal measurement, success in school can also be realized.

Garner and Cole (1986) presented the variable of achievement into this perspective of self-esteem and locus of control. Lower socio-economic status (SES) youth share the characteristic of having a greater risk of dropping out of school. Their research sought to understand why some youth in a low SES setting achieve when others do not. They found that:

> Those in a lower-SES setting with stronger beliefs in external forces could possibly establish a self-concept and/or social behavior that contradict effort toward school achievement more than children in the middle and upper classes. (p. 202)

This is significant in that success in school for lower SES youth appears hindered by an external locus of control. The barrier to success in school is a social restraint which Garner and Cole (1986) took exception to:

> A student cannot learn what he or she cannot see, and a child cannot have the will to learn if he or

> she perceives school success and failure to be beyond his or her control. (p. 203)

Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A) identified dropout youth self-esteem and locus of control as dependent variables of schooling:

> To see these two factors as outcomes of schooling is not to deny that other influences from the home and community have an important effect on them. Parenting, for example, has a great impact on an adolescent's sense of self but sorting out such influences is extremely difficult. We can, however, look at students both before and after they have dropped out of school and compare them with their peers who continue to graduation and beyond, allowing us an indication of the relative contribution school can make in developing self-esteem and establishing locus of control. (p. 386)

A school-based intervention strategy which addresses the locus of control of traditional school dropouts is recommended. Such an approach is feasible, and may provide a comparative understanding between high school dropouts and graduates. Low self-esteem and an external locus of control represent a path of dropping out. Shifting youth to an internal locus of control then would represent a key element of an effective intervention strategy.

The need for control, from a youth's perspective, is presented here as an internal locus of control. Dropping out of traditional high school may represent a youth's effort to avoid further damage to their self-esteem. When a school fails to provide academic success, youth may be able to maintain an internal locus of control by dropping out. Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A) demonstrated this possibility:

> Dropping out may be good in the sense that it gives these youth an opportunity to gain a sense

> of control through participation in adult activities. Unless one is very good at doing those academic tasks rewarded by schools, one is not likely to gain a greater sense of internal control through schooling. If this is the case, then schools can be seen as reinforcing the existing dispositions of students rather than helping those most in need of an increased sense of control over plans, decisions, and circumstances. (p. 388)

The issue of locus of control provides an interesting means of looking at the behavior of a high school dropout. Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A) have shown here that in some cases the best action a youth may take is dropping out of school. By behaving this way, dropouts are demonstrating an internal decision-making process which may well be healthier than staying in a destructive environment.

Self-esteem, achievement, and locus of control are factors which Pallas (1984) included in the following analysis:

> There are three major perspectives on why youth drop out. The first, the Academic Performance perspective, asserts that most youth drop out of high school due to their poor academic performance. The second, the Social Disability perspective, claims that youth typically leave high school because of their poor social and personal adjustments, manifested in such traits as alienation, delinquency and rebelliousness. The third, the Accelerated Role Transition perspective, argues that youth leave high school before completion as a consequence of taking on adult roles while still in high school. (p. 29)

Actions taken by the individual student may develop into a course of behavior resulting in dropping out of traditional school. This analysis of the Accelerated Role Transition demonstrates an internal locus of control. The significance

of this perspective is reinforced when viewed also with the conclusions of Wehlage and Rutter (1986, A):

> Furthermore, our analysis sees student and school interacting to produce dropouts. Unlike many researchers, we see the school as having an opportunity for initiative and a responsibility to respond constructively to those students whose continued education is at risk. (p. 388)

Corrections to an external locus of control orientation require the support of the school. Without such support, the dropout problem is only being partially addressed.

By examining the locus of control orientation of traditional school dropouts, much can be learned. Both the self-esteem and academic success of at-risk students can be related to locus of control. A positively developed self-esteem is shown to support an internal locus of control. Success through academic achievement also enhances this internal orientation. By correcting an external locus of control orientation, a more comprehensive intervention strategy is established. An end result of fewer problem students dropping out may be achieved by schools helping young people realize control.

Chapter Summary

Each of the five questions at the beginning of the chapter have been addressed. Further understanding of the dropout, though, is needed to support informed social policy decision making. Qualitative research provides the means for this dissertation to grasp part of a complex social problem and generate essential knowledge. Awareness of the

traditional high school dropout problem is provided through the examination of the definition of a dropout, characteristics of dropouts, and their cost to society. By identifying the essential elements of effective intervention strategies, the need for further research in understanding the dropout problem can be revealed. Qualitative research offers the means for this study to move closer towards a richer understanding.

The final question explores the implications of the locus of control of high school dropouts. Locus of control research shows that dropouts tend to have an external orientation. A qualitative study which investigates traditional high school dropout control in a school-based intervention strategy can enhance our understanding of "what works." This understanding involves consideration of which orientation of control the dropout assumes. Accordingly, the number of research variables are fewer in number. A specific part of this complex social problem thus can be studied to assist in generating new knowledge.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Theory of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research techniques were used for this dissertation. The strengths of qualitative research are identified by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) by examining a classification of five common elements:

> 1. Qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument.
> 2. Qualitative research is descriptive.
> 3. Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simply with outcomes or products.
> 4. Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively.
> 5. 'Meaning' is of essential concern to the qualitative approach. (pp. 27-29)

The term qualitative is used throughout this study as the most appropriate description of research techniques which were applied. Other related terms, such as participant observation, field research, and ethnography, share many of these five common elements. In fact, a review of literature shows that a number of terms may be applied in describing similar research. For the purposes of this study, however, the definition of qualitative research presented by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) is used.

Erickson, Florio, and Buschman (1979) suggested that through qualitative research answers are found to questions which address:

> -the invisibility of everyday life
>
> -specific understanding in terms of concrete detail
>
> -the local meanings for the people involved
>
> -comparative understanding of different social settings
>
> -comparative understanding beyond the immediate circumstances of the local setting (pp. 2-5)

High school dropouts represent a research population within our society. Understanding this population requires making sense of a social problem. By refining the "sense-making process," a qualitative researcher is able to present explanations of events which will enhance our understanding. Erickson et al. demonstrated how this process complements education:

> It is not difficult to see how such skills of observation, inference, and evidence-gathering can enhance a teacher's ability to assess student needs, to interpret the behavior of students from diverse backgrounds in fair and meaningful ways. (p. 7)

This same argument can be made in relation to the high school dropout problem. Efforts within education are needed to enhance our ability to assess the needs of the traditional high school dropout.

An example of a qualitative dissertation was completed by Giles (1984), who investigated the lives of eight Native American students. An understanding as to why Native

Americans remain in or drop out of school was presented. Based on the findings, Giles concluded:

> The more assimilated an Indian student is into the American middle class value orientations, the more likely s/he is to complete high school. Conversely, it is evident that the more assimilated an Indian student is into the Native American value orientation, the more likely s/he is to drop out of high school. (p. 158)

From this study Giles was able to better understand acculturation. Her qualitative analysis provided meaningful insight which contributed to a broader understanding of Native American students.

Development of Research Path

The primary goal of this dissertation is to identify significant educational issues from the traditional high school dropout's point of view. Students attending an alternative high school represent one research population. Choosing to use these students' perspectives eliminated a number of other possibilities, such as capturing the viewpoints of the teachers, an administrator, the traditional high school students, or members of the community. Employing qualitative research techniques in this natural setting supported the primary goal by providing a means to further understand the multidimensional social issue of dropping out of the traditional high school.

An open-ended research approach was initiated through a pilot study at an alternative high school. This approach provided essential information in initiating an overall research design. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) pointed

out, qualitative research, by definition, "cannot be programmed, that it's practice is replete with the unexpected" (p. 28). This characteristic of qualitative research represents a distinction from that of quantitative research. The pilot study provided me the means to formulate assertions regarding the research topic. This represents an inductive approach to the paths of research inquiry. Quantitative research, on the other hand, would involve deductive steps using an hypothesis. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) further demonstrate this distinction while describing common strategies employed by the qualitative researcher:

> Investigators may enter the research with some idea about what they will do, but a detailed set of procedures is not formed prior to data collection. In addition, qualitative researchers avoid going into a study with hypotheses to test or specific questions to answer. (p. 55)

In this study, the research design procedures modeled these strategies through the use of the pilot study. The open-ended design of the pilot further reinforced this approach. As a result, the findings presented in Chapter 5 evolved during data analysis.

The pilot study represents the first stage of a three-stage research design. It asked:

> Why do traditional school dropouts attend an alternative high school?

I wanted to find out from the students' perspective what needs were met at the alternative high school that were not met at the traditional high school. What I eventually found

was that the students at the research site have established a significant level of control within the school.

Based on this finding from Stage One, further research was undertaken to analyze and explain the assertion. Stage Two permitted a retesting of findings from the pilot study. In addition, the paths of inquiry became more distinct. Goetz and LeCompte (1984) explained the need for such focusing as a proven data-collection strategy:

> Neither recording everything nor 'getting it all down' are attainable goals for participant observers. The interactive stream is too complex and too subtle to be captured completely, even by a team of observers. Most ethnographers accept the more achievable goal of recording phenomena salient to major aspects of the topic they have defined. (p. 111-112)

In this dissertation, Stage One research provided the basis to form initial assertions. Data recorded during this time influenced how I perceived students in this alternative school setting. From this process, a more specific research path began to form. In Stage Two I pursued this development by asking:

> How does student control impact the effectiveness of an alternative school?

Only through the careful analysis of data collected during Stages One and Two was I able to refine the concept of student control. The inductive aspects of this research are therefore demonstrated through the ongoing focusing and analysis of assertions.

It is interesting now to look back at the original focus and review the progression of changing questions which

eventually formed this study. Initially, I sought to understand the traditional high school-related conflicts which precipitated enrollment at the alternative school. Questions and observations centered on the student's relationship to the alternative school teacher. This approach was taken primarily due to my training as a teacher and reflected how I viewed these youth.

In order to explain the development of the research path, I will use examples from this study. These student references are only intended to illustrate my formulation of questions. Analysis of this data will be more completely developed in Chapter 5 findings.

When I asked Carol, a student at the alternative school, what she liked about this school, she immediately referred to the teachers:

> The teachers help you more and stuff. They explain the work to you more than over there at the high school. Like over there, they just tell you what to do and that's it.

This type of student response led me into asking questions such as:

> Did the teachers at the traditional high school pick on you?
>
> How do you feel about the teachers at the alternative school?

Debby viewed her interaction with the teachers as something she could control:

> It's our choice if we want to stay in or out. I mean, the teachers don't really say nothing to us about it until we get to that board. And then everybody gets down your neck.

Debby's feelings about her teachers changed when she recalled going before the school's advisory board. At the research site, an alternative high school advisory board, composed of community service organization representatives and school administrators and counselors, provided direction on alternative school policy. As a result of student comments of this type, I followed the discussion with questions like:

> Do you answer questions from the advisory board the way you really feel?

By so doing, I was allowing the students to determine the flow of data. As a result, the presentation of evidence was maintained within the natural setting.

By forming my questions in response to student data, I minimized the opportunity of being manipulated by the students. Responses to this type of questioning may, in a sense, be rehearsed. The students had been so emotionally close to these concerns that a defensive answer could be quickly provided for me. Answers to questions about the advisory board, however, also contained a deeper current of emotion. In these responses, the youth were also communicating their hostility toward the advisory board members. Student issues before the advisory board frequently focused on attendance and academic competence. Students strongly differed from the teachers on both of these issues. As a result, I refined my research focus to: control, negotiation, and compromise patterns. Observations indicated that neither the students or the teachers were

formally acknowledging these processes, yet behavior in the alternative school suggested otherwise. Due to this evidence, the research path became increasingly focused on student perceptions of control.

Researcher Biases and Insights

By looking at the school dropout problem from the perspective of the victim, a particularly critical analysis of the traditional high school is possible. I feel that the dynamics which occur in an alternative education school are the testing grounds for the traditional high school of the future. Traditional schooling perpetuates consistency, whereas alternative education serves those youth who are incompatible with conventional practice. Public education, I suspect, is blind to the phenomenon of dropout youth offering the acid test of deciding if a society's needs are being met. I further believe that not only is public education blind to this phenomenon, but that the blindness is intentional. As a researcher, I am intrigued by what such a path may lead to. However, as an educator, I find that I am partly at fault. Public education must respond to the changing needs of society. My formal training as an educator has primarily focused on maintenance of the traditional school structure. As a result, I have tended to discredit recommendations made by dropouts.

Today, my understanding of the role I play as an educational administrator may be broader, yet I continue to support traditional education. Through alternative

education and other innovative demonstration pilots, change can be introduced. My support of such methods, however, represents a dichotomy. I must become more sensitive to what the traditional high school dropout is communicating. I can conclude that being a product of the educational system influences my perspective.

Initiating social change can appear to the educational administrator as an overwhelming task. To the researcher, however, the task is more manageable. Through the pursuit of knowledge, a path can be revealed which will lead to social change. Informed social policy decision-making represents the application of knowledge. Social change within the institution of education then becomes the integration of the researcher role with that of the educational administrator. With the support and direction of the policy makers, social change can take place.

In this dissertation, the control, negotiation, and compromise processes represent building blocks to an assertion that student control does exist in a meaningful way at an alternative school. As a researcher, I offer this knowledge to support informed social policy decision-making. I avoided building assertions on my stronger beliefs regarding public education. That is my educational administrator bias, and therefore, can be openly disclosed both here and in my conclusions in Chapter 6. The validity and reliability of this research is strengthened by the separation of my bias from my findings.

My studies in the field of social work helped me realize that the forces which influence a youth to drop out of school were complex and interrelated. Quantitative research which focused on cause and effect relationships of a social problem seemed inappropriate. I quickly realized that qualitative research allowed me the freedom of not having to force a preconceived cause into a structured hypothesis. By focusing on the "meaning" of attending school, the students were able to help me better understand the complexity of the issues.

Nowhere in my pre-fieldwork preparation had I come across an analysis presented from the dropout's point of view. The most similar to this was a study conducted by the Austin Texas Independent School District during the summer of 1982 (Jordan-Davis, 1984). In that study, interviewers went to the homes of dropout youth and conducted formal interviews using a dropout interview questionnaire. The results of the study categorized youths' responses into what appeared to be predetermined classifications. This study intrigued me because of the effort taken to interview dropouts in their homes. However, I felt that this study did not clearly represent the viewpoints of the youth due to the use of a structured questionnaire. The responses of the youth showed that "no one issue could fully explain school withdrawal. Social, personal, and academic issues were interwoven" (p. 1). Aside from this general finding, a number of additional results were reported. These results,

however, were limited by the interview questionnaire. As the report suggests, "the study did not produce a composite picture of the 'typical dropout'" (p. 15). Realistically capturing the dropout's perspective remained my goal. My research design therefore needed to avoid an approach such as this one.

By using an alternative education school as my research site, I had direct access to a different perspective. Maximizing this opportunity, though, meant that, in a sense, I become a research instrument. Documenting the perspective of someone else while maintaining an acceptable standard of scientific rigor was demanding. My personal perspective had to be kept separate from the students' perspectives. By identifying my biases and insights, I was able to maintain this distinction between perspectives.

A qualitative research approach to the problem of youth dropping out of public education has proven to be very rewarding for me. Without this research approach, I doubt that I would have obtained as deep an understanding of dropouts. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) explained:

> By including our own role within the research focus and systematically exploiting our participation in the world under study as researchers, we can develop and test theory without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism, of either positivist or naturalist varieties. (p. 25)

In this study, initially looking for questions became more demanding than the more common approach of looking for answers. My assertions were dependent on the data from the

students. Patterns emerged from research which tied significant events together. Significance was defined by the students' perspectives at a very specific point in their lives. The reward to me became the realization that through qualitative research I shared in these events.

Chapter 4

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Field Site Selection

Having chosen a research topic which required access to an alternative high school, selection of an appropriate research site was necessary. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) suggested:

> Contacts with personnel promising easy access, the scale of travel costs likely to be involved, and the availability of documentary information, etc. are often major considerations in narrowing down selection. (p. 41)

All three of these points affected my decision along with the advice of Bogdan and Biklen (1982) "to pick places where you are more or less a stranger" (p. 57).

The nature of my employment as an educational administrator forced the elimination of sites which I was directly involved with or lived near. Establishing a separation therefore involved consideration of both geographic distance and administrative responsibilities. However, this separation was not intended to create total isolation. I wanted to remain within a one-hour driving range for convenience and to be able to apply my research to my employment. My employment responsibilities extended over a large geographic area, thus permitting the one-hour driving range. Using this criteria, I was able to gain

access to an appropriate research site which allowed me to remain, for the most part, a stranger.

Community Characteristics

For the purposes of research confidentiality, the site name is a pseudonym. Coolidge Alternative High School is located in a rural midwestern city approximately one hundred miles north of a major metropolitan area. The city is the county seat and represents both political and commercial interests for the surrounding rural area. Population figures represent 1986 estimates based on 1980 data from the United States Bureau of the Census. The population of the city is approximately 10,200 people, with a total county population of 25,000. Racial make-up of the population is 99% caucasian. Within the city, there are 31 protestant churches and one Catholic church.

Although the area has two large inland lakes and a moderately developed tourist appeal, the economic focus of the community is on light, non-union manufacturing. The major industrial employers in the area are parts and accessories manufacturing for the auto industry, small appliance assembly, and boat-cruiser manufacturing. Agriculture activity is primarily small farm operations and Christmas tree production. Unemployment annually runs around 15% for the total reported labor force and approximately 30% for the youth population.

School District Characteristics

The city public school system serves approximately 3,500 students. Coolidge enrolls an average of 40 alternative students, age 16 to 18 years. Faculty for the traditional K-12 school numbers approximately 155, with a reported teacher-student ratio of 25:1. Coolidge Alternative High School has three teachers, with an average ratio of 13:1. Because Coolidge serves several local school districts, the three teachers are employed by the intermediate school district (ISD). An ISD assists local districts through a consortium which encompasses a geographic area of at least one county or larger. The three teachers are certified in secondary education. As a group, they can be generalized as young professionals with high energy and commitment.

The dropout rate as reported by the school system is approximately 28%. Census data (1980) shows that of the total county population 25 years old and over, 37% (8,800 people) have not graduated from high school. The need for both alternative and adult education services appears warranted based upon the pool of eligible students. Under the auspices of the local school board, the adult education program administers the alternative education school.

Description of School Research Site

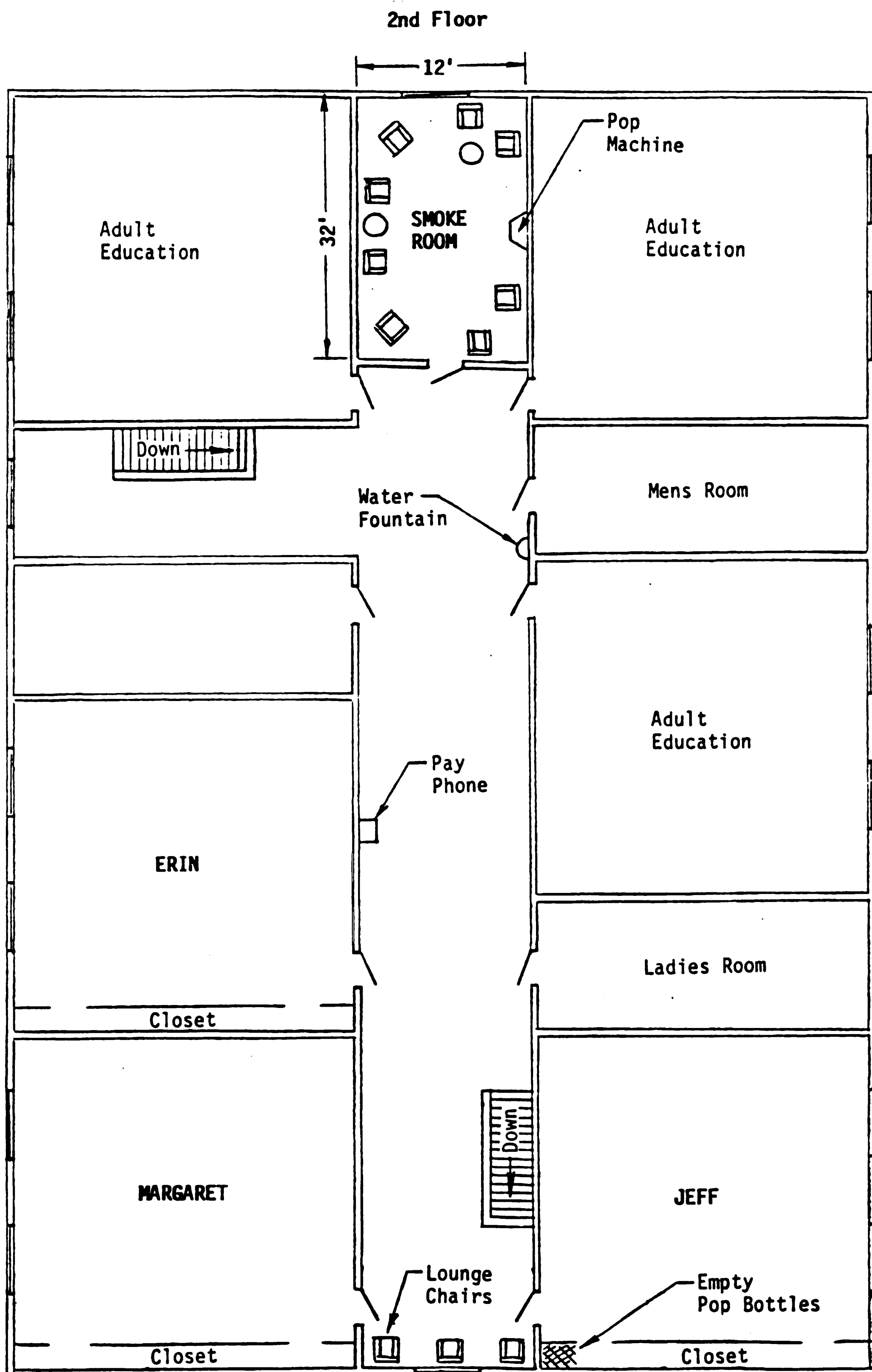
The alternative high school is in a two-story, brick structure built in 1923 as an elementary school. Presently, the building houses adult and community education services.

Alternative education classes are on the second floor of the building, separate from other building activities. The three classrooms are at one end of a wide wooden hallway. Three lounge chairs are at this end of the hallway near two of the classroom doors (see Figure 1).

At the opposite end of the hallway, a smoking room has been added for the students. This was accomplished by building a 12-foot dividing wall across the end of the hallway. The resulting enclosure is 32-feet deep and holds several lounge chairs, freestanding ashtrays, and a coin-operated pop machine. Ventilation of the smoke room is provided by a large window-mounted exhaust fan. For the most part, site observations were conducted by the hallway lounge chairs and in Jeff's classroom. Figure 1 is a map showing the design of Coolidge Alternative High School's second floor to aid the reader for visual reference.

Figure 1
COOLIDGE ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOL

2nd Floor



Description of Student Population

Students at Coolidge reflect the population characteristics of the community. No racial minority students were observed or referenced as attending the alternative school. Male and female participation was evenly mixed. The age of the students was generally 16- through 18-years-old. Under unusual circumstances, a 15-or 19-year-old student would be accepted into the school. Student enrollment during this study typically averaged 39 at the beginning of the semester and dropped to 30 at the end of the semester. This represents an average dropout rate of 23 percent. At the beginning of this study, the teachers reported to me that the preceding semester had an unusually high enrollment and dropout rate. Of the 44 students that started the semester, only 28 completed, resulting in a dropout rate of 36 percent. This research study does not follow-up on those youth who have dropped out of Coolidge. The focus of this study is participant-observation of traditional high school dropouts at an alternative school, not alternative school dropouts.

A selection process is used to determine which youth may attend Coolidge. Interest in attending has grown over the three years of operation to the point where a waiting list of candidates now exists. A review committee made up of the advisory board, program administrator, and the teachers determine which candidates will be accepted. Applications are accepted from youth who reside in any of

the local school districts throughout the county and one other school district in a neighboring rural county. Criteria used in the selection process includes a review of the youth's school file, recommendations by school officials, community agency support, mandatory parental participation, and the youth's commitment. Once accepted, each new student is assigned to one of the three teachers for academic counseling. This assignment remains in place as long as the student attends Coolidge.

The typical student at Coolidge is a 16-or 17-year-old, caucasian dropout from the traditional high school. In this rural setting, transportation is a problem for the student. Public transportation service is considered by the students to be slow and unreliable. Long school bus rides involve transfers between bordering school districts, and owning an automobile is beyond the reach of many of the students. Coolidge students can be further generalized as "kids" with multiple personal problems. The following examples offer insight into these problems.

Debby is 16 years old, caucasian, and usually spends one hour in the morning on public transportation getting to Coolidge. From her perspective, Debby does not feel she has personal problems. "See, I don't have problems at home at all, hardly at all." As I came to know Debby better, I learned that her parents are divorced, her boyfriend is in jail, and her older sister dropped out of Coolidge last year. Other students attribute her disruptive classroom

behavior to all the drugs she takes. I also learned, one year later, that Debby is now pregnant and staying at home. Her old classmates are disappointed that she is not trying to graduate from high school.

Dennis is well-behaved in class and is getting good grades. He plans to graduate next year. The high school diploma is important to Dennis because "I don't plan on flipping burgers at McDonald's for a job." Dennis mentions that his brother is serving one year in jail for car theft. "We rolled that car and we were doing a hundred-and-twenty miles an hour. My brother went to court, and the car was totalled." Dennis has only served one week in jail. "Nothin' real big, ya know." The following school year, Dennis never returned. His goal of earning a high school diploma is currently postponed. His girlfriend was pregnant so they were married. Dennis now works full-time at a local restaurant. Recently, his apartment burned down. Dennis and his family were unharmed, but they lost all of their belongings. Students at Coolidge sponsored a drive for donations.

Josh started attending Coolidge as a court referral. He was being pressured by his father to do better in school. So Josh tried to get into his student file. Josh was arrested for breaking and entering at his traditional high school. Two weeks later, Josh was arrested for shoplifting. Due to poor attendance, Josh failed to complete his first semester at Coolidge. The following school year, Josh's

probation officer warned Josh to improve his attendance record. Missing nine out of the last 18 days was unacceptable to the officer. "The 15-day attendance policy is the school's, but I can impose more structure." A few weeks later, Josh was absent from school. The next day a patrol car was in front of Coolidge. Josh was taken to jail.

Description of School Day

The school year is divided into two semesters which are 18 weeks long respectively. Classes are scheduled Monday through Friday. A typical school day is composed of five class periods each 50 minutes in length. Each of the three teachers instructs five classes.

First hour begins at 8:30 a.m. Ten-minute breaks between classes and a 40 minute lunch period results in a school day which ends at 1:50 p.m. Course offerings are designed so that students receive credit in all the necessary subjects required for a high school diploma. The following list represents an assortment of classes which are offered:

English I, II, III
Speech
Life Science
General Math I, II
Algebra I, II
General Business
Consumer Education
Law and You I, II
Government
Civics
American History
State History
Social Studies
Personal Guidance

Students are required to attend classes and participate in the lessons. Homework is frequently assigned in each of the five classes with subsequent tests and quizzes. In

general, the students are academically engaged throughout the school day.

Collection of Data

During Stage One of this study, 12 weeks of research was conducted during January, February and March 1986. Stage Two research was conducted at the same site in January and February 1987. Both first-and second-stage data were analyzed for the formulation of dissertation findings. An additional five-day period in May, 1987 was used as Stage Three to test findings which had been developed during Stages One and Two.

Stage One research-contact time averaged one day per week for a five-hour period. This represented nearly 60 hours of observations. Rough notes were taken on-site, rewritten immediately afterward in narrative form to ensure accuracy, then typed. Approximately 90-typed pages of observations were recorded. Transcriptions of tape-recorded interviews with seven students generated an additional 103-typed pages. Site documents were represented by 23 pages of forms, memos, and sample tests. Photographic documentation of the physical setting was established with 55 slides. Using these sources of information, a preliminary analysis of data was conducted.

Of particular value in this collection of data were the student interviews. Each interview could best be described as an unstructured series of open-ended questions. Bogdan

and Biklen (1982) explained the advantages of an unstructured interview composed of open-ended questions:

> The open-ended nature of the approach allows the subjects to answer from their own frame of reference rather than from one structured by prearranged questions. (p. 2)

As a result, the subjects are more inclined "to freely express their thoughts around particular topics" (p. 2). Responses were recorded using a portable audio tape machine and later transcribed. The majority of the interviews were conducted one-on-one in the hallway lounge chairs. On occasion, the interview would be moved to the smoke room or an empty classroom for privacy. Interviews with two or three students were attempted; however, this practice was minimal due to the difficulty in recording responses. At no time were teachers or other school officials present during an interview. In addition, confidentiality of discussions was strictly adhered to. This free expression of thoughts by the students provided me with a rich description from their perspective.

During Stage One pilot research, a number of assertions were developed. Using the admonition from field research lectures that the researcher should "change as much as you can," the various assertions underwent continual revision. As a means to support the change process, I varied my methods of data collection. Observations were conducted in the hallway, men's room, parking lot, gymnasium, school office, and all three of the classrooms. Conversations with the teachers, secretaries, program administrator, and

community agency staff also provided different perspectives. The use of a videotape recorder was suggested by me, however, the teacher and four of the students rejected the idea. From these numerous sources, the research techniques which were employed during Stages Two and Three evolved.

Stage Two research followed-up on Stage One pilot findings. During January and February 1987, an additional 20 hours of site observations were conducted. Approximately 36 typed pages of field observations were recorded. Typical classroom observations from this point on took place in Jeff's classroom. Interviews with seven additional students generated 70 typed pages. Participant observation field notes and transcribed, unstructured interviews provided the means to refine preliminary findings.

Self-analysis of researcher bias also improved by returning to the research site. With the researcher as the sole research instrument in gathering data at the site, constant self-monitoring was necessary. By returning to the same site throughout three stages of research, I was able to compare my role as a participant observer. As a result, assertions underwent constant revision to accurately reflect the evidence. Findings and conclusions drawn from this research were, therefore, significantly strengthened and refined.

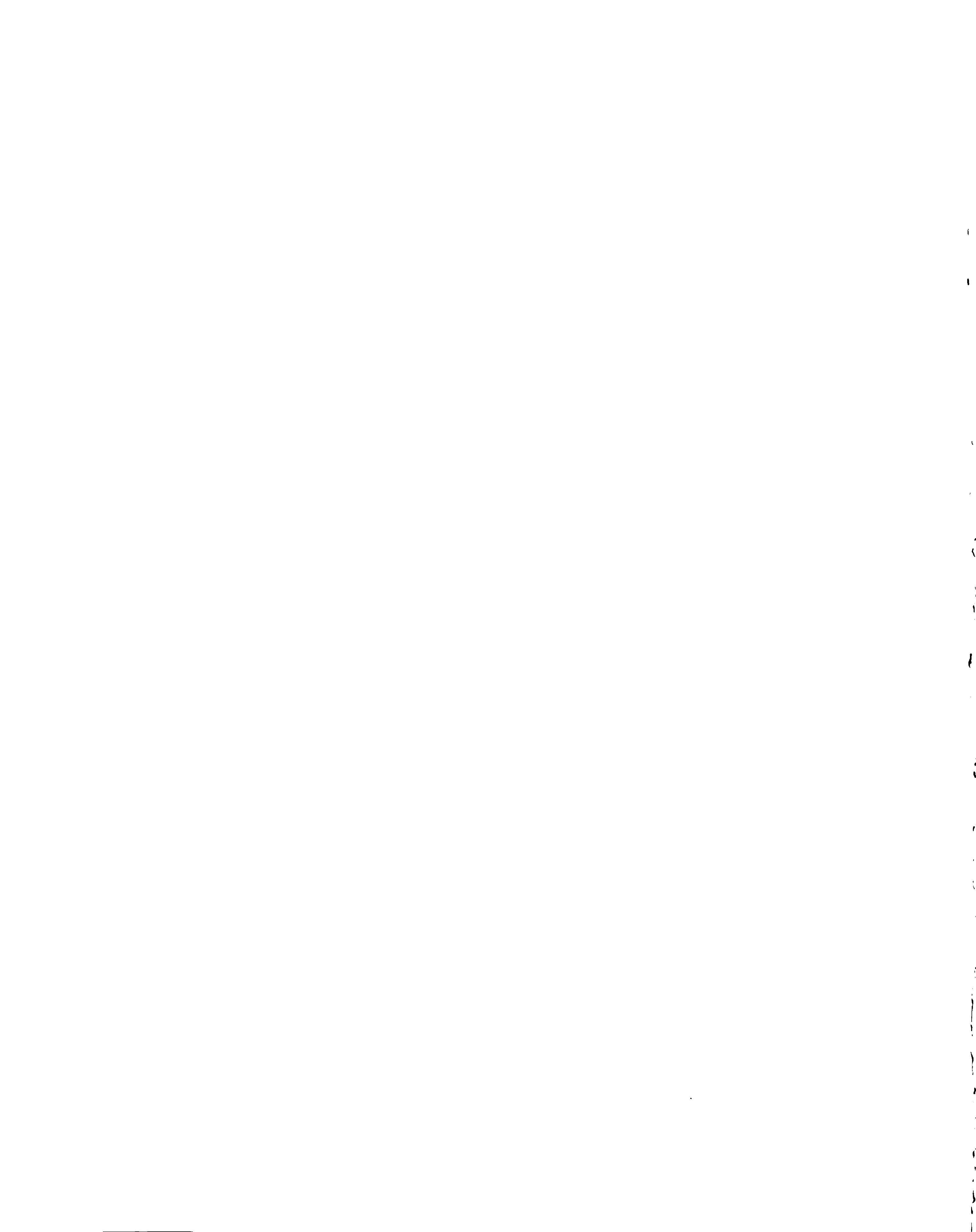
Two additional sources of data complemented the research. Seven additional student interviews collected during Stage One activity were transcribed into 56 typed

pages and used as part of Stage Two analysis. And, as mentioned earlier, an intensive five-day observation was conducted to assess the reliability of Stage One and Two findings. This one-week period of Stage Three research conducted during May 1987 provided an additional 25 hours of field observations which generated 57 typed pages of field observations. During this stage, data collection was further changed by shifting myself on the participant observer continuum. A qualitative researcher may freely assume the more active role of a participant or the passive role of an observer. I became more active as a participant student by taking four examinations and sitting in a different student seat each class hour. As a bonus, I also received two copies of a new student newspaper and a 1987 Coolidge Yearbook.

One of the problems with this type of research is determining when to stop data collection. In a particularly thorough qualitative study, Erickson (1976), with a team of researchers, conducted a thorough analysis of a large corpus of data. Erickson expressed his method of establishing a conclusion to the study:

> The question is: "Where does one stop?" Its answer lies only partly in methodological considerations, which are relatively simple. (p. 142)

At some point, the size of the study is predetermined. Erickson went on to clarify that research studies are affected by factors outside the scientific environment of research:



> The stopping point is also determined by policy considerations. Do policymakers want certainty from policy research? If so, then no amount of empirical evidence is sufficient. (p. 142)

For the purposes of this dissertation, an understanding of traditional high school dropouts was sought. Data gathered during the three stages of this study achieved this goal.

Analysis of Data

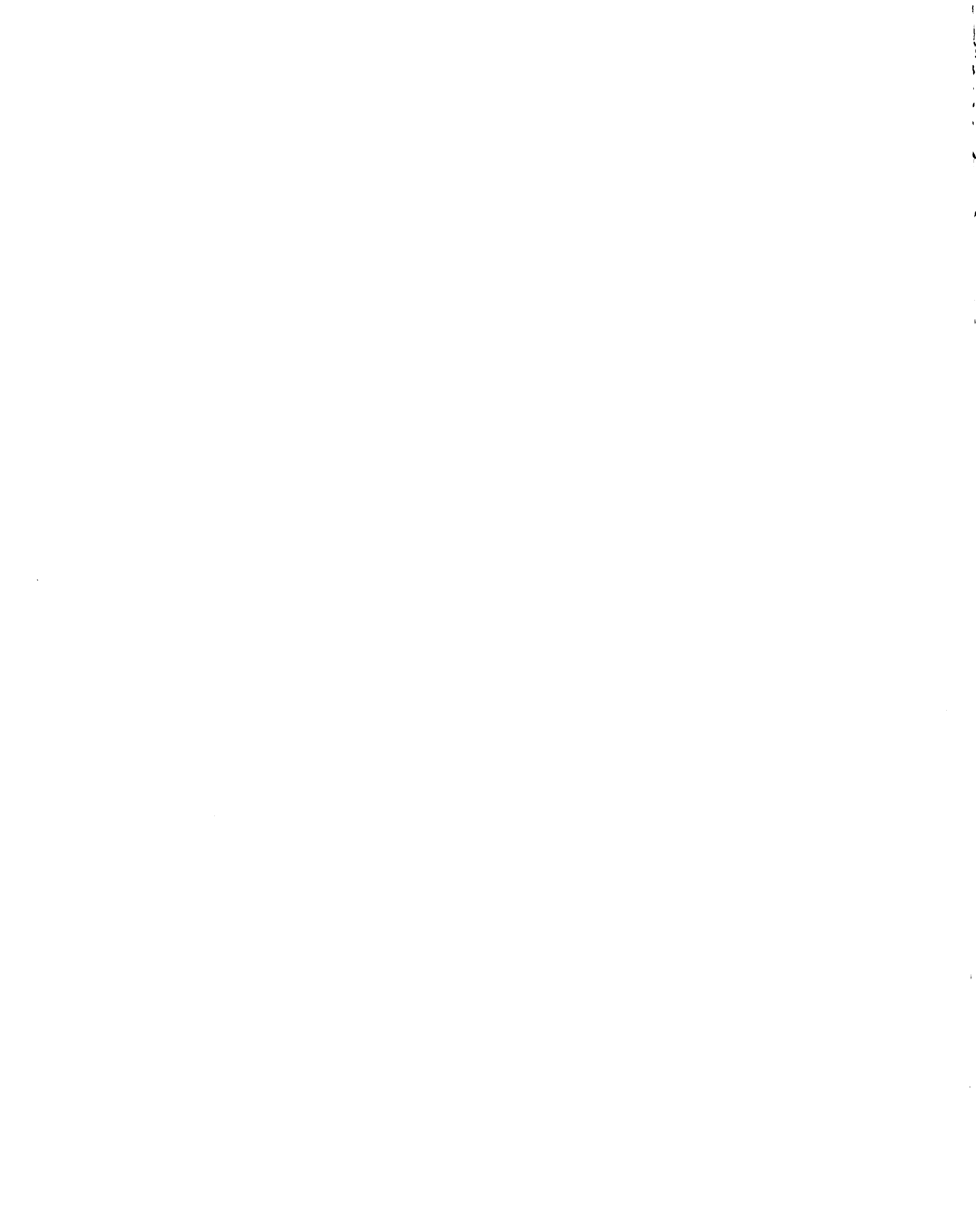
Following Stage One data collection, a preliminary report was completed. The techniques used in preparing this first report set the tone for the subsequent analysis. Two objectives were accomplished by the preliminary report: meeting the requirements of my research class sequence and, secondly, providing a Stage One pilot study for this dissertation. Assignments associated with the research class included: reflecting on early field notes, formulating an assertion and assessing one's data, writing a key vignette, presenting a key quote, and intellectual development through the research process. Instilled into this formulative process was the admonition from class to "change as much as you can." Continual re-analysis from ever-changing perspectives increases the opportunity for the data to steer the analysis. As one of my research class teachers, Fred Erickson (1976), phrased it:

> What the institutions of anthropologists in our own society can do is to provide policymakers with a new framework within which to consider a social "problem"; a framework that makes visible aspects of the problem that may have gone unnoticed because they were so obvious. (p. 143)

This is attained through a data analysis framework which encourages the researcher to change perspective. Such change occurred in this study as demonstrated by the constantly evolving assertions from all three stages of data collection.

The conversion of raw data into evidence began in earnest as preparation for the preliminary report. This same approach was maintained throughout the dissertation. Field notes and transcribed interviews were coded according to repetitive topics. The repetition of topics is found as the researcher becomes increasingly familiar with the raw data. After several overview readings of field notes and transcribed interviews, I was able to identify reoccurring topics. This time-consuming process allows the data to present the evidence rather than the researcher seeking out a predetermined perspective. Each of the repetitive topics was assigned a colored marker. I then highlighted, by color, each topic as it emerged from the data. By sorting the data in this manner, I was able to accomplish the conversion without altering the context from which the evidence emerged.

Patterns within each topic and between topics were then analyzed. A number of charts, tables, and diagrams were used to represent various paths of inquiry. These visual references were effective analytical tools. In each case, I summarized some aspect of the evidence. I then compared the visual reference to the body of evidence surrounding a given



topic or, in some cases, multiple topics. By so doing, I could better see relationships of evidence. As a result of using these visual references, the analysis of patterns was considerably strengthened. None of the charts, tables, or diagrams, though, accurately represented the total body of evidence and, therefore, are not presented in this study. Having completed this process, the resulting patterns of evidence are presented as findings in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

FINDINGS

During one of the weekly group-counseling sessions, Mike, the counselor running the group, asked me if I wanted to ask any questions. My question for the eleven students in the session was: "Why do some people feel Coolidge is easier?" Group reaction to the question was immediate. The following four responses reflect the consensus of opinions expressed:

> Dennis: There are no authoritarian teachers here at Coolidge. They're really helpful.

> Bob: Some of the teachers at the high school feel you have to have college. We don't have that college-shit thrown at us here at Coolidge.

> Jim: The teachers feel the same way about their high school experience as we do. None of us like it over there.

> Nancy: School is easier here because I understand the lessons. The work is the same, but here I can finally figure it out.

These four student responses raised even more research questions for me. The various paths of inquiry ultimately lead me to the findings of the study. Those findings are presented in this chapter along with substantiating evidence.

Introduction

The student responses in this case example are particularly effective at demonstrating the research findings. These findings are composed of an overarching theme and four major assertions. The overarching theme is:

> Students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school.

The major assertions are:

1. Students at Coolidge experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.
2. Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of Coolidge.
3. Students, as a group at Coolidge, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.
4. Students enjoy the experience of success at Coolidge.

Displaying the relationship between the findings and the opening case example demonstrates the analysis process throughout this chapter. Qualitative research involves direct interaction between the researcher and the research subject. In this sense, my question to the students represented an assertion based on data. This was my fourth visit to the alternative school, and I was still feeling very much like an outsider. Mike's offer made me uneasy, yet I knew that this was a great opportunity. Here was a chance to sample eleven students who were willing to openly talk. Over the past five months, Mike had established these weekly group-counseling sessions as a way to work through

many of the problems of the students. Mike was affiliated with a community agency separate from the alternative school. Perhaps for this reason, the students expressed high interest in participating in the sessions. Dennis, for example, felt that the counseling helps him cope:

> Oh, drugs, sex, the political problems sometimes, or sometimes we just sit down and listen to each other's problems. Mike comments on that. It's pretty interesting.

Dennis also mentioned that he planned to call Mike to make an appointment for a session at Mike's office.

During my first three site visits, I noted several student comments regarding the academic rigor at Coolidge. In essence, the students were telling me that the lesson content and class assignments were equivalent to what they experienced at their traditional high school. Several students made a point of drawing my attention to the textbooks. The message here was that the same text is used at the traditional high school. My initial observations of the students suggested that academic standards at Coolidge were equal to the traditional school. I was also hearing a conflicting message from the program administrator and one of the teachers that academics at Coolidge were easier or perceived as different from the high school. Less pressure was placed on the students to perform, and grading was conducted in a non-embarrassing way. Teachers were encouraged to project a positive, non-competitive attitude towards grades and academic performance. I was struck by these differences in perspectives concerning academic

standards. What I needed here was more data from the youths' perspective.

In all four responses the students made reference to a positive relationship with the teachers at Coolidge. For this to take place, the teachers must avoid using an authoritarian role. As a result, students experience greater freedom. The teachers must also understand the problems which these youth face everyday. College preparation does not represent a desirable end goal when the real goal is just to get through high school. Student choice is demonstrated here by the students' willingness to get through Coolidge. Feeling successful at Coolidge involves a teacher facilitating mastery of the lesson. With this in place, the student feels encouraged to keep trying. Success thus becomes an incentive for the students to attend Coolidge.

An involvement between the teacher and the student stands out in this evidence. Interaction between the students and teachers is informal in that the rights and obligations identified here are perceived by the students as significant. No formal rules are referenced by the students as controlling teacher and student interaction. The interaction is, therefore, dependent on an informal perception of the acceptable roles played by both the students and the teachers. Students maintain this balance by monitoring and adjusting their behavior. As a result,

Coolidge is an effective alternative high school for these traditional high school dropouts.

Each of the four major assertions represents an area of research inquiry. I acknowledge that some of the evidence suggests a psychological line of inquiry. For example, positive relationships and feelings are concepts which emerge from within the person. I am drawing inferences from such data and recognize that these inferences are selective. In this chapter, evidence is presented which supports the findings. Other research paths may have opened up, but I did not pursue these options for a number of reasons. Most importantly, I limited my findings to the data which was gathered. Parameters such as research time, scope of the study, and limited ability to observe everything occurring on the site also influenced the research path. Therefore, these research findings accurately represent only part of a much larger picture.

Through participation at Coolidge, these students have exercised a form of control over their actions. An overarching theme thus is revealed that the students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school. Major assertions concerning freedom, choice, behavior, and success support this overarching theme. By analyzing the evidence in this detailed manner, a framework of investigation is applied. A look at the attendance practices and policies at Coolidge demonstrates this process further.

Compliance with school attendance policy varied with individual youth on a day-to-day basis. However, the vast majority of the students at Coolidge consistently used as many available absence days as permitted. This practice is an example of informal student control. Three years ago, Coolidge began an alternative high school program with a maximum of 10 days absent per semester. Last year, the policy was changed to 15 days. Currently, the policy is remaining at last year's level. However, a stricter enforcement of tardies is resulting in a loss against the 15 day ceiling. Last year, students were allowed to make-up tardies by staying after class. Teachers decided that the tardies were being abused by the students so the policy was changed. This year, tardies are recorded as a partial absence. The formal policy responded to the informal practices of the students.

The attendance policy was under constant pressure by the students during Stage One research. Observation of student resistance to the attendance policy was recorded on 37 separate occasions. Teacher response to attendance policy enforcement was recorded on 35 occasions. This high number of observations suggests that the students consider the issue a significant point. An administrator at Coolidge was annoyed by the continual student pressure on the policy. He remarked, "They know they have 15 and will take it right to the limit." With two weeks remaining until the end of the school year, one of the teachers explained that only 3

out of 40 students in the school were under a 12-day absent rate. The teacher went on to say that one of these three students made plans to use up all available days. Student behavior, in using the maximum allowable days absent, was viewed by the students as the norm and by the school administration and teachers as undesirable. Negotiating by the students is demonstrated here through informal student behavior. Both teachers and students acknowledged that the attendance policy was annoying. Yet both groups continued to function cooperatively in the school environment. Formally, an attendance policy is in place. However, informally, students demonstrate control by pressuring the teachers and administration for a more lenient policy.

Informal student control was shown by student behavior in response to the attendance policy. Changes in the formal policy represent efforts to address the needs of these students. At the same time, the formal policy must reflect the position of the community as defined by the local board of education. Coolidge teachers therefore are in the middle of the negotiation process.

The concept of informal control can be seen also as a process of students expressing themselves. During Stage Three research, one of the students showed me her assignment for creative writing class. The weekly writing topic asked students to describe what they liked about Coolidge. Students were also encouraged to point out what they would like to see changed. The teacher provided me with copies of

the students' work. Of the seven papers, all considered Coolidge a school they enjoyed. Particular points raised included:

> The teachers care and try to help you.
>
> The smoke room helps relieve tension.
>
> Students feel good about themselves.

Conversely, students felt some aspects of the alternative school could be improved. These included:

> Weekly group-counseling sessions should be resumed.
>
> The image of Coolidge should be improved.
>
> The attendance and tardy policies should be more lenient.
>
> More community support should be built.

In reviewing the students' papers, more evidence was presented of informal student control. By expressing their concerns through a class assignment, these seven students have provided yet another example of informal control. The strengths of Coolidge are reflected in the friendly relationships with the teachers and the freedoms that students enjoy. Stated areas of improvement identify the same points which the students seek to change through informal control. As Marsha pointed out in her paper, "I really believe this school will make it if the teachers and, mostly, the students try to keep it going." Marsha acknowledged the presence of informal control by the students.

From the attendance policy assertions in Stage One to the creative writing class assignment in Stage Three, student control is seen. The overarching theme that the students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school represents a basis to further explore the four major assertions which follow.

#1 Freedom to Negotiate

The first major assertion is:

> Students at Coolidge experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.

One example of such freedom is student consumption of pop and snacks during class. A pop machine, located in the smoking room at the end of the hall, was provided for the students' use. Students also brought bottles of pop from home or purchased pop from area stores during lunch hour. Empty bottles and cans were stacked in the corner closet of one of the classrooms. Teachers occasionally asked students to pick up empties; however, no restriction on the consumption of pop was observed. Traditional high school structure around refreshments is significantly more restrictive according to the students.

During the initial phase of site observation, the frequent presence of pop and snacks during class time struck me as unusual. On five separate dates, consumption of pop, candy, and gum was recorded at different times during the day. In each case, a different student was involved. Observations in each of the three classrooms indicated a

uniform acceptance of the practice by the three teachers. Due to the commonplace view of pop and snacks by both students and teachers, I discontinued further documentation of this pervasive practice.

Two additional events were recorded following this data gathering decision due to their uniqueness. Both cases presented further evidence that this behavior had become well entrenched as a student freedom. As Jeff's fourth-hour class was taking a test, one of the students, Nancy, was eating shelled nuts. This observation was unusual in that I had not previously observed Nancy remain this quiet and academically engaged over the past five weeks. During this observation, Nancy was totally engaged in an academic exercise. Her concentration on the test appeared to be enhanced by the snack. Two neat piles were on the desk, one of empty shells and the other of uneaten nuts. As Nancy would answer a question, she would eat a nut and stack the empty shell. The freedom to eat snacks appeared, in Nancy's case, to complement the academic objectives.

The second recorded event occurred six weeks after the first event. During the same fourth-hour period, the teacher, Jeff, was attempting to lead the class in a discussion of the lesson. Students were loudly talking among themselves in approximately four separate conversations none of which were related to the lesson. Jeff continued to talk through the lesson by walking over to specific students. During this process, one of the

students, Don, stood up and threw a stick of gum across the room to another student. The gum passed within a foot of Jeff, but Jeff continued the lesson discussion uninterrupted. Don then threw a second stick of gum to another student. Jeff continued the lecture and cautioned the entire class to pay attention. In this event, the snack was part of an already disrupted class. Of particular interest to the observation was the acceptance of the gum by the students and the teacher. Even though the majority of the students were not following the lecture, the teacher did not impose any sanctions against the presence of the snack.

In both events, snacks were part of the situation. The snack complemented the lesson objective in the first case and distracted from the second. Yet, in both cases, the teacher remained uninvolved in the presence and use of snacks. Neither the students or the teacher identified the snack as unique to the setting. Freedom to use the snacks or pop during class had been accepted by all parties present.

A 10-minute break between classes, as opposed to a 5-minute break at the traditional school, is also mentioned by the students as a distinction of Coolidge from the traditional high school. An important aspect of these ten-minute breaks, however, is the observation that the students experienced the freedom of access to a smoking room. The majority of the approximately 40 students hurried into a 12-foot by 32-foot smoking room to smoke and socialize.

Socializing involved group conversations while listening to rock-and-roll music from portable stereo systems. One of the students, in the minority that did not smoke, described a typical break:

> It's terrible. They run! They're stupid. They all run down there and smoke their cigarettes. They bum cigarettes off each other, smoke six cigarettes, and run back down the hall.

A more favorable opinion of the smoking room was expressed by six students during a weekly group counseling session. The subject of having a student smoke room was mentioned as an important difference between Coolidge and the traditional high school. All six students lit up cigarettes and continued talking about the injustices of the high school smoking policy. Popularity of smoking at Coolidge is evidenced by the number of students who smoke. Standing-room-only in the smoke room was consistently the case during every break time observation of Stage One research.

Teachers are involved indirectly in various student freedoms. Observations of pop and snack use led to a specific look at control of the empty pop bottles and cans. A total of sixteen observations focused on behavior and practices involving pop empties at Coolidge. The empties storage closet was in Jeff's classroom. When a sufficient number had accumulated, the students returned the empties for deposit refund money which was used to cover special student activities. Planning for the activity appeared to be initiated by the teacher Jeff. Typically, the subject would be introduced by Jeff about one week prior to a

favorable date. In one such conversation, a group of students strongly advocated their choice of activity. "We are going to get pizza, no bowling or roller skating." Based on observations, clearly the choice of the students was a Friday pizza party lunch followed by an afternoon of volleyball.

In preparation for one of the Friday pizza parties, Jeff had asked two students, Ann and Claudia, to order and pick up the pizza. This duty included returning the empties for the deposit refund. Ann asked Jeff where he wanted them to buy the pizzas, and Claudia asked what toppings should be ordered. Both questions struck me as examples where the teacher could allow the students to decide for themselves, however, Jeff gave specific answers to both questions. Later in the day, I observed both girls stacking and counting the empties. Claudia was concerned that the pizza restaurant would not be open. She had telephoned earlier and there was not an answer. Both Ann and Claudia suggested a different restaurant. Jeff assured them that the restaurant would be open and commented, "Remember, we're concerned about the size. That other restaurant makes a smaller pizza." Both students were actively engaged in the task, however, the teacher demonstrated a degree of decision-making control.

On one occasion, I observed a note was taped to the empties that read "Stop Stealing Cans." When I asked about it, Jeff said that he had written the note. Student theft

of the empties had occurred the previous semester and Jeff suspected that empties were again being taken. Last semester, Jeff had told a group of students that the cans were everyone's property and that it is up to the students to enforce compliance. As a teacher, Jeff was attempting to change the behavior of the can-stealing students. Student group pressure following last semester's occurrence was viewed strong enough to cause one student to make restitution to the pop empties fund and for another student to quit attending school. A structure for storing the empties and planning pizza parties was maintained by Jeff; however, selecting the activity and compliance to acceptable behavior had become the responsibility of the students.

During an interview with Chuck and Jim, both students referred to the theft of empties. As we discussed student freedom at Coolidge, Chuck mentioned that he was kicked out for poor attendance but allowed to return. Jim responded to this point by using the empties theft as an example.

> Jim: I'm glad they kicked a few people out last semester that shouldn't have really been here, like Jack. We had them pop cans saved up in there and he took them. Jack, and I can't remember who else it was.
>
> Chuck: Dennis.
>
> Jim: Yea, Dennis. They took the pop and they...What did they use it for?
>
> Chuck: Drugs.
>
> Jim: Yea. They went and got a couple of joints or something.

Chuck: And the teachers really can't do nothing about it because it's our money.

Jim: It's our pop cans. But it kinda gets us mad.

Chuck: They wouldn't show up for a while.

Not only did Jim and Chuck support this example from their perspective, but in addition, the parameters to student freedom were demonstrated. Student responsibilities are associated with freedom, such as attendance and respect of the empties collection. Although Jeff may maintain a degree of decision-making control, the students consider the empties collection as one of their freedoms. In this example, the students referred to the empties as "our money." Deciding how to spend the money is ultimately the students' decision. When Jack and Dennis stole the empties, the students at Coolidge applied peer pressure. This informal control is made possible through the interaction of student freedoms at Coolidge. The freedoms involved in this example included drinking pop, saving the empties, selecting the activity, and enforcing acceptable student behavior.

#2 Student Choice

The first major assertion showed how students at Coolidge have more freedom than what they experienced at the traditional high school. In this second major assertion, evidence is presented which builds on the concept of student freedom. Student choice represents the specific application

of freedom in a way which complements the effectiveness of Coolidge.

During Stage One, when I listened to Sam, a student, talk about how he compared the traditional high school to Coolidge, I only grasped part of the message. Instead of asking, "Why do you attend Coolidge?", I was asking, "Is Coolidge really easier?" Sam responded:

> It is up to the person, how hard it is. Um, if you want a comparison between the two, it's easier over here. People over at the high school who are well educated have a field day over here. Well then again, then you gotta put up with all the noise in there too. But myself, I like it because it's a more relaxed atmosphere.

My perspective kept me from understanding the full meaning of Sam's message. Even though I only asked one question, Sam answered both. Sam's perception of choice is presented here as a positive comparison between Coolidge and the traditional high school. Sam preferred the atmosphere of Coolidge over that of the high school. By choosing Coolidge, Sam had expressed a personal commitment. This commitment was evidenced through attendance and demonstrates a significant choice made by a dropout.

Choice is a category of evidence which the students repeatedly mentioned. During Stage Two research, data-gathering focused on the question: How does student control impact the effectiveness of Coolidge? This question revealed a distinct path of evidence. The resulting assertion is:

> Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of Coolidge.

Jim and Peggy more directly addressed the concept of student choice. I posed a series of questions to Peggy and Jim which attempted to get at the feelings behind why they continue to attend Coolidge. Peggy wants to graduate. "I feel the necessity to do it. I'm serious." With further questioning, Peggy responded to her commitment to learning.

Question: Do you learn anything here?

Peggy: If I want to.

Question: Do you want to?

Peggy: When I want to I do?

Question: Not really?

Peggy: Yea, I do. Right now I could give a shit less, if I learned anything. I don't know.

Question: Yes, go on.

Peggy: But maybe tomorrow, I'll do all my work, I don't know. It's just right now I got a bad attitude.

Jim quickly followed these comments with his own position on the discussion:

Jim: It's like I was telling you last week, you have a choice of doing your work or you have a choice to sit there and do nothing, but ya know, it's your choice.

Question: Now, if you just sit there and do nothing?

Peggy: They don't care.

Jim: They care but they get mad at you and they try to make you do it, but you don't have to.

From these comments, the concept of student choice is clearly referenced. It is expressed by the students as a reason behind their behavior. Student control is also

present as the means by which choices are made. Peggy implied that she has control over her choices by permitting her attitude to govern her work performance. Sam and Jim both suggested control over their own decisions in a framework of choice.

Jim referred to his discussion with me last week as he explained the concept of choice. At that time, he and Chuck were responding to a question of how traditional high school students compare Coolidge to the traditional high school. Jim explained:

> They think it's just all-out fun, ya know, that's all it is, is all-out fun. If you want it that way, that's the way you could have it, ya know. That's a good point. If you want to go to school and just mess around all day and everything, you could have it that way, but if you want to come to school, you see, you have a choice--alternative choice of education, ya know. You have a choice, if you want to come and just do nothing, you can do that, ya know, and you ain't gonna graduate by doing that. That's where I learned my lesson.

Chuck went on with this point by sharing how some of his choices last year resulted in his suspension from Coolidge:

> The teachers kept telling me I was getting a lot of absences and I got up to fourteen without getting any more. I stayed in school maybe two weeks without missing a day. I just decided to quit. I stopped going and they kicked me out, but they gave me my chance to come back.

Both Jim and Chuck recognized the perceptions and influences of others. Even with these external forces, an internal control is evident. Jim saw Coolidge as his alternative choice for an education. Chuck saw his experience last year as something he controlled. The

teachers warned him and subsequently kicked him out. Even so, Chuck considered the decision to quit his own choice.

One year later, during Stage Two research, I interviewed Chuck a second time. Given the question, "What do you have control over at Coolidge?" Chuck responded:

> If the teacher gives me an assignment, I could say, 'Why don't I just wait until tomorrow and do today's and tomorrow's assignment.' And he'll say, 'Okay, as long as you get it done.'
>
> Because he knows I'll get it done. If it was a new student he might just say, 'Get your work done.'
>
> Well, I can decide if I want to do it, or what I want to do. But I really can't say, 'No, I'm not gonna do it.' Because, then I don't have a right to be here. That's mostly what you have control over is yourself. Cause everybody here is totally different from the next person.

This interview with Chuck demonstrated several interesting points. The most significant point is that Chuck was consistent in both interviews, even though a one-year period of time had passed. As Chuck phrased it during Stage One research:

> The way people talk, you have to come here, sit here for a few hours and then go home, and you pass, graduate that way. But you don't.

Chuck considered it his decision to come to Coolidge and to do the work. During Stage Two, Chuck held the same position. It was his decision if he wants to do the work. Chuck raised another point, though, by referring to his obligation to do the work. "If I don't do the work, then I don't have a right to be here." This was a lesson Chuck learned his first semester at Coolidge when he was kicked

out. "I got up to fourteen absences without getting any more. Then I stopped going and they kicked me out. But they gave me my chance to come back." One other point of interest is that Chuck introduced a discrepancy and also justified the practice. Because he has attended Coolidge for two years, teachers permit him to establish his own assignment deadlines. Although this practice discriminated between first-year and second-year students, Chuck suggested that the second year student had established a record of performance.

Throughout Stage Two and Stage Three research, students consistently referred to choice when addressing the question of control. One exception to this occurred during my Stage Two interview with Ted. In response to the specific question "What control do you have at Coolidge?" Ted answered, "None." This discrepancy, however, must be placed in context. Prior to this question, Ted and I had discussed at length a problem he was having at school. The day before our interview, Ted had been involved in a confrontation with a substitute teacher in third-hour class. This substitute teacher had confronted Ted regarding his loud behavior, and Ted responded by walking out of class. Ted recalled:

> There's two girls sitting by me and, ya know, picking on me, and I'm trying my best to ignore it as long as I could. And then I couldn't take it anymore so I stopped it. And I guess he didn't like that, and he walked right up screaming in my face, and I wasn't expecting it, and it made me mad. He told me to leave or act like a human being, and that just made me more upset.

As a result of his argument with the substitute teacher, Ted received a warning. Just prior to the interview, Ted had been sent downstairs to talk with the program administrator. In addition, Ted was questioned by Jeff regarding yesterday's behavior. Given this situation, Ted was viewing the question of control from an authoritarian context. Ted summarized his meeting with the program administrator:

> I mean, it's all up to Mr. Hammerly. And I don't know. He seems to be quite the headstrong type of guy, ya know. He didn't get into it. He just told me the way it was and that was it.

The only choice Ted saw when confronted by formal school authority is "either leave or take it."

Sam, Jim, Peggy, and Chuck have been presented here as typical examples of student belief that Coolidge offers a choice. Ted's position can be viewed as influenced by the events of the day.

In six additional Stage Two and Three interviews, students provide similar supporting documentation for this major assertion. One of the six students is Joann. She explained her perception of choice as follows:

> I learn something here. You want to learn something here. You know it's your choice to be here; where at the high school you're told, 'You've got to be here; you're either going to do my classes and do this thing or we're gonna do this to you.' Here, it is your choice; do it or not; it's your grade, your choice; it's your life.

These students believe that attending Coolidge is their choice. Through choice, a feeling of control over one's own direction emerges. As Joann suggested, by being allowed to make choices, she is learning to control her life. It is

not always easy. Students, like Chuck, at first get kicked out for not trying hard enough. Once you are enrolled in Coolidge, the teachers and students treat you like you are going to succeed. As Chuck said, "The only one that can stop you is you." In a similar case, Ben was kicked out of Coolidge a second time for poor attendance. Several students intervened on Ben's behalf, seeking permission for Ben to return. Although Ben was denied permission to complete the semester, he was permitted to re-enroll for the following semester. Ben had failed, tried again, had teacher and student support, yet failed again. The opinion of several students and Jeff, the teacher, was that Ben will succeed next semester. Dennis quit to raise a family. The students and teachers still wanted him back. Pregnant girls would rather stay than transfer to the pregnant teen program.

When Jerry tried to get into adult education, the other students harassed him for a month. According to Jeff, the students were offended that Jerry would consider choosing adult education over the alternative school. Jerry admitted he was only seeking an easier class schedule. By remaining at Coolidge, Jerry demonstrated that the temporary student harassment did not deter him from attending school. Given the options, Coolidge remained Jerry's first choice. Chuck looks back at his traditional high school experience and concluded, "People at the high school, it's getting to be like you have to be a robot; there's so many useless rules."

Kevin would rather ride a school bus for over two hours each way to attend Coolidge than return to his traditional high school. Even though the school day ends at 1:50 p.m., Kevin commented, "I don't get home 'til 4:15 p.m. And believe me, that bumpy ride can get awful boring." He explained to me why he was willing to do this:

> At Coolidge, you're given choices. You can play volleyball or come up to the room to study. You're always given choices. At [the high school], it's yes or no. The only choice is hot dog or hamburg at lunch.

This major assertion suggests that the choices associated with attending Coolidge demonstrate school effectiveness. It is the contention here that school effectiveness is achieved when traditional high school dropouts choose to participate in this alternative form of education. Without students, a school cannot be effective. Coolidge is demonstrating effectiveness through the choice of attendance made by students.

#3 Student Monitoring

In this major assertion, evidence is presented which supports the finding that the students demonstrate control over individual and group behavior. More specifically, the assertion is:

> Students, as a group at Coolidge, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.

This assertion suggests a bonding of purpose among the students. Recognition that such group-processing exists is needed to show that informal student control is possible

both as an individual and as part of a group. A teacher-structured situation such as the earlier example of the pop empties collection demonstrates formal control. Students, however, lack a formal voice in the day-to-day operations of the school. A degree of decision-making control by a teacher over the pop deposit refund money was recorded on four separate occasions during Stage One research. In each of these cases, however, students demonstrated informal control over the process. Students evaluated Coolidge policies and rules in relation to personal and group rights. In the earlier example concerning the theft of pop empties, students perceived the loss of the collection as a threat to a student/group right: "No empties, no pizza."

As part of a student interview, Mary provided a vivid case which supported and clarified earlier discussion on the pop empties example. All three classes were having a Friday volleyball game followed by a pizza party. During the volleyball game, Jeff caught Mary and five other students in the smoke room. Jeff kicked all six students out of school for the remainder of the day. I asked Mary if she was allowed to stay for the pizza. She replied:

> No, we had got in a fight about that, me and Jeff. Well, all of us were yelling at him. He got pretty mad at us. . . . I told him I wanted my pop cans. Cause I buy at least three pops a day, and I figured I'm not buying their pizza if I can't have any.

According to Mary, the students at Coolidge did not agree with her viewpoint:

> Cause they didn't think that since we got kicked out, we shouldn't be getting our pizza. But we fixed them. We said we're taking our pop cans. Marsha and Darlene were going with me. So we were gonna take about five of those [cases], and they wouldn't have been able to get their pizza. Darlene was carrying them out to the car, and I said, 'I can't do this. Just forget it; take the cans up there.' She sat them on the floor, and she just said, 'We'll be back to get our pizza.' And Jeff said, 'No.' So we went down and talked to Mr. Hammerly [the program administrator] and he said it was up to Jeff. We came back up here and we were yelling at Jeff. Finally he said, 'OK, you can come back up and get your pizza, but you have to leave after you eat your pizza.' So we did. We came up here and sat and ate.

When I asked Jeff about the incident he explained that he had checked with the program administrator prior to confronting the students. Jeff did not like the confrontation. He reflected, "It didn't go well, and many of the students were just in a weird, Friday mood." Jeff also commented about the pizza; he thought it unusual that two pizzas were left over.

In this example, the formal authority of the teacher and the informal influence of students is evident. Based on a rule violation, Jeff levied sanctions against a small group of students. This group of students, however, challenged the teacher's position. The challenge was based on the students' control over the pop empties fund. The students attempted a formal appeal through the school administrator. That approach failed; so the students used informal pressure upon the teacher. Jeff did not care for the pressure and eventually accepted a compromise.

This example also demonstrates individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior. Mary perceived how the larger group of students saw the situation. By not taking what she defined as her fair share of empties, she avoided a confrontation with the larger student group. In this situation, Mary considered it acceptable to challenge the teacher as long as her actions did not violate the rights of the larger student group.

In another example, violation of a smoking rule was confronted by a teacher and subsequently re-enforced by another student. During lunch, one of the teachers casually mentioned that she had forgotten to enforce a loss of break privileges upon a female student. The teacher explained that on the previous day, she had caught the student smoking in the bathroom. Smoking is only permitted in the smoking room. The teacher went out into the hallway and returned with Debby. An explanation was being given to Debby that her break privilege was lost due to yesterday's violation of smoking in the girls' room. The teacher returned to the hallway. Debby walked to the front of the room and began griping to another female student, "She [the teacher] can't do this to me." As Debby continued to complain, Peggy responded with, "Dumb bitch! What do you think the smoking room is for?" At this point, both girls were standing within four feet of each other and appeared to be emotionally upset. Debby replied in a defiant manner, "I'll smoke where I want." After a brief pause, Debby began to

draw away and added, "You acted like you wanted to know bad enough." Neither said anything else, and Peggy left the room a few moments later.

Group monitoring and adjustment of an individual student's behavior was tenaciously pursued by Peggy. Such involvement assists the group, or individuals within the group, in tempering individual behavior which could threaten the rights and privileges of the group. In this instance, Peggy was aware of Debby's rule violation and directly confronted Debby with it. Use of such descriptive language as "dumb bitch" communicated both a depth of feeling and a position on enforcement. Peggy wanted Debby to know how she felt. Peggy also wanted Debby to understand that this violation was not approved by other students.

During a weekly group-counseling session two weeks after this event, several students felt that ". . . the school is tightening up because they don't want people to take advantage of Coolidge." Group awareness of student behavior is measured against the vague parameters of what constitutes "to take advantage of Coolidge." Debby's discomfort from the excessive smoke in the smoking room was not considered a strong enough argument for the majority of the students to support her actions. In fact, Debby recognized her own behavior as unacceptable. During our interview, Debby explained, "And ya know, I knew--if it was something that I wasn't expecting and then she [the teacher] got down my back, I woulda been mad--but, I was expecting

her to." The students were able to define threatening behavior and, in this case, Peggy was willing to verbalize the group norm directly to Debby.

During follow-up interviews, Peggy analyzed the violation:

> She's the one that went in there and smoked a cigarette. . . . So she goes in the bathroom. And then, when she gets in trouble, she can't figure it out. Well, it don't take much to understand.

Debby, herself, considered her actions to be improper, "I knew if I got caught, I would've got in trouble. I knew that so it was no big deal." Both girls agreed that the smoking room is too smokey. Yet, Peggy did not consider this reasonable grounds to violate the rule. Debby, on the other hand, did consider this reason justification to violate the rule. In fact, Debby conceded that she was sneaky and smoked in the bathroom two additional times following this incident.

It is interesting in looking at the comments by both girls to note that rule enforcement is a three-way street. The teacher observed a rule violation and administered a punishment. Another student confronted the violation in a provoking manner. Yet, the violating student chose to continue to violate. In this example, the rule is understood by all parties involved and compliance is sought. Control over rule compliance, however, was lacking. The smoking rule was informally being negotiated by a single student. Peggy was communicating to this student that her

actions were clearly that of an individual and did not represent a unified student challenge to the rule. Debby could negotiate compliance through rule-testing as long as her actions did not endanger a vague standard of student behavior. Debby, however, must be willing to work within the authority of the teacher and the accepted behavior of the student group.

Smoking at Coolidge is a privilege which these students did not have in the traditional high school. Debby's behavior, in violating this rule, threatened the tenuous balance of taking "advantage of Coolidge" and jeopardized the privileges of the group. Through monitoring, the group was aware of the violation. Due to the potential threat to group privileges, student-to-student enforcement is condoned. The issue, as defined by both the teacher and student, was Debby's behavior. No one was questioning the privilege of student smoking. All parties, including Debby, were avoiding any reassessment of the smoking privilege. Hence, the parameters of acceptable group behavior remained unchanged.

The issue of group monitoring of individual student behavior reaches beyond day-to-day rights and privileges. Attainment of the high school diploma is the desired end goal for the students. Academic requirements, such as attendance and passing classes, are closely monitored by students. Each student is well aware of their own number of days absent. As the next meeting of the school advisory

board drew near, student anticipation was evident. Several students discussed their concerns during a weekly group-counseling session. Sam shrugged off the process, "The meeting is no big deal. They just want to ask a bunch of questions." Nancy reacted more strongly to her appearance before the advisory board. "I'm 18, I don't need them telling me how to act when I don't take it from my Mom. Come on, we're all half-assed adults up here." Peggy's feelings toward an advisory board warning regarding her use of five absence days was manifested by her statement, "Kiss my ass. I don't think I'll come to school for a week." The 15-day absence policy is viewed by the students as a right. Coolidge policy prohibits students from exceeding the limit. Violation of the policy jeopardizes enrollment, which translates into: No diploma! For this reason, students at Coolidge worked at keeping below the fifteen-day limit. A deep resentment of the attendance policy, however, continued to be held by the students. Harsh comments regarding the policy, such as those made by Nancy and Peggy, were identified on nine occasions during the course of this typical class day. As a group, the students wanted as many days off as possible. They also wanted a diploma. The option became one of complying with the 15-day limit while informally pressuring the teachers for change.

#4 Student Success

This major assertion has undergone the greatest amount of change during data-gathering and analysis. The Stage One assertion was:

> Teachers at Coolidge seek student growth through an improved perception of student self-worth.

However, Stage Two and Three findings significantly modified the focus of this assertion. Student growth was more critically examined in Stage Two research and eventually was viewed as a movement on a continuum from an external locus of control to an internal locus of control. As a result, the objectives of the teacher were no longer significant in this context. A review of student comments also showed frequent reference to academic success while attending Coolidge. With the primary focus of this research being a report of what the students say, evidence such as this became significant. Assertions, therefore, need to accurately represent changes such as this in the results of qualitative data analysis. The beliefs of the students, as opposed to the objectives of the teachers, are fundamental to this study. For these reasons, the assertion was modified to its present form:

> Students enjoy the experience of success at Coolidge.

Many similarities exist between the original and modified assertion. Success, for example, reflects the students' efforts toward a high school diploma. Success also represents a refinement of a sense of one's self-worth and

internal control. The significant difference between these assertions, however, is that the perspective of the teacher has been replaced by the perspective of the student.

Even though the modified assertion shifts away from teacher-generated data, the relationship of the student with the teacher remains significant to this study. Success is cultivated by the students from a number of sources. A positive relationship with a teacher is one such source.

Jim, for example, talked about how well he related to Jeff as a teacher. Jim appreciated how Jeff had shared his own high school experiences and feelings:

> He told me that he hated high school over there for some of the same reasons that I hated it. He says he had, basically, the same problems that we're having, he had over there at the high school, ya know.

Jim attributed his success at Coolidge to the support he received from Jeff and the other teachers:

> I'm doing a whole lot better this year than I ever did in any of my high school years, really. Well, they encourage you more; they tell you how it is. Teachers here, it's like they've been through it all.

A negative relationship with a teacher, on the other hand, generates barriers to student success. Both Jim and Peggy shared their feelings about the teachers with me during a joint interview. In reference to one teacher, both students expressed deep frustration. Peggy explained, "She's like that. She won't compromise. Everything has to be her way to the letter, and God [pause] that's why we don't get along." Jim twice referred to an old encounter

which still confused him. He attempted, in a friendly way, to influence a teacher's decision and reflected, "I don't know why she got mad either. She started yelling at me." Jim felt confused with one teacher and accepted by another. In discussing Jim's feelings about the teachers, his attention focused on interpersonal matters. These students measured a significant part of their success at Coolidge through their relationship with teachers. As acceptance and support by the teacher increases, these students feel more successful.

Success in the classroom is commonly measured by the teacher through grades. Donna enjoyed the support she had from the teachers at Coolidge. "At the high school, they don't give a shit if you pass or not." Success emerges from the alternative school setting and offers students the opportunity to feel good about themselves. Debby shared this feeling with her mother:

> My grades went up. My Mom, she looked at my last report card, A's and B's, and she's really freaking out, ya know. At the high school, I got all E's, a couple D minuses.

High grades for Debby symbolized a success at school which she enjoyed. A very personal satisfaction was realized through this experience. Mark also felt better about himself since he began attending Coolidge:

> The work is the same at the high school, but I get As here. I didn't get A's at the high school because I didn't want to do anything.

Another interesting example came out of a Stage Three interview. Ed looked back at his high school experience and

described various meetings he had with the principal and the superintendent. Ed felt he was accepted and successful at Coolidge. He explained, "At Coolidge I haven't been talked to by the principal yet. Yes, I think that's proof that I've been successful here." Debby, Mark, and Ed have assessed themselves at Coolidge. Debby and Mark used grades and Ed used disciplinary meetings as benchmarks for success. Regardless of the measurement, all three of these students believe they are successful.

As a negative case, another student, Bob, was complaining in class about a social studies test. Bob felt that the teachers at Coolidge did not care about him because he was taking several tests on the same day. He explained, "The teachers get together at Murphy's Bar and plan when to give all the tests at the same time." Bob went on to say that one of the teachers, Erin, was drunk at the bar. On a separate occasion, I had asked Erin how Bob was doing academically. The assessment was that Bob is "a kid who thinks he can get away with not doing assignments and just do well on the tests. He is smart enough but just doesn't apply himself." The student's position was, "I've put up with enough shit that I shouldn't have to work to graduate." Unfortunately for this student, the teacher measured success according to the student's commitment to achieve. Failure was measured both in a non-passing class grade from the teacher and in the eventual expulsion of Bob from Coolidge.

In looking at these representative student comments, the influence of the teacher is referenced when discussing student success at Coolidge. For these students, a key ingredient for success is the teacher. By establishing a positive relationship with the teacher, these students believe that success at Coolidge is attainable.

Student success also involves a commitment to achieve. For this to occur, the feeling of being successful needs to translate into student participation. Academic success, for example, generates a positive feeling of achievement. If students believe that participating at Coolidge results in success, then they are less likely to leave. This cause-and-effect statement is presented as an underlying premise of student participation at Coolidge. It is not the intent of this research to substantiate such a causal inference. Rather, its purpose is to show that the students do feel that they are successful at Coolidge. As mentioned earlier, this population of students share the characteristic of failure in the traditional high school setting. Donna expressed this sense of common student identity at Coolidge. "The students all understand that we are all labelled. We all feel that everybody has to be given a chance once."

If you are in a setting and experiencing failure, three options typically exist: (1) You may continue the experience, (2) change your approach, or (3) change to a different setting. It is the contention of this assertion that these students have demonstrated their preference for

the third option. By seeking a chance for success in an alternative high school, these dropouts have changed from their traditional setting. If you are experiencing failure in the traditional high school, you do not feel like you are successful. Ted recalled his struggle to succeed at the traditional high school. After quitting once and returning, Ted found school even more difficult. "The teachers just started getting crazy, they were really bogue to me then." Having successfully completed one-and-a-half years at Coolidge, Ted will graduate at the end of the semester. In a senior mock election, Ted was voted "Best Personality." Ted considered Coolidge:

> . . . a pretty good school. I mean, I don't mind going to school now. I get here and I don't feel like I have to leave. And we're not a bunch of dummies. I work harder here than I did at the high school.

During Stage One research, students frequently referred to the feeling that the teachers at Coolidge care. When asked what she did not like about the traditional high school, Betty responded:

> The teachers, they weren't very easy to get along with. If you had a problem you couldn't really talk to them. It was just like they didn't really care. They'd talk to you but they didn't really listen to what you were saying and stuff. I just didn't do very good over there. You get the impression that they don't care so you just get that attitude too, that you don't care.

In a separate Stage One interview, Debby raised the same point as Betty. To Debby, teachers offered more support at Coolidge:

> And the teachers are a heck of a lot nicer. They don't get down your back for stupid things. And they spend more time with ya on your work. That's mainly why I come up here.

By focusing on the caring aspects between the students and teachers, evidence through teacher observations was needed. With this research based on student participant observation, data-gathering remained focused on the perspective of the student. As a result, modification and refinement of the Stage One assertion was needed so that the assertion properly reflected the data. The inductive nature of qualitative research is demonstrated by this modification process. As the elements of student success emerged through the three stages of research, the assertion was changed to encompass this body of evidence.

Stage Two and Three interviews provided evidence which tied the feeling of caring to the notion of success. Trisha, for example, reinforced the notion of caring and also expressed what that caring meant to her:

> Trisha: I hated school until I got here and they took the time to care about, ya know, if you don't understand something, they want to make sure that you do and they have time to sit there and go through it and make you understand it. Like at the high school where they just, ya know, if you didn't understand it, that was your tough luck.
>
> Question: So academically, you're learning more; how do you feel about yourself?
>
> Trisha: Well, when I came here, I felt like I hated myself when I came here, but when you get up here they make you feel really good. Especially the teachers, cause they always say, 'You know you can do it; you don't have to say you can't when you can.' And [pause] and um, all of the teachers, they just [pause]

they really care up here and I guess that's most important. I don't think I've ever liked my teachers as much as I have up here.

Question: That seems important to you.

Trisha: Yea, it is. I never had any time to be friends with my teachers. To me, they're not my teachers; they're more my friends.

Not only did Trisha enjoy the caring relationship she had with the teachers at Coolidge, but she also enjoyed academic success. Her belief in the effectiveness of Coolidge was best expressed at the end of our interview. As a closing statement, Trisha emphasized, "If someday I have children, I would want them to go here." For this student, Coolidge had become her traditional high school.

The tenuous nature of caring by the teachers at Coolidge was demonstrated by a one-day staff change. Molly and Kay did not like the previous day's substitute teacher. Both students felt that the substitute had a bad image of Coolidge:

> He thinks we're no good. He thinks this is a second-hand school, and that we don't know nothing. He doesn't treat us with respect. That's a big thing for us up here.

Respect, for these girls, represented their incentive to participate. Student success will not ensue for Molly and Kay as long as the setting includes the substitute teacher. If the substitute teacher does not respect them, then they do not respect him. These students saw the substitute as the one that did not belong.

Students at Coolidge believed that the high school students and community held a low opinion of them.

According to the students, negative labels such as "burnout, druggies, crazies, dummies, retards, criminals, and pot-heads" were used to express this belief. During a Stage One, weekly group counseling session, Dennis reacted to a reference to the high school, "They just think we're burnouts; our brains are jelly and shit." Donna followed with, "Adults don't think much of us at this school." Peggy countered with, "Adults aren't as narrow-minded as kids up at the high school." Given this negative labeling, which the students disliked, the caring relationship with the teachers stands out as a key ingredient to the effectiveness of Coolidge.

During a Stage Two interview with Donna one year later, she reaffirmed that the students at Coolidge still contend with negative labels. However, since last year, Donna became a mother. With an infant daughter at home, Donna felt her identity at Coolidge had changed:

> I belonged last year more than this year. Because I had a kid, a few close friends, like Dawn, treat me the same; but most of the students think I'm different. Treat me like a mother.

Negative labeling, according to Donna, helps bond the students together. Even though Donna doesn't belong as much this year as last, she still identifies herself with Coolidge. Neither the pregnant teen program or the traditional high school offered what Donna enjoyed from school. As Donna said:

> I don't want a half-assed education. Over in that pregnant teen program they're just sitting around in a circle, talkin'. We do twice as much as they

> do. Back at my high school, I would have to have one teacher to graduate. I couldn't get along with him--there's just no way.

Even with the pregnancy and subsequent responsibilities of raising a child, Donna would be graduating at the end of the semester. What Donna enjoyed about Coolidge was that she was "given a chance" to succeed.

Evidence presented as support for this major assertion focuses on student success. A positive relationship with teachers at Coolidge is seen as a key ingredient in attaining success. Various measurements make up success, however, graduating is the ultimate standard. By participating at Coolidge, a chance for success exists. The feeling that teachers care offered students an incentive to succeed. The negative connotations associated with labels only brought the students closer together and made them more committed to succeed at Coolidge. Through participation and commitment, the students feel that they will be successful.

Overarching Theme

A presentation of each of the four major assertions has provided a focus for viewing the overarching theme: Students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school. This is supported by the fact that traditional school dropouts are participating as students at Coolidge. The very act of voluntary participation constitutes a form of control. By going to Coolidge, these students have demonstrated self-control. Informal control of Coolidge is also demonstrated when these

same students stay in school. Teachers, through use of formal control, represent the interests of the community. Student control represents the informal needs of a group of young people. Together, teachers and students support the assertion that Coolidge addresses the informal control needs of these youth. Student control is not formally recognized by the community; however, informal recognition is apparent within Coolidge. If Coolidge were identical to the traditional high school, this informal path would not exist for these students. Greater student freedom and the experience of success at Coolidge present paths to informal student control.

Student response to the question of control confirmed the informal status of student input. Debby identified control from a formal viewpoint:

> If they [the students] don't like the school, they can just leave. . . . Well, there's been a lot of people last semester that didn't like it. There's, I think, ten of them that just dropped out. See, so that means that apparently we don't have control.

Another student, Jim, saw a direct linkage of power-to-control at Coolidge, "I really think the students have the power. We give Coolidge the power, just like, supposedly, the people give the government the power." Molly, however, felt uncomfortable with the concept of informal student control:

> Well, actually, us kids are ruling our teachers. We tell them what to do more than they tell us. And I was never brought up like that. You do as you're told.

A pattern of reasoning emerges from the students that the option of leaving Coolidge does not represent a form of informal control. Use of this formal option is definitely a last resort action. Staying at Coolidge involves use of informal control which complements participation. The dynamics of influencing Coolidge can be unsettling for some of these students. Yet, as a group, the students continued to informally exert control and attend Coolidge.

Chapter Summary

By analyzing patterns within the data, five research findings emerged. These are the overarching theme and four major assertions. Major assertions concerning freedom, choice, behavior, and success support the overarching theme. Traditional high school dropouts are attending Coolidge through their own free-will. These five findings are offered as the primary reasons why.

Further, the overarching theme supports the role of students in determining the effectiveness of the educational process. The perspective of young people can help our understanding of the educational process at work. By recognizing the informal control by students within Coolidge, a valuable source of knowledge is accessed.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Research Audience

The analysis of qualitative data from the students attending Coolidge Alternative High School resulted in the findings which were presented in Chapter 5. Drawing conclusions from the findings raises the issue of generalizability. Because this qualitative research focused on a single rural alternative high school with a predominantly caucasian population, conclusions drawn could be considered unique to this study. Consequently, results of this study would be scientifically limited from being generalized to other communities.

My initial goal in researching this dissertation topic was to enhance my understanding of the traditional high school dropout. With this understanding, I intended to design more effective intervention strategies for high school dropouts. As discussed in Chapter 3, my employment as an educational administrator influenced aspects of this study. The issue of generalization can be addressed by the relationship of my employment with that of my research. Field site selection, for example, reflected my intent to remain within my geographic area of employment while remaining relatively a stranger to the population being

studied. Conclusions drawn from this site, therefore, were intended to assist me in my employment responsibilities. I have been able to apply the conclusions of this study to Coolidge and to similar communities within my geographic area of employment. As a result, this study has been scientifically generalized through my role in supporting local social policymaking.

My employment responsibilities include program planning and implementation of services for high school dropouts. Funding for these services are primarily provided by the United States Department of Labor, Job Training Partnership Act. This places me in the middle of the social policymaking process. In this sense, I am not an isolated researcher. I am a researcher who is in the field seeking a better understanding of the needs of high school dropouts. Applications of my study, therefore, are experienced in a direct and immediate way. The transfer of research theory into practice ultimately involves a blending process. In my case, this blending represents an opportunity to fully integrate my two worlds.

Research data which was collected provides a descriptive picture of a group of traditional high school dropouts from Coolidge. The picture is presented from the youths' perspective. By listening to the voices of the students, I was able to go beyond the perspective of an educational administrator to that of the researcher, and see within this student-generated evidence. The question of

scientific rigor represents only one component. Yet, each component moved me one step closer to understanding these students.

By generalizing the conclusions, through my employment, I have demonstrated how local social policymakers can become a research audience. There is, however, potential for a larger audience to apply conclusions of this study. Such an audience would be actively engaged in policymaking throughout our society. Social policymaking is influenced by a number of factors, one of which is research. Erickson (1976) expressed concern for a potential problem in the use of research by policymakers:

> Social scientific research does not produce certain answers even in "basic" studies, much less in applied "policy" studies. (p. 143)

Research does support informed decision-making by enhancing our understanding. This function should not be confused with the concept of certainty. The distinction made by Erickson is one which the policymaker must be aware of so as to make informed decisions. Viechnicki (1987) considered present public policymaking "a crude instrument for securing societal ideals" (p. 3). Educators are faced with policies which are good in general but fail to provide specific courses of action. Viechnicki referred to the role of research in providing "new perspectives to informal policymaking" (p. 21). Both Erickson and Viechnicki contended that research can provide information to assist policymaking. However, both the desire for certainty from

research and the "good in general" characteristic of social policy suggests the need for caution. This study offers one means of assistance to the policymakers search for understanding.

Introduction of Conclusions

Chapters 2 and 5 offer insight to understanding the traditional high school dropout. The structured questions in Chapter 2 offer one approach:

1. Is there agreement on the definition of dropout?
2. What are the characteristics of dropouts?
3. What is the cost to society of dropouts?
4. What are the elements of effective intervention strategies with dropouts?
5. Can locus of control research assist school-based strategies with dropouts?

The findings from Chapter 5 offer a different perspective, one drawn from the students at Coolidge. This provided a descriptive understanding of high school dropouts.

Overarching Theme

> Students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school.

Major Assertions

1. Students at Coolidge experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.
2. Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of Coolidge.
3. Students, as a group at Coolidge, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.

4. Students enjoy the experience of success at Coolidge.

The relationship of information between Chapter 2 and Chapter 5 provides a basis to explore conclusions of this study. To accomplish this, each of the findings from Chapter 5 will be clarified using information from the structured questions in Chapter 2. As was the case in Chapter 5, each of the major assertions will be addressed in order of presentation. Discussion of the overarching theme will follow the major assertions.

#1 Freedom to Negotiate

Beginning with the first assertion:

> Students at Coolidge experience greater freedom than they previously experienced at a traditional high school.

This finding states that Coolidge is an unconventional school because the students are allowed to behave differently. In looking back through Chapter 2, a review of the characteristics of dropouts revealed an interesting paradox. One perspective is that the characteristics may suggest that the social problem rests with the dropout. A different perspective may suggest that the dropout problem is a by-product of a larger social problem. Treating potential high school dropouts as social mutants in the community is a response which would constrain the expression of freedom. By allowing students at Coolidge to experience greater freedom, a different perspective emerges. These students no longer attend the traditional high school. At

Coolidge, though, these same students have attained greater freedom. The question then becomes: Is Coolidge exceeding the standards of freedom as defined by the community?

#2 Student Choice

The next finding addresses the effect of student behavior upon Coolidge:

> Student choice has a positive impact on the effectiveness of Coolidge.

School effectiveness is defined as a school meeting the educational needs of students. In this finding, the assumption is that these students need to choose Coolidge if Coolidge is to be effective. As succinctly expressed by Hodgkinson (1985) in Chapter 2, "Any youth that is not attending one of the community's recognized majority traditional high schools" can be classified as a dropout. This definition avoids a number of debates and fits well with this finding. Students at Coolidge are considered dropouts from the traditional high school. Yet, they choose Coolidge. If they graduate with a high school diploma, then Coolidge appears to be effective. In a comparative analysis of youth at an alternative school, Jurgens (1985) summarized the literature concerning choice:

> From the purist's point of view, a school is not truly an alternative school unless the choice for attendance is made solely by the student. (p. 182)

This interpretation is readily accepted by Jurgens without further analysis. From a qualitative perspective, however, the ingredient of choice has a much greater 'meaning' than

simply defining the term "alternative school." Further research which explores the relationship of choice to alternative school effectiveness would be appropriate.

#3 Student Monitoring

In the next finding, informal student control is demonstrated:

> Students, as a group at Coolidge, monitor and adjust individual student behavior in relation to acceptable group behavior.

These students want a high school diploma. They also want freedom, choice, and the feeling of being successful. By monitoring and adjusting their behavior, a balance is achieved which permits them to realize their wants. The discussion on effective intervention strategies in Chapter 2 reveals the complexity of variables which must be addressed. One conclusion is that no single intervention strategy is going to solve the dropout problem. Through local level design, however, this complex problem can be addressed through a community network of services. The perspective of the youth affected by such a design is essential for this understanding to be comprehensive. Analyzing the common elements of effective local strategies may offer techniques in improving services to dropouts.

#4 Student Success

In this final major assertion, the perspective of the students at Coolidge is more carefully analyzed:

> Students enjoy the experience of success at Coolidge.

This finding suggests that these students want to feel successful. Further, the feeling of success was absent at the traditional high school. When Coolidge students talk about success, they are sharing their own feelings. By looking inside themselves, they are acknowledging the presence of an internal locus of control. Achieving success is something only the student can accomplish. Coolidge offers caring teachers to facilitate this experience, yet the feeling of success belongs to the students. Riter's (1984) description of locus of control in Chapter 2 suggested the need to fight a feeling of "passive acceptance of failure" (p. 16). By looking at success as the antidote to failure, students strive to achieve at Coolidge. Acknowledging the presence of an internal locus of control suggests that a more detailed analysis of this specific aspect may assist efforts to enhance success for dropouts.

#5 Informal Student Control

The overarching theme represents the finding which moves this study into the social policymaking arena:

> Students at Coolidge have established a significant level of informal control within the school.

Student control suggests an ability to have an impact on school policymaking. Although this control is informal, it has important implications. Local policymaking represents the interests of the community. Policies which impact Coolidge ultimately will determine what share of limited

community resources Coolidge will receive. However, at what cost does a community support alternative education? In Chapter 2, the cost to society of dropouts is presented in comparison to the costs of various social problems. Community resources are allocated by social-policy decisions. Because these resources are limited, it is essential that Coolidge's services conform to the policy decisions of the community. Through informal control, the students at Coolidge share in the responsibility of conforming to the policies. For Coolidge to be effective, dropouts must be served. Informal control by the students therefore can directly impact the more formal educational standards and policies of the community.

Summary

During my last day of data gathering at Coolidge, several students created the following recipe for me:

Recipe for Coolidge Stew

1. Add 3 teachers, no more. Look for the kind that has no Mr. or Mrs.; they're just friends to help you along.

2. Add students; careful, not too many. Make sure they're assorted characters.

3. For a spice, add choice. Students want to be here--not have to be here.

4. A tangy touch of energy

5. Trust, a lot of it

6. Coke, caffeine, sugar, and smoke

7. Homework, only enough for color

8. Mix it all in an old building that you have to watch where you walk.

In a sense, the recipe summarizes the findings of this study.

These students have been given an educational choice through the medium of alternative education. Coolidge Alternative High School represents an opportunity to try once more to be successful. The decision to attend Coolidge is different for each of these students. Many of these youth do not consider themselves to be dropouts. Some see a dropout as "somebody who doesn't try." Attending Coolidge is a matter of pride for these students. They are trying and, on Coolidge's terms, succeeding. "This material is as tough as what is used at the high school. The difference is that now I choose to do the work." "The work is hard. I'm committed; I get good grades. I will graduate here; I'm no dropout." These comments from different students capture the purpose of this alternative to the traditional high school. In his film "The Purple Rose of Cairo," Woody Allen (1986) suggests, "The most human of all attributes is your ability to choose." The students at Coolidge have made a choice and are striving to be productive "humans" in society.

Recommendations

Coolidge Alternative High School is a valuable community resource. Through the efforts of a caring faculty and committed administration, Coolidge serves a population

of young people that would be otherwise overlooked. The effectiveness of Coolidge, as measured by the young people in this study, is impressive. Unfortunately, the needs of high school dropouts go beyond Coolidge. Young people continue to dropout of traditional high schools. One solution to this problem is to establish more alternative schools. Another, more meaningful, solution is to improve traditional high schools. Until the traditional high school more effectively educates all young people, alternative high schools must continue to operate.

As a result of this study, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Support alternative schools while reforming traditional schools.

2. Improve the effectiveness of alternative and traditional schools by listening to the needs of dropouts.

3. Train alternative school advisory committees in listening to the needs of dropouts.

4. Support efforts by alternative school faculty in advocating for the needs of dropouts.

5. Train traditional school faculty and administrators in listening to and understanding the needs of students at risk of dropping out.

6. Involve community social policymakers in understanding the issues surrounding the high school dropout problem.

Implications

There are implications of this study for social policymakers. Clearly, society cannot bear the social and economic costs associated with the dropout problem. The

best solutions to this social problem can be found at the local level. Looking for a non-local solution only diverts attention away from the needs of the dropouts. While the issue of dropouts has been studied previously, the perspective of the dropout at the community level must be heard. Using applied qualitative research as part of local educational needs assessments can result in more effective intervention strategies. The local policymaker must be willing to listen to the local high school dropout. In doing so, a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of the dropout problem is possible. A commitment to act must accompany this descriptive understanding by the local policymaker. Only through such understanding and action can education hope to prevent students from dropping out.

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