SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERPERFORMING HIGH SCHOOL LATINO MALES

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ABSTRACT

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT: PERCEPTIONS OF UNDERPERFORMING HIGH SCHOOL LATINO MALES

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This study examines the perceptions of underperforming Latino male high school students about the factors that they believe have led them to disengage from school. The literature indicates that a disproportionate number of these students are Latino males and that very little research has been conducted on the topic of school engagement from their perspective. This qualitative study of seven Latino males was guided by research questions focused on how students described their behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement throughout their educational experiences. Data analysis resulted in the following key findings: (1) The students described their academic performance and behavioral conduct as progressively getting worse beginning in middle school. (2) The students described a negative emotional connection to school, authority figures, and peers, which also became progressively worse beginning in middle school. (3) The students described a cognitive interest in learning that wavered very little throughout their
schooling experience but that does not necessarily apply to an interest in all types of learning. The implications of these findings suggest the following: (1) Elementary and middle school leaders need to collaborate on how to minimize the academic spike felt by students in middle school. (2) School authority figures need to make developing positive relationships with students a priority. (3) Educators need to develop programs that capitalize on the cognitive interest that already exists within the students and that allows the positive experiences that occurred in elementary school to continue throughout middle and high school.
Chapter I: Introduction

In the United States, approximately 25 percent of students drop out of high school every year. In forty years, this number has remained fairly constant. Too many students are dropping out of high school, and a disproportionate number of these students are African American and Latino. This is alarming to educators and researchers because after four decades, the high school dropout epidemic still persists and has not been alleviated beyond a 5 percent improvement rate. The state of California is a microcosm of this nationwide epidemic. The high school dropout rate in lower performing California urban school districts is of even greater concern because those numbers have shown very little improvement in the last forty years in comparison to average and high performing districts (Chapman et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, the dropout rate for African American and Latino students is more than double that of Caucasian students. Moreover, students from low-income families drop out approximately five times more often than high-income families (Chapman et al., 2010).

In addition to the statistics presented on the connection between high school dropout and race and socio-economic status, there is a significant body of research claiming a connection between high school dropout and gender. Carter, (2006), Kleinfeld (2009), Oguntoyinbo (2009), and Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) agree that males are more likely to disengage from school and more likely to drop out of school, among various other negative schooling experiences. Kleinfeld (2009) notes that these experiences and high school dropout are more frequent among Black and Latino males. For this reason, the focus of my study will be on low-income, Latino males. I want to give the high school Latino male experience a voice and validation. Exploring the
educational experiences of Latino males as it relates to their levels of engagement in school is key to understanding the types of supports and resources that can facilitate greater success for these students.

In addition to the research on race, socio-economic status, and gender, it is important to note that many of the potential high school dropouts have experienced chronic academic failure. This academic failure has the potential to turn into a dangerous domino effect that not only impacts the individual students but society as a whole. Students who drop out of high school are likely to face economic hardship because most professions require a high school diploma at the very minimum. As these high school dropouts mother and father their own children, there is the possibility that the cycle of economic hardship will perpetuate (Frey, Perry, Brazil, & Oregon, 2005).

Also, the students who are chronically underperforming academically are often at higher risk for disciplinary issues. What may begin as an extensive disciplinary log can potentially translate into a student choosing to participate in some form of criminal activity. A disproportionate amount of the student population at greatest risk for dropping out are participating in criminal activity and getting arrested, which makes it significantly difficult for these students to integrate back into general society and find a job (Frey et al., 2005).

It is the responsibility of the educational community to find solutions to the high school dropout problem that the United States is facing. In order to begin repairing the educational system, it is important to learn as much as possible about why students are disengaging from school in the first place. Are there trigger events, experiences, and/or relationships that cause students to disengage from school and, in some cases, drop out of
school? These are questions that could begin to be answered by the struggling students themselves. In my study, I want to learn about the perceptions of underperforming Latino male students regarding the factors leading them to disengage from school.

Problem Statement

Despite the implementation of various high school dropout prevention programs, the dropout rate has remained fairly steady over the last four decades. Risk factors for high school dropout such as low socio-economic status (SES), low GPA, and behavioral track record have been identified by a number of quantitative researchers. However, very little qualitative research has addressed the risk factors for high school dropout and even less qualitative research has addressed the experience of these risk factors from the perspective of the Latino male students who are at risk for dropping out of school.

Disengagement and high school dropout problems are compounded for Latino males. Kleinfeld (2009) and Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) conducted research indicating that Latino males are more likely to experience higher dropout rates, higher rates of placement in special education, and lower rates of postsecondary enrollment and graduation. In addition, Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) discuss the concept of acting “white” and machismo. In many poor, urban neighborhoods, academic success is viewed by Latino males in a negative light and can even be dangerous. According to Saenz and Ponjuan (2009), most Latino males who do not finish high school end up working low wage jobs, being unemployed, enlisting in the military, or getting sent to prison. The key researchers on this topic agree that the social, cultural, and financial barriers faced by many Latino males is a problem that needs to be addressed in educational research (Carter, 2006; Oguntoyinbo, 2009; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009).
Purpose and Background

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of underperforming Latino male high school students about the factors that they believe have led them to disengage from school with a specific focus on the following three most commonly referenced components of engagement in the literature: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004). With the intention of bringing awareness to the issues of school disengagement and dropout, researchers have illuminated three significant factors leading to the high school dropout epidemic: low SES, poor academic performance, and deviant behavior (Suh & Suh, 2007). The research relating to these risk factors has been primarily quantitative. Very little qualitative research has explored the how and why behind these three risk factors from the student’s perspective (Behnke, Gonzalez, & Cox, 2010; Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004; Suh & Suh, 2007; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007).

The research that has focused on the educational experience of students who are at a higher risk for dropping out frequently speaks from the view of the parents, teachers, and/or school. Little is known about the student perception regarding the factors that have led students to drop out or consider dropping out of high school. Qualitative data can shed additional light on how three of the greatest risk factors for dropping out – low SES, poor academic performance, and deviant behavior – are experienced by Latino males, and their relationship to disengagement. (Suh & Suh, 2007).

The more educators know about the factors that underperforming high school students perceive to lead to disengagement from school, the better schools can devise strategies that will help prevent students from dropping out of high school. The research
on school engagement is growing due to the increasing awareness of the connection between engagement and dropout rates (Betts, Appleton, Reschly, Christenson, & Huebner, 2010; Fredricks et al., 2011; Stouts & Christenson, 2009). The definition of engagement has been viewed and presented from multiple perspectives. The most widely used definition of engagement in the current research typically encompasses one or more of the following categories: behavioral, emotional, or cognitive. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in academics, participation in the social environment, and conduct (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989). Emotional engagement refers to the relationship with teachers, peers, and the school (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989). Cognitive engagement refers to an interest in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Learning about underperforming students’ behaviors, feelings, and thoughts from their perspective will allow educators to start uncovering the root of some problems that are leading to disengagement and, in some cases, dropping out of school.

**Research Questions**

The focus of the study was to answer the following research questions, which are based on the definition of engagement that was presented in the purpose and background section:

1) How do underperforming high school students describe their academic and social behavior throughout their educational experience?

2) How do these students describe their emotional connection to school, teachers, and peers throughout their educational experience?

3) How do these students describe their cognitive interest in school throughout their educational experience?
4) What are the educational and policy implications of school engagement for Latino males?

**Overview of Methodology**

The setting/context for my case study was a grade six through twelve charter school that caters to underperforming, Latino students from low socio-economic backgrounds. My student sample will be chosen purposefully according to these three criterion: low socio-economic status (based on free and reduced price lunch status), the lowest GPAs in the school, and the longest behavioral track records in the school. The reason for this set of criteria was based on the three factors that are the likeliest indicators for dropping out of high school (Suh & Suh, 2007). In beginning to understand the lived experiences from the perspective of this sample of students, I hope to identify some of the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive experiences that have led these students to disengage from school and in some cases, contemplate dropping out of school. I will use semi-structured, one-on-one interviews as the data collection method.

**Significance**

The broad problem of high school dropout is significant because too many children are dropping out of high school, which results in the limiting of their academic and career opportunities (Burzichelli, Mackey, & Bausmith, 2011; Kleinfeld, 2009; Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004; Orthner et al., 2010; Patterson, Hale, & Stressman, 2007; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009; Velez & Saenz, 2001). The education system, as an institution, is allowing children’s futures to be stifled. Out of the 25 percent of students not graduating from high school each year, most of them are low-income, minority students (Carter, 2006; Oguntoyinbo, 2009; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The education
system is not providing equal access to education for all children (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Conchas, 2001; Ginorio & Huston, 2000; Moreno, 1999; Ponjuan, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valencia, 2002; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). The educational community needs to gather research that will have the long-term effect of alleviating the dropout rate.

The educational system has implemented reform after reform that has not resolved the problem (Burzichelli et al., 2011; Kleinfeld, 2009; Montecel et al., 2004; Orthner et al., 2010; Patterson et al., 2007; Somers et al., 2009; Velez & Saenz, 2001). Educational researchers have collected mountains of data in an attempt to determine the primary factors that continue to result in such a large percentage of students dropping out of school. Some researchers say that the students are making the choice to drop out, while other researchers say that the education system is an institution designed to push certain types of students out (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Lee & Burkam, 2003). Whether it is drop out or push out, the point remains that too many low-income, minority students are exiting the school system prior to high school graduation (Burzichelli et al., 2011; Kleinfeld, 2009; Montecel et al., 2004; Orthner et al., 2010; Patterson et al., 2007; Somers et al., 2009; Velez & Saenz, 2001). This study aims to illuminate Latino male high school students’ experiences by exploring the factors that they perceive are leading them to disengage from school. The significance of understanding their experiences by exploring their perceptions is to document how these students behave, feel, and think so that interventions can be more accurately tailored to their needs.

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation for this study occurred during the participant selection process. I only studied students who exhibited the three traditional risk factors for dropping out of
school: low SES, low GPA, and behavioral track record (Suh & Suh, 2007). While these three factors are frequently referenced in the literature on high school dropout, it nonetheless limited the type of participants I chose to interview for my study. There are other factors cited less frequently in the literature, such as placement in special education and repetition of grade levels in elementary school, that were not included in the criteria for choosing my sample of participants. The setting of the study was a limitation, particularly because the study took place at a charter school that was experiencing a complete change in name and program, therefore acting somewhat like a start-up charter school. It is possible that this study would have different results if it took place at a large, traditional high school or a more established charter school. Another limitation in this study was the possibility that students would not be completely open and honest about their perceptions and experiences relating to disengagement from school. If a student was too nervous or closed off, this may have affected the richness of data that I was able to collect. To limit this effect, I established the necessary rapport with students to ensure their comfort in sharing information with me as much as possible when the audio recorder was turned on.

A delimitation for this study was the demographic profiles of the students I studied. I studied seven underperforming tenth grade students, who are Latino males, from one school site in California. Any data I gathered cannot be reliably generalized to other populations or individuals. The data collection took place over the course of a few months. This was a delimitation because the time frame inhibited my ability to follow-up with participants to see if there has been any change in their perceptions and/or to see if they chose to stay in school or drop out. This study does not address the population of
students who do in fact drop out of school nor will it address high school dropout prevention. The scope of this study strictly focused on the factors that underperforming students perceive led them to disengage from school.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

The remaining chapters of this dissertation are organized as follows: review of the literature, methodology, findings, discussion and conclusions. The review of the literature presents research on high school graduation and dropout statistics, the transition from middle school to high school, the traditional risk factors for high school dropout, the role of school structure and organization in high school dropout, and school engagement. The methodology chapter discusses research design/tradition, setting/context, sample and data sources, instruments and procedures, data collection, data analysis, and the role of the researcher. The findings chapter presents the main results of the study synthesized from the data collection process. The discussion and conclusions chapter is comprised of interpretations based on the findings, which then relate back to the research questions of the study.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

This study aims to understand the perceptions of underperforming Latino high school students with regards to disengagement from school. In this research, the term “underperforming” will refer to students achieving a grade point average (GPA) under 2.0. Additionally, for the purposes of this study, disengagement will be defined as a behavioral, emotional, and/or cognitive lack of interest in school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). As noted in the problem statement section in Chapter I, educational researchers have identified a series of individual and institutional factors that lead to high school disengagement and its relationship to dropping out. However, much of the research conducted on this topic is quantitative in nature and devoid of student voice. Little is known about the perception of underperforming high school students on the topic of disengagement from school (Fredricks et al., 2004). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) argue that the “potential contribution of the concept of school engagement to research on student experience has yet to be realized” (p. 59). My study will contribute to this gap in the literature by discovering how underperforming high school students have behaved, felt, and thought throughout their schooling experience. Through this process of discovery, I have been able to identify a specific set of experiences that impact underperforming high school students, in addition to understanding the role of the traditional risk factors that have already been identified in the current research on this topic.

The review of the literature begins with the broad problem of practice, high school dropout, with a look at high school graduation and dropout statistics. Within this section, the Latino male educational experience is highlighted as a point of focus from the
statistics. Next, there is a discussion about the relevance and importance of the transition from middle school to high school for underperforming students. Following this, there is a discussion of opposing literature on the traditional risk factors for high school dropout in comparison to the role of school structure and organization in high school dropout. At this point, the focus is narrowed to the research on high school engagement, which includes a subsection on school connectedness.

The review of the literature is heavily influenced by the definition of engagement, which focuses on the components of behavior, emotion, and cognition. In addition, these three components will be used as a lens to develop data collection methods and guide the analysis of data. This chapter ends with a summary discussion of the gaps in the current literature that form the basis for my study.

**High School Graduation and Dropout Statistics**

For the last forty years, the calculation method for high school graduates and dropouts has been largely inconsistent and inaccurate in per state calculations throughout the United States (Johnson & La Salle, 2010; Mishel & Roy, 2006; Swanson, 2004; Warren & Halpern-Manners, 2007; Zachry, 2010). There have been a multitude of calculation methods and names attached to these methods over the years. This inconsistency means that comparisons made across states and across time must be made with great caution, if at all (Mishel & Roy, 2006; Warren & Halpern-Manners, 2007).

Zachry (2010) illuminates the importance of evaluating the validity of high school graduation and dropout statistics. Zachry (2010) explains that particularly in the recent era of high stakes testing and accountability, it would not be in a school district’s best interest to provide full and accurate disclosure of dropout data. With the intense pressure
that school districts face from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), it is not surprising that some schools have been underreporting dropout rates and over reporting graduation rates (Zachry, 2010). In addition, each state has been accustomed to having the freedom of making their own calculations for reporting official high school graduates and dropouts. For example, Orfield (2004) found that one state was reporting students who went to jail as transfer students as opposed to official dropouts. The evidence of inconsistent data and underreporting dropouts is important in my work because it suggests that the graduate and dropout rates using a variety of calculation methods are likely to be significantly inaccurate (Johnson & La Salle, 2010; Swanson, 2004; Zachry, 2010). Researchers have pointed to limitations in the graduation rate calculations, however, it is clear that regardless of the exact number, the United States is facing a serious problem with high school dropouts that needs to be solved.

In response to the scholarly complaints about inconsistency across states and general inaccuracies concerning high school graduation and dropout reporting, the new method known as the compact rate or four-year cohort rate was developed. In 2005, the compact rate was developed by the National Governor’s Association (NGA) in an attempt to improve the prior calculation methods. In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education mandated that by the 2010-2011 school year (unless granted a one year extension), all states must calculate the graduation rate using the compact rate formula which appears as follows:

\[
\frac{\text{on-time graduates in year } x}{(\text{first-time entering ninth graders in year } x - 4) + (\text{transfers in}) - (\text{transfers out})}
\]

In addition to creating a consistent method of calculation across the nation, this formula accounts for students who transfer in and out of a school, which previously was a
category of students not accurately calculated. Also, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) is mandating that high schools document every time a student leaves the school and where they are going, whether it be to another school, out of the country, or dropping out. The first year of statistical data based on the compact rate is available for some states but not all, therefore the national rate has not yet been published. See Table 1 for graduate rates in California disaggregated by race (National Governors Association, 2012).

Table 1

*Compact Graduation Rates for Class of 2010 in California*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Subgroup</th>
<th>Compact Graduation Rates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>74.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>78.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>89.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Data source: CALPADS

This table contains several alarming data pieces concerning gender and race. In each of these categories, there is an achievement gap that clearly persists. For example, there is a 30.4 percent gap between the graduation rates for African Americans and Asians and an 8 percent gap in the graduation rates for males and females. The table also shows a large gap in the graduation rate of Latino students relative to Asian and White students. It is important to note that making comparisons between the prior methods and the compact rate method is problematic due to the different formulas used for the various methods. However, regardless of the calculation method, all graduation data report the
same conclusions. Too many students are dropping out of high school and too many of these students are African American, American Indian, Latino, and/or male.

The compact rate data is currently being released and not all states have reported with this method, and the national data is still missing. For this reason, data from immediately prior to the compact rate will also be presented in order to paint the picture of graduation rates on a state and national level. The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) was the most commonly used method of calculation for high school graduates prior to the compact rate. The AFGR is calculated in different ways depending on the state. The basic skeleton of the formula is the following (Johnson & La Salle, 2010):

\[
\text{AFGR} = \frac{\text{on time graduates in year } x}{\text{first-time entering ninth graders in year } x - 4}.
\]

This formula does not account for students who transfer in and out of a school throughout a four-year period, which is one of the main reasons for the development of the compact rate formula. Table 2 illustrates the AFGR for California and the United States, respectively, disaggregated by race (Stillwell, Sable, & Plotts, 2011):

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Subgroup</th>
<th>California AFGR</th>
<th>United States AFGR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>71.0%</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian / Alaska Native</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian / Pacific Islander</td>
<td>91.9%</td>
<td>91.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
<td>65.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>57.7%</td>
<td>63.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
According to this data, 75.5 percent of students in the United States graduated high school within a four-year period in 2009. This means that approximately 25 percent of high school students in the United States either dropped out or were unaccounted for in the class of 2009. In California, only 71 percent of students graduated high school within a four-year period in 2009. This means that almost 30 percent of high school students in California either dropped out or were unaccounted for in the class of 2009. Even more alarming are the high school graduation statistics for Black, Hispanic, and American Indian / Alaska Native students. Nationally, 63.5 percent of Black students graduated high school within a four year period in 2009, 64.8 percent for American Indian / Alaska Natives, and 65.9 percent for Hispanics. In California, the AFGR varies slightly from the newly calculated compact rate, however, they both paint an equally dire picture as it relates to persisting group differences in high school dropout. In addition, these gaps have persisted despite high school dropout prevention efforts (Burzichelli et al., 2011; Kleinfeld, 2009; Montecel et al., 2004; Orthner et al., 2010; Patterson et al., 2007; Somers et al., 2009; Velez & Saenz, 2001).

**Latino Male Educational Experience**

Kleinfeld conducted a study examining the current standing of males in education - academically, behaviorally, and socially. Kleinfeld (2009) discovered the following:

Males have a higher likelihood of experiencing far lower literacy, lower school grades, lower engagement in school, higher dropout from school, higher rates of repeating a grade, higher rates of emotional disturbance and learning disabilities and placement in special education, higher rates of suspensions and expulsions, and lower rates of postsecondary enrollment and graduation. (Kleinfeld, 2009, p. 126)
She notes that these experiences are more frequent among Black and Latino males.

In their research on the “Vanishing Latino Male in Higher Education,” Saenz and Ponjuan discuss several alarming statistics about the school experiences of Latino males compared to Latina females, which overlap some of the assertions made by Kleinfeld. Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) discovered the following: girls outperform boys academically, more girls attend preschool, boys are twice as likely to be held back in elementary school, boys have more discipline problems, boys are more likely to be suspended, boys are three times more likely to commit suicide, boys are twice as likely to be labeled with a learning disability, boys are seven times as likely to be diagnosed with ADD and ADHD, and boys are more likely to drop out of high school. This presents a troubling picture for the Latino male educational experience.

In addition, Saenz and Ponjuan (2009) discuss the concept of acting “white” and machismo. In many poor, urban neighborhoods, academic success is viewed by Latino males in a negative light and can even be dangerous. Most of the research on the concept of acting “white” is rooted in the African American culture but applies very similarly to the Latino culture. In 1986, Fordham and Ogbu published a well-known piece in which they presented the resistance-to-acting-white thesis. In this thesis, they discussed how African American students living in a poor neighborhood in Washington, D.C. “came to define achievement-oriented behaviors and attitudes as acting white and were therefore resistant to studying hard and getting good grades” (Carter, 2006, p. 305). Culturally, some argue that for Latino males, it is important to have machismo traits such as masculinity, strength, independence, and the desire to act as a protector (Carter, 2006; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Carrying books, spending time on homework, and getting
recognitions in school is sometimes viewed as contradictory to these machismo traits in the Latino male culture (Carter, 2006; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). These contradictory behaviors are believed to have some bearing on the schooling experience of Latino males. Oguntoyinbo (2009) argues that many Latino males face a variety of barriers to receiving a high school diploma that most White males do not face. In addition to machismo and the resistance to acting “white,” Latino males are often pressured to help support their families by getting one or more jobs as a teenager (Carter, 2006; Oguntoyinbo 2009; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). This can make it difficult to attend school and perform well academically. In some schools, many Latino males are placed on an academic track that does not prepare them for college. Oguntoyinbo (2009) adds that there are few Latino male teachers to act as role models for these young men in the school setting. Also, during the time when Latino males are exhibiting a lack of engagement in school, there is relatively little outreach to reel them back into the education system. There is far too little support in the education system for the Latino male students who are much too frequently dropping out of high school (Oguntoyinbo, 2009).

In 2010, 25.9 percent of Latino males of ages 18-24 years were enrolled in some form of higher education but did not complete it (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011). In 2010, only 3.2 percent of Latino males of ages 18-24 years earned a B.A. degree or higher (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011). With the cards stacked against Latino males in education, where are they going if they are not finishing high school and/or not attending college? According to Saenz and Ponjuan (2009), most Latino males who do not finish high school end up working low wage jobs, being unemployed, enlisting in the military, or getting sent to
prison. The social, cultural, and financial barriers faced by so many Latino males is a topic that greatly needs to be addressed in educational research (Carter, 2006; Oguntoyinbo, 2009; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The research on Latino males is important in my work because I want to give the high school Latino male experience a voice and sense of validation. Exploring the educational experiences of Latino males as it relates to their levels of engagement in school is key to understanding the types of supports and resources that can facilitate greater success for these students. In addition to exploring the educational experiences of Latino males, another topic that is prevalent in the school dropout and engagement research is the transition from middle school to high school.

**Transition from Middle School to High School**

The transition from middle school to high school has been frequently cited in the literature as a predictor of the decision to stay in high school or dropout (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Juvonen, 2007; Orthner et al., 2010; Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, & Patterson, 2011). Samel, Sondergeld, Fischer, and Patterson (2011) conducted a six year longitudinal study to determine the role that resistance and resilience play among students in grades 7-12 as they navigate their way through the middle and secondary educational pipeline. The researchers focused on a school site that has a 47 percent dropout rate and included students in their study who displayed some of the traditional risk factors starting in the 7th grade. The traditional risk factors for dropping out of school, which are discussed in greater detail in the next section of this chapter, are low SES, low grade point average (GPA), and poor behavior. This study, along with a twelve year longitudinal study conducted by Bowers (2010), revealed that students who display attitudes of resistance begin exhibiting some of the traditional risk factors for dropping
out beginning as early as the 7th grade. The researchers found that the students who displayed attitudes of resilience were frequently the ones who self-reported receiving encouragement and help from teachers and school personnel. The most relevant piece that came from this study is the finding that students begin experiencing the traditional risk factors in 7th grade. The dropout research is often conducted in high school and sometimes misses this crucial element of the big picture behind high school dropout - how early the process of disengagement can begin. Not only do warning signs often begin in the 7th grade, but by the time this type of student transitions from middle school to high school, their chances for dropping out have multiplied exponentially (Bowers, 2010; Samel et al., 2011).

Cohen and Smerden (2009) examine the significance behind the transition from middle to high school. By the end of the 9th grade, some students realize that the workload is greater, the teacher expectations are higher, and the lost credits are difficult to make up. Researchers looking at the transition between middle and high school are realizing the need for a change in structure and offer of more support during this tenuous time (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Juvonen, 2007; Orthner et al., 2010; Samel et al., 2011). Cohen and Smerden (2009) note that schools are beginning to restructure themselves to accommodate smaller populations in order to provide smaller learning communities. However, until the high school dropout statistics reflect a positive outcome from these smaller learning communities, students who become disengaged and disconnected in middle school remain at higher risk for dropping out of high school. For many students who drop out of high school, disengagement is a cumulative process that frequently starts in middle school, or much earlier, and culminates in high school dropout.
Traditional Risk Factors for High School Dropout

The term high school dropout first entered educational research and national policy discussions in the late 1950s (Stout & Christenson, 2009). By the 1960s, the socio-political expectation that all students graduate from high school was nationally prevalent. Stout and Christenson (2009) explain that by the end of the 1960s, the national push for high school graduation faded into the background and not much was said about it until the 1983 publication of A Nation at Risk (Stout & Christenson, 2009). During this time in the early 1980s, high school dropout became a hot topic again, and the term “at risk” student appeared in the literature and in policy discussions. The thinking at the time that arose from A Nation at Risk was that there were individual factors leading to high school dropout, such as SES, and that dropout prevention programs needed to be established to help these “at risk” students. It has been more than thirty years since the publication of A Nation at Risk, and many researchers are still discussing the impact that these individual risk factors have on the high school dropout rate.

Suh and Suh (2007) report that there are three major individual risks factors leading to high school dropout: low SES, low GPA, and behavioral problems. Other prominent researchers on this topic have concurred with Suh and Suh (2007) in stating that low SES, poor academic performance, and behavioral problems are leading factors that have consistently contributed to the high school dropout rate over the last thirty years (Chavez, Belkin, Hornback, & Adams, 1991; Janosz, Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000; National Collaboration for Youth, 1989; Rumberger, 1983; Suh & Suh, 2007; Wells, 1990). Within these three major risk factors, some of the sub risk factors that have been identified as contributors to the likelihood of dropping out include: lack of interest in
school, getting bad grades, falling behind in school, clashing with school authority figures, parents with a lack of formal education, makeup of household, lack of motivation, not identifying with the school community, and a lack of engagement in school (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003; Coley, 1995; Devine, 1996; Pittman, 1986; Tidwell, 1988). Suh and Suh (2007) conducted a quantitative study using multiple logistic regressions to determine which factors and to what extent these factors contribute to dropping out of high school. The results of the study identified the three greatest risk factors as low SES, low GPA, and behavioral problems. The results also indicated that the more risk factors students had, the more likely they were to become disengaged and dropout of high school (Suh & Suh, 2007).

Strom and Boster (2007) conducted a meta-analysis regarding the effect of messages in the home and school. This is relevant because the messages students receive in the home and school can impact academic performance, which is one of the three major risk factors. Strom and Boster (2007) discovered that the communication of parent educational expectations to a child impacts the child’s perception of school and engagement in school. Parents who place a positive emphasis on school are more likely to have children who do the same and as a result choose to stay in school. The type of student-teacher interaction that a student experiences in school also plays a role in their decision to stay in school or dropout of school. In some cases, students who do not receive positive messages about school at home receive these positive messages and support from student-teacher interactions. When a student is missing this positive interaction from home and school, they are more likely to drop out of school (Strom & Boster, 2007).
The third greatest risk factor for dropping out of school, behavioral problems, is discussed by Finn, Fish, and Scott (2008) in their quantitative study regarding the seven most frequent types of misbehavior that lead to dropping out of high school. The following is a list of these types of misbehavior: skipping class, disruptive behavior, fighting, getting into trouble, drinking, drug use, and belonging to a gang. The researchers followed students from grade 8 through grade 12 and administered surveys based on these seven misbehaviors. The analysis of the surveys was used to determine which students had dropped out by grade 12 (Finn, Fish, & Scott, 2008). These behaviors work similarly to the three broad risk factors in that the greater number of misbehaviors that students engage in, the more likely they are to drop out of school.

**Role of School Structure and Organization in High School Dropout**

In the literature on high school dropout, two dichotomous perspectives emerge: (1) students dropout of high school due to traditional risk factors such as low SES, low GPA, and behavior problems and (2) students drop out of high school, at a disproportionately high rate among Black and Latino populations, because of the school structure and unequal institutional access to curriculum and resources (Rumberger & Rodrigues, 2002; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). The high school graduate and dropout statistics lead both sides to agree on who is dropping out most frequently. The disagreement arises among researchers when discussing why it is that these populations are dropping out at disproportionately higher rates. Researchers who argue that the school structure is what eventually prompts poor and minority students to leave high school refer to high school dropout as high school “push out” (Lee & Burkam, 2003). This distinction in the phrasing of the problem signifies the difference in perspective on why students leave high
school - for individual reasons (the fault of the student) compared to school structure reasons (the fault of the school). Lee and Burkam (2003) argue that most students who drop out of high school experience at least one of the traditional risk factors along with a school structure that is designed to conflict with their social, cultural, and/or economic background in some way. The researchers who study the relationship between these elements of school structure and high school dropout typically disaggregate data into the following three subcategories: school structure, academic organization, and social organization (Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Lee & Burkam, 2003).

**School structure.**

School structure is most commonly described in terms of sector, urbanicity, and size (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Sector refers to private or public setting. Urbanicity refers to urban or suburban location. Size refers to small (under 500 students), medium (between 500 and 1,000 students), and large (over 1,000 students) (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Rumberger and Thomas (2000) demonstrated in a quantitative study that when demographics, resources, and attendance were controlled for, school structure became the leading cause of high school dropout. Dropout rates were highest in schools that were public, urban, and large (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Several other studies have confirmed the findings from the Rumberger and Thomas study in 2000 (Lee, 1999; Lee & Loeb, 2000; Lee & Smith, 1997). Also, in many of these types of schools there is a disproportionate enrollment of students of color, including Latino students (Darling-Hammond, 2007). In many cases, the school structure is designed in a way that allows wide-scale failure for low-income, Latino students.
**Academic organization.**

Academic organization primarily refers to the high school curriculum. The key question in this discussion is what types of classes are offered, and what types of students are taking those classes? In schools where there is a sharp division among types of classes (e.g., low level, honors, and AP), the students taking the low level classes are typically poor and minority students (Lee & Burkam, 2003). In schools where there are no “low level” courses, students learn more, are more engaged, and are more likely to stay in school (Freedman et al., 2005; Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rubin, 2006). In the world of education, this statement leads to the topic of academic tracking.

Tracking students based on presumed academic ability has been a fiery debate for decades (Rubin, 2006). The main advantage of tracking is that teachers have a homogeneous group of students, which makes it easier to design and deliver instruction. The main disadvantage of tracking is that instructional design and delivery is more challenging and the social element of student self-concept is often diminished. The most common stance among researchers in the twenty-first century is that the advantages of tracking are outweighed by the disadvantages of tracking (Freedman et al., 2005; Rubin, 2006). While most educators agree that tracking is not an effective education strategy, tracking certainly does still exist, particularly in schools that enroll a disproportionately high number of students of color.

The majority of students are well aware of what type of track they are on and how that track is perceived by the adults who placed them there. Students often associate the lower track as the one with classes for “dumb” students and the higher track as the one with classes for “smart” students and then exert their effort accordingly (Carbonaro,
2005). Freedman et al. (2005) argues that tracking much too often leads to less school engagement and in some cases, high school dropout because students have been presorted into categories of successes and failures. The division placed between the students and the assumptions made about their academic abilities is often too much of an obstacle to overcome for a struggling, low-income Latino male student. These students are already facing multiple social, cultural, and financial barriers in addition to the negative perceptions of the adults guiding their education experience.

**Social organization.**

Social organization began to enter the academic conversation regarding the relationship between high school dropout and school organization factors when researchers started interviewing students who had recently dropped out of high school (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Many of these students were citing reasons for leaving high school that would be considered part of the social organization category. These students commented that teachers did not care about them even when the students solicited help from teachers. They explained that teachers were not there to make sure they succeeded and to talk about their personal problems with them when needed (Croninger & Lee, 2001). On the contrary, in studies that involved interviews with students who were at high risk for dropping out of high school based on the traditional risk factors, students who graduated cited incidents of teachers going out of their way to help, support, and mentor them through academics and life (Fine, 1991; LeCompte & Dworkin, 1991; Lee, Smerdon, Alfeld-Liva, & Brown, 2000; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandes, 1989). In most quantitative and qualitative studies on the topic of the factor of social organization, the relationship between students and teachers beyond the one hour in the
classroom appears to be key. Stanton-Salazar (2001) asserts that this is particularly true for Latino males.

**School structure and equal access.**

Stanton-Salazar (2001) published a book about the effects of school structure and equal access on low-income, Mexican-origin youth. He describes how many low-income, Mexican-origin youth frequently experience failure in school and how educators often assume that this is happening because these students are not trying hard enough or do not care. However, the reality is often an alienation from the school as an institution that does a poor job of integrating low-income, Mexican-origin youth into the middle class school system. Most school institutions are rooted in middle class social networks and traditions. Stanton-Salazar contends that students who go through the school system with middle class social capital do not experience the same kind of conflict and disconnect as students who go through the school system with working class social capital.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) continues by explaining that many of these students are living in poverty. They may not always have food to eat, water to drink, clothing, a comfortable place to sleep, a safe neighborhood to live in, or other basic resources. These are basic needs that a child needs to be able to survive and have a chance at succeeding in school. When these needs are not met, the child may not be performing well in school and/or may have increased behavioral infractions. Instead of finding ways to better integrate these students into the school system, these children are often disciplined harshly and blamed for their academic performance level and behavior. Stanton-Salazar (2001) writes that something as simple as providing safe and comfortable
opportunities for students to bond with school officials could make a significant
difference in engagement and motivation.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) adds that the misconception about these students is often
started by the school. When a student is low-income, of Mexican-origin, and low
performing, teachers or other school officials sometimes jump to the conclusion that this
is just a “bad” kid and the parents do not care. When in reality, the student does not have
the same social network (support from home and school) as other middle class students
often have. These students experience the “outsider” effect when it comes to the types of
social networks that the school institution values and promotes. The bottom line is that
middle class people and working class people are embedded in different social networks
and these different networks afford middle class people with far more opportunities
academically and socially than working class people. The author explains, “working
class networks can become social prisons” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 17). He elaborates
that it should be the job of the school as an institution to provide all students the same
access to the favored social network but instead the school as an institution provides
functions to restrict it from certain populations.

In this study, Stanton-Salazar (2001) examines the types of social networks that
working class, Mexican-origin children have access to as they cope with life challenges.
The author writes about two specific constraints on “help-seeking”: 1) distrust, fear, and
anxiety of approaching adults for help and 2) institutional constraints such as school
counselors giving more time and attention to middle and high-income students. Stanton-
Salazar (2001) makes it clear that Mexican-origin youth are not seeking help from
teachers or school officials very often, which results in a lack of access to the full
capacity of the school structure. Stanton-Salazar’s study is important in my work because, in essence, his study demonstrated that some schools are organized in a way that do not promote a comfortable opportunity for Mexican-origin youth to seek help when they need it most. This same finding has also been confirmed in the work of Saenz and Ponjuan (2009).

Zarate and Burciaga (2010) discuss trends and equal access to higher education for Latino students. Given that only 65.9 percent of the Latino population graduated from high school in 2009, Zarate and Burciaga (2010), along with other experts, argue that it is imperative for educators to consider school structure factors such as access to curriculum and resources (Ginorio & Huston, 2000; Moreno, 1999; Valencia, 2002). This variation in the distribution of resources is primarily due to the location of the schools that are serving predominantly Latino students. These schools are usually located in low-income neighborhoods and typically do not receive the same level of funding as schools located in higher income neighborhoods (DeLuca, 2010). With such a low high school graduation rate for Latinos, these authors argue for the need to examine the structure of the school and issues related to equal access.

Brown and Rodriguez (2009) conducted an ethnographic, qualitative study following the educational and home lives of two Latino male students. The purpose of the study was to determine what institutional factors contributed to the two students’ eventual decision to drop out of school. The researchers identified the low level of engagement that both students experienced in school. The following factors related to the school as an institution emerged from the interviews and observations of the two students: lack of challenge for high performing students who are amongst predominantly
low performing students, failure to implement Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) for students struggling with general education material, lack of caring from school teachers and personnel, gender and race stereotypes, and a staff that is overworked and rarely able to help with academic concerns (school counselors in particular). The researchers discuss disengagement from school as a progressive occurrence. Each year that a student at risk for dropping out is in school, the more disengaged they become. Brown and Rodriguez (2009) “illuminate how, through educational neglect and social and intellectual alienation, schools and school adults contributed to these two students’ progressive disengagement from school” (p. 1). The authors of this study argue that the traditional risk factors of low SES, low GPA, and behavioral problems, are still relevant and important to discuss, however, the discussion needs to expand to include factors related to structures within the school institution itself that impact school engagement and dropout.

Conchas (2001) conducted a study of twenty-six Latino students at a large urban high school in California on the impact of school structure on the Latino student school experience. Latinos were 10 percent of what was a majority African American student population. The study sought to describe how the various academic programs at this school construct failure or success for the Latino population. The results of the study demonstrated that the school was completely segregated by race, as well as academically and socially. Latino students who were in the advanced programs shared this space with predominantly White and Asian American students. These Latino students were succeeding in school and were only friends with other advanced students. Latino students who were in the basic level academic programs shared this space with
predominantly African American students. These Latino students were not succeeding in school and were only friends with other basic level students.

The conclusion of the study was that this school structured itself in a way that academically benefited only one part of the Latino population. Throughout the article, Conchas (2001) discussed the close relationship between school structure and school engagement. Students who are experiencing a school structure that is not designed to facilitate academic success are typically much less engaged than their counterparts who experience a sense of fitting in well with the school structure. This study points to the importance of learning about students’ school experiences with regards to how they fit into the school structure and how engaged they are in school.

The aforementioned literature suggests that high school dropout is caused on the one hand by traditional risk factors such as low SES, low GPA, or poor behavior. At the same time, other scholars argue that high school dropout is caused by institutional factors such as structural, academic, or social constructs within a school. The research about each of these differing perspectives highlights disengagement as a key factor in the decision to drop out. The body of literature that covers the connection between school engagement and dropout is a central focus in this review of the literature.

**School Engagement**

The research on school engagement is growing due to the increasing awareness of the connection between engagement and dropout rates (Betts et al., 2010; Fredricks et al., 2011; Stouts & Christenson, 2009). The definition of engagement has been viewed and presented from multiple perspectives. The most widely used definition of engagement in the current research typically encompasses one or more of the following categories:
behavioral, emotional, or cognitive. Behavioral engagement refers to participation in academics, participation in the social environment, and conduct (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989). Emotional engagement refers to the relationship with teachers, peers, and the school (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989). Cognitive engagement refers to an interest in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Learning about underperforming students’ behaviors, feelings, and thoughts from their perspective will allow educators to start uncovering the root of some problems that are leading to disengagement, and in some cases, dropping out. In their research on the study of school engagement, Fredricks et al. (2004) call for “richer characterizations of how students behave, feel, and think - research that could aid in the development of finely tuned interventions” (p. 59). These three components of engagement will be used as a lens to guide the rest of the literature review, the methodology, and the development of the interview protocol because of the documented connection between engagement and dropout rates (Betts et al., 2010; Fredricks et al., 2011; Stouts & Christenson, 2009).

The counterpart to engagement, disengagement, is a phenomenon that can start as early as the first grade. Disengagement from school is documented in the literature as one of the central causes of poor academic performance and high school dropout (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Finn, 1989; Marks, 2000). Disengagement from school goes beyond the individual student. It is often a domino effect that leads to high school dropout, increased social economic costs, and social problems such as criminal activity (Manlove, 1998; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2003; Orfield, 2004; Pettit & Western, 2004).
The vast majority of research on high school engagement and dropout is quantitative. A couple of those large studies are summarized here and several more are cited for reference in this section. There are hardly any qualitative studies that deal specifically with high school engagement and dropout. However, most of the qualitative studies on engagement emphasize subtopics within engagement such as school connectedness, which is discussed in the following subsection and the role of school structure, which was discussed in the previous section. Both of these subtopics are in essence linked to engagement, which is linked to dropout rates. A couple of these studies are also summarized in this section, which build on the findings of Conchas, Stanton, and others from the previous section on school structure.

The following factors have been shown to contribute in some way to disengagement and high school dropout: attendance, grades, behavior, parental support, relationship with authority figures, and school connectedness (Belfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Betts et al., 2010; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Juvonen, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lohmeier & Lee, 2011; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rios, 2010; Stout & Christenson, 2009; Suh & Suh, 2007). The question is raised in the literature as to which comes first - the disengagement or the factors such as attendance and behavior (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011). For example, do students who have poor attendance become disengaged because they are missing so much school or do students become disengaged because of some latent factors, which then results in poor attendance? While there appears to be a relationship, the directionality and causality is unclear. Research on the topic of engagement can shed additional light on key factors influencing school engagement. Following are two examples of large-scale quantitative studies that focused
on some of these factors in relation to school engagement.

Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver (2007) conducted a longitudinal quantitative study on student engagement in relation to high school graduation. The study ran over the course of eight years tracing 12,972 students from high poverty urban middle schools starting in the sixth grade and through high school (plus an additional year). The purpose of the study was to detect early warning signs of student disengagement starting in the sixth grade in order to predict which students had a higher likelihood of dropping out of high school, if no intervention was provided during middle school. Balfanz et al. (2007) discovered that three early warning signs consistently predicted a higher likelihood of student disengagement and high school dropout: poor attendance, poor grades, and poor behavior. With this information, the researchers implemented a high school dropout prevention program across a group of middle schools. The students who experienced at least one of the early warning signs and attended one of the middle schools with this high school dropout prevention program for all three years were 55 percent more likely to graduate high school than students who experienced the early warning signs at a middle school without the program (Belfanz et al., 2007). This study is important in my work because I am attempting to gather similar data by identifying early indicators that lead to high school dropout from a qualitative perspective.

Brewster and Bowen (2004) conducted a quantitative study across ten states surveying 633 Latino middle and high school students who were considered at risk for dropping out of school. The study’s survey examined the following four measures: problem behavior, perception of school meaningfulness, parental support, and teacher support (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). The key finding that the researchers discovered
through regression analysis was that the strongest relationship lied between perceived teacher support and perceived school meaningfulness (Brewster & Bowen, 2004). This means that the more students felt supported by a teacher, the more that school mattered to them. In addition, Brewster and Bowen (2004) found that teacher support mattered more than parental support in terms of school meaningfulness and in decreasing problem behavior. This study is strikingly similar to the studies presented in the social organization subsection that is in the section about the role of school structure and organization. There is clearly an overlap in the type of research and findings for the literature on high school dropout and high school engagement. The Brewster and Bowen (2004) study is important in identifying key factors that can be examined and their meaning illuminated through qualitative interviews from students with similar demographics.

The bulk of the literature specifically on the topic of school engagement either takes place in other countries (Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Hodgson, 2007; Lessard et al., 2008; Maslak, Kim, & McLoughlin, 2010) and/or has interviews with students who have already dropped out of high school (Gallagher, 2002; Suh & Suh, 2006). Studies that focus on the topic of school engagement in other countries are too far removed from my study because a crucial part of my study is the participant sample of Latino males in the United States and the reoccurring issue of the United States school structure. On the other hand, it would be useful to discuss the studies about students who have already dropped out of high school because this literature might help shed light on the factors that lead to disengagement and consequently to high school dropout.
Gallagher (2002) interviewed four students who recently dropped out of school about their academic, social, and emotional experiences. The students spoke about the following experiences: teachers not listening to their needs, lack of parent support, becoming a single teenage parent, racial and cultural discrimination, poor academic performance, poor attendance, the need to work, lack of participation in school community, and substance abuse. For Latino males, these factors are often compounded as discussed earlier in the review of the literature.

Suh and Suh (2006) conducted a mixed methods study, including interviews of high school dropouts. They found the following factors to be the most important predictors of high school dropout: lack of academic aspiration, lack of organizational skill, and an external locus of control (Suh & Suh, 2006). The locus of control refers to how an individual associates the cause of an experience. If an individual experiences more of an internal locus of control, it means that the person is more likely to look within themselves to identify the cause of an issue, such as the feeling of not being engaged in school. If an individual experiences more of an external locus of control, it means that the person is more likely to look at external factors, such as the way the person has been treated by a teacher or the school community to identify the cause of an issue like wanting to drop out of school. Suh and Suh (2006) claim that the students who drop out of high school and do not pursue any type of alternative education typically experience an external locus of control, looking to everything but themselves as the cause of their plight. This study is important in my work because it calls to attention three factors that have not yet been illuminated in the review of the literature on the topics of school engagement and high school dropout.
School Connectedness

School connectedness is a concept that has been studied within the context of school engagement because students who feel more connected to school are more likely to feel engaged in school and vice-a-versa. School connectedness is defined as students feeling a part of their school and feeling an attachment to the teachers and students (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011). Students who experience school connectedness typically experience the following four factors: adult support, belonging to a positive peer group, commitment to education, and a positive school environment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Osterman (as cited in Lohmeier & Lee, 2011) highlights that “when students do not experience feelings of connectedness to school, they . . . are considerably more likely to drop out of school” (p. 85). The literature on school connectedness is important in my work because it suggests a relationship between school engagement and dropping out of school.

Monahan, Oesterle, and Hawkins (2010) argue that increasing school connectedness would be a large part of the solution to disengagement and dropping out. School connectedness results in less behavior problems, better emotional well-being (Eccles et al., 1993), and increased academic achievement (Osterman, 2000). By the time students reach high school, 40-60 percent of surveyed students report being disconnected from school (Klem & Connell, 2004). Monahan, Oesterle, and Hawkins (2010) propose that if schools investigate how to increase school connectedness that engagement will increase, and the dropout rate will decrease.

Lohmeier and Lee (2011) conducted a quantitative study evaluating school connectedness using the School Connectedness Scale (SCS) developed by Parker, Lee,
and Lohmeier (2008). The purpose of the study was to assess the differences in school connectedness between an urban high school and a suburban high school. The researchers used a fifty-four item survey addressing the three relationships key to school connectedness: school, adults, and peers. The results demonstrated that the suburban students had a slightly higher level of school connectedness than the urban students. For both schools combined, the highest percentage of students felt a “negative connectedness” to school (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011). This suggests that school connectedness is an issue that needs to be addressed in most schools, albeit likely more so in urban settings.

Juvonen (2007) conducted a study looking at the impact of school connectedness on school engagement in middle school. Most schools have such large numbers of students that each teacher is responsible for, from anywhere between 100 and 200 students. This makes it challenging for teachers to develop relationships with individual students. In addition, peer relationships are essential in fostering a sense of connectedness to school (Juvonen, 2007). Also, the school climate in general has to be positive, safe, inviting, and comfortable for all students to feel connected to the experiences students have at school and in class. Juvonen (2007) argues that a student who feels more connected to school is more likely to be engaged in school. Juvonen (2007) suggests that students who experience a lack of connectedness to school in middle school are more likely to experience a lack of connectedness and engagement in high school. The school connectedness research is important in my work as a way of understanding the relationship between this concept, engagement, and the likelihood of dropping out.
Summary

During the last forty years, the high school graduation and dropout rates have been calculated using many different methods, therefore, making comparisons problematic. The currently accepted method, the compact rate, has yielded data for most of the states, but no national data is available yet. According to the compact rate calculation, the graduation rate for students in California is 74.4 percent. According to previous calculation methods, the graduation rate for students in the United States is 75.5 percent. Despite the calculation, the graduation rate for African American, Latino, and American Indian / Alaska Native students is substantially less than White and Asian students. This study will focus on the Latino male population.

The literature frequently cites the transition from middle school to high school as a factor closely related to school engagement and dropout. Several longitudinal studies have verified that the path towards disengagement, low GPA, and behavioral problems begins as early as the 7th grade for students who feel a lack of connectedness to their schooling experience. Researchers who are now focusing on this transition sometimes accuse those researchers who only focus on high school of missing a crucial component of the engagement/dropout puzzle.

The three most frequently cited risk factors for dropping out of school are low SES, low GPA, and behavioral problems. However, the research in the last decade has shed light on an alternative perspective with regards to high school engagement and dropout among students categorized as high risk – the role of the school structure and organization. Proponents of this perspective argue that it is not internal, independent factors such as low GPA and behavioral problems that are of greatest concern but rather
external, institutional factors such as inequitable access to resources and curriculum. Proponents of both perspectives agree, however, that there is an undeniable link between disengagement from school and the risk of high school dropout. This is even more pronounced for the Latino male population.

The review of the literature demonstrates that the majority of the research on the topic of high school engagement and dropout is quantitative. Little qualitative research has been conducted directly on the topic of engagement and dropout, particularly from the perspective of the students (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009, Fredricks et al., 2004). However, there are qualitative studies that focus on subtopics within engagement, such as school structure and school connectedness. Studies have demonstrated a link between these subtopics and dropout, particularly for Latino males.

The purpose of my study is to learn about the educational experiences that have impacted Latino male students who are at high risk for dropping out of school by asking questions about their behavior, feelings, and thoughts. Gathering narrative data from these students before they potentially make the choice to dropout will hopefully provide insight into some more practical dropout prevention strategies for this population. The educational community needs to collect data from the students themselves who are experiencing the high level risk factors for disengagement and dropout. The students at risk for dropping out will be able to inform the educational community better than any adult presupposing why these students behave, feel, and think the way they do.

There is a significant gap in the literature with regards to qualitative studies on the relationship between school engagement and high school dropout. There are qualitative studies that hover around the topic of engagement and high school dropout, however,
very few of these studies have qualitatively examined engagement directly from the
Latino males who are at risk for dropping out of high school.
Chapter III: Methodology

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how underperforming high school students describe their level of engagement in school by exploring their academic and social behavior, emotional connection to school, teachers, and peers, and their cognitive interest in school. In the last forty years, educators and researchers across the United States have expressed concern about the rate of students dropping out of high school. In 2009, only 75.5 percent of students in the United States graduated from high school. Researchers have illuminated three significant factors leading to the high school dropout epidemic: low socio-economic status (SES), poor academic performance, and deviant behavior (Suh & Suh, 2007; Suh et al., 2007).

Previous research relating to these risk factors has been primarily quantitative. Very few qualitative research studies have explored the how and why behind these three risk factors from the student’s perspective (Behnke et al., 2010; Martinez et al., 2004; Suh & Suh 2007; Suh et al., 2007). The more researchers learn about the students’ academic and social behavior, emotional connection to school, and cognitive interest in school, the more likely that educators will be able to address some of the known risk factors for dropping out of high school.

Research Questions

The focus of the study was to answer the following research questions, which are based on the definition of engagement that was presented in Chapter 2:

1) How do underperforming high school students describe their academic and social behavior throughout their educational experience?
2) How do these students describe their *emotional* connection to school, teachers, and peers throughout their educational experience?

3) How do these students describe their *cognitive* interest in school throughout their educational experience?

4) What are the educational and policy implications of school engagement for Latino males?

**Chapter Organization**

First, the decision to use a phenomenological research tradition is described. Next, the rationale for choosing the setting and context where I work is discussed. Then, the reasoning for choosing the sample and data sources is illuminated. After that, the instruments and procedures are discussed and are available for viewing in the appendices. Following that, the data collection methods and data analysis procedures are presented in detail. Last, the role of the researcher is defined and discussed.

**Research Design/Tradition**

This was a phenomenological case study using the lens of an interpretivist paradigm. A case study focuses on understanding processes and phenomena that naturally occur in the social world. I used a heuristic approach in my case study in order to focus on the understanding of a particular phenomenon in an educational setting. Phenomenology was the most appropriate research tradition for my study because I wanted to understand the lived experiences of underperforming tenth graders with regards to how they describe their behavior, emotions, and cognition throughout their educational experience. The lived experience refers to a person’s perception of their experiences surrounding a particular topic. Many different people could potentially
perceive one experience in different ways. In the phenomenological tradition, the lived experience is the description of the experience through the eyes of the participant.

Phenomenology is composed of two attitudes: the natural attitude and the phenomenological attitude. The natural attitude refers to “the focus we have when we are involved in our original, world-directed stance, when we intend things, situations, facts, and any other kinds of objects” (Sokolowski, 2000). The phenomenological attitude refers to “the focus we have when we reflect upon the natural attitude and all the intentionalities that occur within it” (Sokolowski, 2000). The goal in this study was to get students to share information based on their phenomenological attitude so that the data would be based on the most authentic reflections possible.

The interpretivist paradigm served as a lens for my phenomenological case study because its purpose is to assess “others’ interpretations of some social phenomenon and of interpreting, themselves, other’s actions and intentions” (Glesne, 2011, p.8). In seeking to understand the lived experiences from the perspective of this sample of students, I intended to identify some of the educational experiences that have led these students to disengage from school and, in some cases, contemplate dropping out of school.

Relying on a phenomenological research tradition carries implications for the data collection methods that I utilized. I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews because it allowed me to explore each student’s individual lived experience from his perspective. When I interviewed students about their educational experiences, I explored the students’ phenomenological attitudes about their lived experiences in their personal lives and in school, particularly regarding behavioral, emotional, and cognitive
engagement in school. Using interviews as the data collection method, aims at collecting
data on the reflections of the lived experiences of my participants, thus providing further
rationale for the choice of a phenomenological research tradition.

**Research Setting/Context**

The research setting for my study was the school where I currently work, Hower Military School (HMS). HMS is a pseudonym for a grade six through twelve charter school located in California. HMS has 250 students. The students are 85 percent Latino, 5 percent White, 5 percent African American, and 5 percent other. At HMS, 29 percent of the students are students with special needs, 13 percent of the students are English Learners, and 85 percent of the students qualify for free/reduced price lunch. The staff consists of one principal, one California Cadet Corps Commandant, one dean of students, one operations manager, one registrar, three secretaries, twelve teachers, three California Cadet Corps officers, one special education coordinator, two special education resource specialists, one special education aide, and one teacher’s aide.

Hower Military School is in its first year of operation. For the seven years prior, it was Tave Charter School. For the three years before that, it was Initiative Academy. When the school first started as Initiative Academy in 2003, the mission was to promote academic achievement, democratic leadership, and personal growth. However, after three years of operation as a new charter school, Initiative Academy found itself experiencing significant financial challenges, declining enrollment, and poor academic performance. The board found a new facility, restructured the school, renamed the school, and rehired all new faculty and staff. The goal was to keep the same mission as Initiative Academy but to divorce themselves from the parts of the school that were
failing. The final transition to Hower Military School was made this year out of concern that enrollment was again declining but this time during a tremendous budget crisis. The school needed a specific niche to attract more students and a program that would teach the fundamentals of responsibility and leadership.

HMS caters to predominantly Latino youth. Many students enroll at HMS because they have been expelled from a surrounding school and/or because their parents want them in a small, structured, and disciplined military setting. It is a common misconception that the mission of HMS is to act as a boot camp for troubled youth and/or to prepare students for the military. The real mission of HMS is to make all students college ready and career focused by using the structure, discipline, and leadership attributes of the military. The California Cadet Corps (CACC) program is the vehicle that serves to implement this mission.

The mission of the CACC is to “provide California schools and students with a quality educational and leadership development program that prepares students for success in college and the workforce” (“California Cadet Corps,” 2014). The objectives of the CACC are “to develop leadership, to engender citizenship, to encourage patriotism, to foster academic excellence, to teach basic military knowledge, and to promote health, fitness, and wellness” (“California Cadet Corps,” 2014). There is a rank structure that emulates the military in which students can work towards achieving higher level ranks and positions in a hierarchical leadership system. This system is designed to teach structure, discipline, leadership, responsibility, and accountability. The CACC has been running programs in schools since 1911.

Regardless of the name changes and program changes, the school has remained on
the same campus with the same type of student population for the entire eleven years. One of the most important changes in addition to the school name and program changes is the school wide grading system. In the last four years, the school has been moving towards a standards based grading design. This is the second year when it is being fully implemented. Standards based grading means that all assignments and assessments completed by students are directly linked to the Common Core Standards, which are the learning goals by subject matter mandated by the United States Department of Education. Now, the only grades that can be entered into a grade book are those that come directly from standards based assessments. Homework and other completion based classwork assignments are no longer allowed in the grade book. Extra credit has been banned.

The original impetus behind this school wide change was the increasing concern over state test scores and the impact of those scores on the school’s Academic Performance Index (API). However, now the state is going through a transitional period with testing due to the recent adoption of the Common Core Standards. Until the new set of testing is fully designed and implemented, there will be at least a one year reprieve on state testing, which is this year. Even without the state testing this year, there is still a statewide expectation for charter schools to perform. Charter schools are expected to academically outperform their non-charter school counterparts that have similar student demographics, commonly referred to as similar schools. This is an extraordinary amount of pressure for charter schools.

I conducted research at the school site where I am currently teaching because the majority of the students at the school are underperforming, Latino males who possess the factors that are most likely to lead to high school dropout. I also wanted to conduct
research at my school site because my research questions were personal and required a prior relationship with my participants. The purpose of my study was to find out from underperforming students what in their life or schooling experience has caused them to become disengaged from school. Collecting data at my school site was an opportunistic sampling strategy because I was able to follow personal connections and leads with students with whom I had already established relationships. There was a preestablished level of trust built between the student and me and, in some cases, between the parent and me, which made it easier to gain the sample of students that best fits my sampling criteria. A clear level of bias emerged from the choice to collect data from students I already knew, which is discussed in the researcher roles section. In addition, my school site was ideal because the type of students we get are typically underperforming and disengaged from the school system, in general, based on prior negative experiences at their local traditional high schools.

In addition to the Institutional Review Board process for the HMS board and California State University, Northridge, my principal is the gatekeeper at my school. She was interested in my research questions and wanted me to conduct the research in house so that we could use the data to shape future school decisions. My principal was aware of my research interests and fully supportive of my proposed study. Personally, I had an interest in conducting the research at my school site because I wanted to have a chance to implement some disengagement prevention strategies at the conclusion of my study. In addition, I had an interest in making this research study longitudinal with the goal of following up with the tenth graders I interviewed two years from now to see if they graduated and what their current thinking is.
I interviewed students that I had previously taught but who were not currently my
students. This helped in negotiating my multiple roles. If I had interviewed students I
was currently teaching, I would have been forced to acknowledge a distinct role change
from researcher to teacher. All students who I have taught and those I am currently
teaching understood that I was preparing to conduct some type of research. I have shared
my experiences as a student with them on many occasions. They are very aware of and
familiar with my multiple roles as student, researcher, and teacher. The main issue of
concern I had to deal with was when students asked me why I chose them to participate
in my study. I know that I chose them because of their chronic poor academic
performance and behavior track record. Sharing this information with them could have
been hurtful and would have likely tainted the data collection process. However, I did
not want to be dishonest when I was asked this question. Therefore, I answered honestly
but not completely by explaining to the students that the purpose was to learn about their
level of engagement in school as a way of helping the school to understand how best to
help all students be successful.

**Research Sample and Data Sources**

The participants for this study were seven, tenth grade, Latino males who have a
GPA below 2.0 and a school discipline record. Interviewing students enabled me to gain
insight into their perspective on their behavior, emotions, and thoughts during their
schooling experience. This data has helped me develop a better understanding about how
those experiences have impacted their level of engagement in school.

I used a criteria based strategy for selecting my research sample. I recruited
participants by circulating a flyer to all tenth grade students at HMS who fit the following
screening criteria: Latino, male, tenth grade, qualifies for free/reduced price lunch, GPA below 2.0, and an existing school discipline record. An administrator at HMS agreed to pull student files that match these criteria so that I did not have to access the student files. Once I had a group of students interested in participating, I selected my sample of seven students from that pool who best fit the criteria. Then, I obtained consent from the parent and student. The rationale for choosing this sampling strategy was to study the students who are at greatest risk for dropping out and therefore, who are most likely to be disengaged from school at this point (Suh & Suh, 2007). The purpose of my study was to learn from these students the reasons they have for their disengagement from school.

The most significant ethical issue I faced was the concern that my participants might have felt as though I chose them because they were “bad” kids. I needed to find an honest way to explain to my participants why I was interested in them without saying that it was because they are poor, have bad grades, and have shown inappropriate behavior. To address the ethical issue regarding the student sample, I told students that I chose them because I want to learn more about their educational experiences. That prevented the students from thinking I chose them because they are struggling students.

It was crucial to protect the human subjects I interviewed. A proposal of this study was submitted for Human Subjects approval at my doctoral institution and the proposed research site and received approval from both organizations. See the Appendix for appropriate consent and assent forms.

**Instruments and Procedures**

I used the following three forms and one instrument in this study: research invitation (see Appendix A), parental informed consent form (see Appendix B),
adolescent informed assent form (see Appendix C), and interview protocol (see Appendix D). The three forms served to protect the human subjects in my study. The interview protocol served as a guide for all interviews in order to collect systematic data related to my review of the literature and research questions.

**Interview protocol.**

The qualitative instrument used in this study was a two-part interview protocol, which was designed for two separate sessions. Seidman (2006) suggests a sequenced interview process that functions to collect as detailed information as possible from a small sample of participants. Accordingly, the first interview focused on participants’ personal and family backgrounds, while the second interview looked at their experiences in school and reflections about the factors that have led them to disengage from school. Separating the data collection process into two interviews helps facilitate the fulfillment of a key orienting principal of the phenomenology research tradition – gathering the most authentic data on phenomenological attitudes. The separate interviews gives students time to become more comfortable with the interview process so that they are more likely to be authentic in expressing their phenomenological attitudes. All questions in the protocol were open-ended so that participants had the opportunity to respond in the interview in ways that captured the most meaning and significance for them. The interview questions contained probes in order to gather more detailed information from the participants.

The questions in the first interview protocol ask about hobbies, siblings, housing, family, growing up, and schools previously attended. The first question from the second interview protocol is a “grand tour” question that asks students to describe what school
has been like for them throughout their lives. The rest of the interview is broken down into three parts that are aligned with the lens guiding this study: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. The questions about behavioral engagement focus on participation in class and social aspects of school, such as peer relationships and extracurricular activities. The questions about emotional engagement focus on school connectedness and relationships with teachers and peers. The questions about cognitive engagement focus on the level of interest students have in learning and in pursuing post-secondary education. In the interview protocol, there are three questions on each of these types of engagement (see Appendix D).

The research questions and interview protocol were developed from the definition of engagement and from conversations I have had with students over the last six years of teaching. Students often discuss with me how they are failing their classes, how much they hate school, and/or how disinterested they are in school. It is important for the educational research community to document these stories from the student perspective because they are the ones we need to understand so that we can engage them in school and positively impact their schooling experience.

**Data Collection Methods and Procedures**

**Interviews.**

Interviews of tenth grade students took place in the summer of 2013. I conducted two semi-structured, in-depth interviews with seven students. Each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes and was audio-recorded. I scheduled all interviews on a day and time that fit the availability of the student and parent. I achieved this by creating a spreadsheet with four time offerings per day over a span of two weeks so that the
student and parent would have many different choices for day and time. Interviews took place at the outdoor picnic tables at school because it is a neutral area on the campus. I used the interview protocol with each student so that there would be consistency in the topics that each interview covers. All interview questions were tied directly to the research questions of this study. I asked students to reflect on their behavior, emotions, and thoughts throughout their schooling experience with respect to school engagement.

**Gatekeepers.**

The gatekeepers to my participants were the parents, my principal, and the students themselves - all three parties had to be willing in order for me to able to proceed with my study. Participation in this study was strictly voluntary and required the informed consent of parents. I called the parents of the students that I wanted to invite to participate based on the sampling criteria. If the parent and student were interested, I set up a time to meet with the parent and student to go over the consent forms and obtain signatures. If possible, the one-on-one interview with the student immediately followed the meeting about the consent forms. Upon conclusion of the first interview, the second interview was scheduled for the following week.

**Data Analysis**

The overarching purpose of data analysis is to make sense of the data that has been collected. Data analysis is a process that begins early on in the data collection process. As data was being collected, I was informally analyzing it simply based on my subjectivities. Factors such as my positions as a teacher, researcher, and student impact how I analyzed the data.

For interview transcriptions, I paid a service to transcribe data since it was not
feasible for me to transcribe the interviews myself in such a short time frame. I found a transcription service that has experience transcribing interviews from high school students so that as many nuances as possible could be picked up throughout the process. I requested verbatim transcriptions. To maintain closeness to my data, I listened to all interviews with the transcripts in hand before I began the initial coding phase. In addition, I carefully read all transcriptions to capture any nuances that might have been missed by the data transcription company. During the interview process, I took notes on what would be my observer comments during the transcription process. Those comments were added in as I listened to the recordings and looked at the transcriptions. My positionality informed the process of listening to the interviews and reading the transcriptions as I inserted observer comments because my mindset was that of an advocate for the students I was interviewing. I worked diligently to keep my advocacy mindset in check and use my researcher mindset.

The interview data has provided me with a sense of what behaviors, emotions, and thoughts in these students’ lives have led them to disengage from school. As I coded, I looked through the data for any common patterns among the students’ descriptions of their behaviors, emotions, and thoughts during their process of engagement/disengagement from school. To do this, I used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze and interpret data. IPA views the research process as an interpretive process whereby research participants interpret their experiences (i.e., actual lived experiences) to the researcher during the interview process, which then are interpreted as researchers and to which the researcher applies his/her own disciplinary frameworks and cultural lenses. Smith and Osborn (2008) argue that this is
really a two-stage interpretive process that incorporates both the participants’ and researchers’ experiences.

Data analysis took place in Fall, 2013. The data analysis process began with preliminary analysis, which consisted of sifting through the raw data as I collected it. This was a three-part process. First, I wrote observer comments during each interview in which I focused on body language, affect, and responses that sounded particularly profound in relation to my research questions. Second, I wrote a series of analytic memos upon the conclusion of each interview in which I focused on the parts of each student’s story that he highlighted the most in relation to my research questions. Third, I wrote a series of analytic memos after every few interviews and at the end of all the interviews in which I focused on preliminary themes that I saw emerging across the interviews.

Next, I engaged in early analysis, which consisted of organizing the data, securing the data, reading transcriptions of the data, and doing initial coding of the data. After this, I entered into the process of thematic analysis, which consisted of refining codes, applying codes across data fields, incorporating analytic memos, and solidifying emerging themes from the coding process.

All the transcriptions were sent to me in Microsoft Excel documents. Within these documents, I highlighted every code according to a set of color codes I created. Then I created a chart broken down by codes in which I aligned quotations from the transcripts to the codes. The rationale for this chart was so that whenever a quotation was needed to describe a particular code or theme, I could extrapolate it from this chart without having to search for it in the transcripts each time. It is important to note that factors such as my
position as a teacher, researcher, and student impacted how I conducted all aspects of the data analysis.

The goal of the coding process was to identify emerging themes that relate directly to my research questions. I looked for data relating to student perceptions about disengagement from school. I was most interested in data analysis that pointed to the lived experiences of students with relation to their behaviors, emotions, and thoughts. Even though I may hold biases in the data analysis process based on my research questions, I tried to maintain an open mind as much as possible in case the data led me in an unexpected direction.

**Researcher Roles**

**Researcher role.**

I am a doctoral student who is currently teaching math at a grade six through twelve military charter school for “at risk” youth. This is my fifth year teaching at this school. I also taught math at a charter school for “at risk” youth for two years prior to my current teaching position. I have chosen to work with this population of students because my goal is to be the adult in their lives who is different. I want to be the adult who never gives up on them. I want to be the adult who shows them the power that education can have for their lives. I want to be the adult who makes them see the possibilities for their life in a different light. I want to be the adult who motivates them to succeed. I view myself as an advocate for struggling students.

My role as an advocate for struggling students began in my first year of teaching - it is the reason I entered the teaching profession. When I reflect on this initial motivation for choosing my career, there are some students who I can truly look back on and say I
know that I impacted them academically, socially, behaviorally, and/or emotionally. However, there are many more students who I never impacted regardless of the amount of effort I put forth. These students were so significantly disengaged from school that it seemed impossible for any adult to reach them. This is the population of students I was most interested in studying. I chose my research topic because I wanted to learn from these students when, where, and why this intense disengagement occurred. My plan was to use this data to develop strategies that schools could put into place early on to prevent these students from becoming disengaged, and in some cases, drop out of school.

I have a vested interest in helping the participants in this study. For that reason, I chose to use bracketing as a strategy to minimize my emotional connection to the participants. Bracketing is a strategy that falls within the phenomenological research tradition that requires the researcher to identify and suspend potential biases towards participants in a study (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I used the bracketing strategy by taking copious analytic memos throughout the data collection and data analysis process to lessen the impact of my emotional connection to the participants in this study.

**Researcher bias.**

Based on my positions, experiences, and values, there are clearly some researcher biases that I carried with me into this study. Researcher biases are the assumptions and beliefs that I hold about my topic, purpose, research questions, setting, and participants. The fact that I am advocating for a different educational experience for my participants acted as a bias. That means I did not walk into the data collection process as a neutral researcher. When the participants told stories about negative impacts from certain adults in their lives, I had to contain my bias against the adults in their stories. I also needed to
be aware of my biases as I analyzed the data so that I was not only searching for data that I wanted to be present. I needed to be open to themes and codes that revealed themselves naturally even if it is not what I expected or hoped to find. In order to minimize the effect of these biases, I kept an analytic memo journal that I used to check for biases, and that I shared with a peer to check for biases.

**Participant reactivity.**

My effects on my research subjects were potentially exploitive from the perspective of the students and/or parents because I asked very personal questions about their home and school experiences. The students I interviewed got nothing in return for going through this potentially uncomfortable process of psychologically and emotionally exposing themselves. From my perspective as a researcher, my effects on my research participants come from more of an advocate angle. I viewed the purpose of my study as the means necessary to find solutions to the problem of disengagement, eventually resulting in a more profitable school experience for the population I am studying. Also, the way that I designed my interview protocol is an effect that I had as a researcher on the study. I practiced my interview protocol before I began data collection to make sure I was not leading the participants through the interview in the direction I wanted them to go.

**Effects of researcher on setting.**

My effects on my research setting were challenging. I conducted my study at the school where I currently teach. My rationale for making this choice was because in order to collect rich data, I needed to already have a developed relationship and a significant amount of trust with my research subjects. It was helpful that I already had excellent
relationships with most of the students at my school that fit the sample criteria I wanted to study. I also knew that choosing to conduct my study at my own school site would be challenging due to biases, subjectivities, and my “insider” status. I did not disrupt the normal happenings at my research setting because I was studying individual students as opposed to school or policy structures, which potentially would have had more of an impact on a research setting. However, it was important for me to not make assumptions about what I was hearing in the interviews because the students knew me personally as I knew them. To safeguard against my assumptions, I used the multi-step coding and data analysis process that was described in the data analysis section.

Effects of setting on researcher.

The effects of my research setting on me were nominal. Considering that I conducted my study at my own school site meant that I was pretty well aware of the day to day life on the campus. I did not experience anything new or uncomfortable in relation to the site itself. The only part of the research setting that slightly affected me was when some of the students that I interviewed mention my colleagues by name in the stories they were telling (even though they were directed not to do so, it happened anyway). I did not want a student interview to change the way I perceived the effectiveness of a colleague or the way I perceived a teacher who is my friend. When I had to correct a student by reminding him not to use a teacher’s name, I was careful to not show any facial expressions that might hint to the student that the teacher might be my friend or that I was offended in any way by what he said about the teacher. I wanted the best possible chance of making my participants feel inclined to tell whole stories as truthfully as he intended.
**Effects of participants on researcher.**

My research participants, individually, affected me because I am emotionally invested in helping them overcome their struggles. The students in my sample affected me just by hearing their stories and reflecting on how I interacted with them in a previous year. Whether it is the students in my study or the students I teach everyday, I always come home from work with their stories weighing heavy on my mind and my heart. After learning even more about the students in my study through the interviews, I was even more affected than I normally am. One of the reasons I chose to study this topic is because I began informally hearing stories about the experiences these students had in their lives that impacted their general perception and outlook on schooling. I did not want these stories to go unnoticed. I wanted to see these stories documented and studied with the purpose of finding solutions. Given the weight of the subjectivity that I have, it is clear that my research subjects individually and collectively have had a significant effect on me as a researcher.

**Safeguards against biases and effects.**

Awareness and acceptance of living biases, subjectivities, and potential effects on researcher and research subject is an important part of establishing trustworthiness with the reader of any study. It is impossible to be fully objective as a researcher. Therefore, it is important to recognize subjectivity when and where it exists so the researcher can find strategies to safeguard against these subjectivities as much as possible. In working to monitor my biases and subjectivities, I conducted some pilot interviews to practice not leading my participants through interviews. This was one of my greatest challenges as a researcher especially given how emotionally invested I am in my research subjects. The
multi-step data analysis was one of the most effective strategies to safeguard against the effects of my biases, the effects of me on the site and participants, and the effects of the site and participants on me. I also incorporated a peer edit safeguard for data analysis in which a fellow researcher who was more objective and more removed from my topic crosschecked my themes and codes. My fellow researcher suggested codes and themes she was able to detect from the interview transcripts. Then I crosschecked these codes and themes with my own so they would be considered with a higher level of validity.
Chapter IV: Findings

This study is centered around the problem that very little qualitative research has addressed the risk factors for high school dropout and even less qualitative research has addressed the experience of these risk factors from the perspective of the Latino male students who are at risk of dropping out of school. The focus of the study answers the following research questions that are based on the three-part definition of engagement that was presented in the purpose and background section of the first chapter:

1) How do underperforming high school students describe their academic and social behavior throughout their educational experience?

2) How do these students describe their emotional connection to school, teachers, and peers throughout their educational experience?

3) How do these students describe their cognitive interest in school throughout their educational experience?

4) What are the educational and policy implications of school engagement for Latino males?

In order to address the research questions, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with seven students for 45-60 minutes per interview, for a total of fourteen interviews. The students were Latino males in the 10th grade who qualified for free/reduced price lunch, had a GPA below 2.0, and had a school discipline record.

The data analysis process began with preliminary analysis, which consisted of sifting through the raw data as I was collecting it. This was a three-part process. First, I wrote observer comments during each interview in which I focused on body language, affect, and responses that sounded particularly profound in relation to my research
questions. Second, I wrote a series of analytic memos upon the conclusion of each interview in which I focused on the parts of each student’s story that he highlighted the most in relation to the first three research questions. Third, I wrote a series of analytic memos after every few interviews and at the end of all the interviews in which I focused on preliminary themes that I saw emerging across the interviews.

Next, I engaged in early analysis, which consisted of organizing the data, securing the data, reading transcriptions of the data, and initial coding of the data. After this, I entered into the process of thematic analysis, which consisted of refining codes, applying codes across data fields, incorporating analytic memos, and solidifying emerging themes from the coding process.

All the transcriptions were in Microsoft Excel documents. Within these documents, I highlighted every code according to a set of color codes I created. Then I created a chart broken down by codes in which I aligned quotations from the transcripts to the codes. The rationale for this chart is so that whenever a quotation is needed to describe a particular code or theme, I can extrapolate it from this chart without having to search for it in the transcripts each time. It is important to note that factors such as my position as a teacher, researcher, and student impacted how I conducted all aspects of the data analysis.

This chapter will begin with a description of each participant in the study so that the reader will have a more in depth understanding of who each student is as they are referenced and quoted throughout this chapter. These descriptions are based on details I know about from my previous relationship with the students and from some details gathered during the interview. Pseudonyms are used for the students and for any names of people or places the students referenced in their interviews. The findings presented in
this chapter build logically from the original problem statement, research questions, and methodology that guided this study. The findings are presented under the following headings, which consist of the six themes that emerged from the data analysis process: influence of neighborhood and family, relationship with school and peers, relationship with authority figures, behavioral conduct, participation in academics, and transition from elementary school to middle school. Under each theme, there are subheadings that are used to unfold the specific codes that emerged from the data within each theme. The themes and codes have elements that tie closely to the three-part definition of engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) that guided the literature review, the methodology, the development of the interview protocol, and the data analysis.

**Participant #1: Aaron Chavez**

Aaron is about 5’4” with brown hair and glasses. He often gets teased for his height. Aaron grew up with his mom, dad, and older sister in the household. He spoke about moving frequently throughout his childhood. Aaron described some of the neighborhoods he lived in as dangerous, partly because he could hear gunshots from his apartment. He talked about wishing his family could stay in one place and the financial hardships that his parents have experienced at different times in his life.

Aaron loves to play basketball and skateboard. I have played basketball with him many times. Aaron’s friends are the students in school who are known for misbehaving in the classroom. When Aaron puts his mind to it, he can do outstanding academic work. In a one-on-one setting with an adult, he is usually calm, polite, and personable. According to most of his teachers, in the classroom, he is known to be talkative, the class clown, sneaky, and sometimes disrespectful. Two months into this school year, he was
sent to an expulsion hearing for his incessant behavioral issues in class. The expulsion committee gave him the option to withdraw before receiving an expulsion on his record. His parents withdrew him from the school the next day. I have not seen him since that day, which was two months after the second interview.

**Participant #2: Andres Ruiz**

Andres is about 5’7” with black hair. To my knowledge, he does not get teased for his looks. Andres grew up with his mom, dad, older brother, and younger sister in the household. He talked about how on weekends the family usually goes on outings together such as going to the beach. Andres shared that he feels as though he has had a good childhood because he knows that his parents want him and love him, unlike some of his friends who have told him otherwise.

Andres enjoys listening to music and going out with his friends. Andres’ friends are not all students who are known for misbehaving. Andres has an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) for a specific learning disability. He has trouble sitting still in the classroom and refraining from talking. In a one-on-one setting with an adult, he is usually calm, polite, and shy. Two years ago, he was expelled from our school for holding another student in a chokehold. He had to wait one year before returning so that is why he at our school again this year. He appears to have matured significantly over the last two years.

**Participant #3: Alan Garcia**

Alan is about 5’8” with black hair. He is very popular with the girls in school. There are always at least a handful of girls who are talking about his good looks and charm. Alan grew up with his mom, dad, and older sister in the household. At the time
of the interview, he said that his mom was five months pregnant with a girl. Alan described how his mom always worked hard to provide both children with all their basic needs. However, he commented that it has been difficult moving around as much as they moved around during his childhood, especially with regards to the adjustment at new schools.

Alan enjoys baseball, basketball, and football. When he is invested in a class, he can do excellent academic work. Alan is calm, polite, and personable in a classroom or one-on-one situation when he likes the authority figure in charge. When Alan does not like the authority figure in charge or especially when he believes that the authority figure is treating him unfairly, he can be verbally combative and defiant. Since middle school, Alan has been in and out of gang involvement in his neighborhood. Our small charter school with a strict military structure was a good chance from him to escape that.

Three months into the school year, his mom withdrew him and sent him to their neighborhood high school (where most of the gang members in his neighborhood attend school). Alan’s mom was five months pregnant and explained that she just would not be able to handle transporting him to our school everyday, which is a twenty minute drive, so he would have to go the neighborhood school because he could walk there. The dean of our school begged his mom to keep him at our school and explained that she felt it was his last chance for survival. The mom politely refused. I have not seen him since.

Participant #4: Daniel Vasquez

Daniel is about 5’6” with black hair. In elementary and middle school, he was teased for being short. To my knowledge, he has not been teased for his looks since he has been in high school. Daniel grew up with his mom in the household. His dad was
not faithful to his mom and left her when Daniel was 48 days old. Daniel told this story with great angst in his voice and with significant resentment towards his father. His father has two other children with the woman that he left Daniel’s mother for, but Daniel does not speak to either of them. He tried to maintain a distant relationship with his father but since has cut that relationship off completely.

Daniel enjoys soccer, basketball, and bike riding. Daniel spent part of his childhood in El Salvador. Daniel’s friends are students who have good behavior and good grades in school. Daniel self-admittedly smokes marijuana on a regular basis. In a one-on-one setting, Daniel is calm, polite, and personable. In a classroom setting, he is either quiet and apathetic or talkative and disrespectful. His behavior in the classroom depends on the mood he is in and how much he likes the class he is in at that moment. Daniel has a history of ditching school and on some occasions ditching by walking out of the room while the class is in progress. He contemplated dropping out of high school because he felt that it was too difficult for him and that he just wasn’t good at it. One of his best friends and girlfriend at the time talked him into staying.

**Participant #5: Gabriel Hurtada**

Gabriel is about 5’9” with black hair. To my knowledge, he does not get teased for his looks. Gabriel grew up with his mom, older brother, and older sister in the household. Gabriel’s father was in the home for the first four years of his life. Gabriel remembers witnessing his father mentally and physically abusing his mother. He does not have much of a relationship with his brother because he felt as though it was both of their responsibilities to stand up for his mom in those abusive situations. Gabriel described his brother as always being too scared to stand up for her and how difficult it was as the
youngest sibling to feel the weight of all that pressure by himself. Gabriel talked about trying to maintain a minimum relationship with his dad but between the abuse of his mom and the number of times his dad did not pick him up when he said he would, Gabriel has since completely cut off the relationship.

Gabriel enjoys drawing, skateboarding, and listening to music. He explained that he uses drawing as an escape for anything negative going on in his life. Gabriel’s friends are a mixture of the students who have good grades and behavior and those who do not. Gabriel has an IEP for a specific learning disability. He has trouble focusing and processing content in class. In a one-on-one setting, Gabriel is energetic, polite, and personable. In a classroom setting, Gabriel is talkative and can be disrespectful if he does not like the class content or the authority figure in charge. Gabriel wants to stay in school and do better to make his mom proud.

Participant #6: Leo Lucero

Leo is about 5’10” with brown hair. To my knowledge, he does not get teased for his looks. Leo grew up with his mom and younger sister in the household. Leo’s dad is very involved in his life as well. Within the last year, he started living with his dad during the week and his mom on the weekends. This arrangement began because his dad was concerned with Leo’s poor grades in school and felt that he had more time available to help him than Leo’s mom had. Leo’s mom agreed that it would be worth a try, especially if it would improve his academic performance. Leo also spoke about having a good relationship with his grandfather.

Leo enjoys baseball, playing video games, and bike building and riding. Leo’s friends are a mixture of students who have good grades and behavior and those who do
not. Leo has an IEP for a specific learning disability. He has trouble sitting still in class and focusing. In a one-on-one setting, Leo is energetic, polite, and personable. In a classroom setting, he often acts as the class clown and is too talkative. He is very rarely disrespectful to an authority figure. Leo really wants to do better in school to make his family proud.

**Participant #7: Rafael Huerte**

Rafael is about 5’7” with brown hair. To my knowledge, he does not get teased for his looks. Rafael grew up with his mom, dad, younger brother, and older sister in the household. His sister is 22 and has moved out of the house. Rafael is close to his younger brother. He is also very close to his Dad’s younger brother who is more like a brother to him than an uncle. Rafael identified himself as Mexican. He spoke about what it has been like growing up in a Mexican household. He talked about the importance of doing chores and helping around the house without being asked. Rafael happily reflected on what it is like to have a close extended family and how much fun the typical big, Mexican family celebrations are with food, music, dancing, and fun.

Rafael enjoys playing basketball, riding horses, going to the park, and hanging out with his girlfriend. Robert’s friends are mostly the students who have poor grades and behavioral issues. When he is interested in a class, he will work to earn a passing grade. Rafael is energetic, polite, and personable in a one-on-one setting. In a classroom setting, when Rafael does not like the authority figure in charge or especially when he believes that the authority figure is treating him unfairly, he can be verbally combative and defiant. Rafael has a history of ditching school and on some occasions ditching by walking out of the room while the class is in progress. Three months into the school year
and one week before a disciplinary hearing, Rafael chose to leave our school to attend an
independent study program in hopes that he will be able to recover the credits he did not
earn at a faster rate. I have not seen him since.

**Influence of Neighborhood and Family**

In the first interview, students were asked questions about their hobbies, siblings,
living situation, growing up, schools attended, and family. The purpose of these types of
questions was to break the ice with some basic questions and to see how the students
described what their life has been like from their early years all the way to the present
time. Before the interviews, I was not sure how much their responses to the first
interview would relate directly to engagement in school beyond my own presuppositions.

By the end of the interviews, I could see there was a direct connection between the
students’ responses to the first interview and engagement in school. I grouped the
following codes under the theme, influence of neighborhood and family: safety of
neighborhood, frequency of moving, and characterization of family.

**Safety of neighborhood.**

Each student referenced the neighborhoods where they grew up without being
directly asked about that. Each one spoke with fervor and pride about the neighborhoods
they have survived throughout their childhood and adolescence. It was as if they were all
saying to me, “Can you believe that I have lived around this kind of danger? But I have
survived. I am strong. Nothing can take me down.” This was the way I interpreted their
body language, affect, and descriptions about their neighborhoods as I heard responses
like this one from Aaron: “And then I moved to Night Hills in an apartment because we
lost our house, so it was smaller, cuz it was like ghetto, small and ghetto. You would
hear gunshots every night.” He spoke about hearing the gunshots every night in a very
casual, nonchalant way.

Rafael spoke about living in a bad neighborhood as well. Rafael described an
important survival strategy and explained how he interprets his circumstances:

It’s just a bad neighborhood, but it’s what you make out of it, put it like that, but it
was a pretty bad neighborhood. It was like if you mind your own business, nothing
would happen to you. But like the slightest stuff will bug people, [so] you just
gotta do you and that’s it.

Rafael used the phrase, “it’s what you make out of it,” multiple times throughout the
interview. He would describe a difficult experience but then attempt to put a positive
spin on it by making sure I knew that nothing bad that he has experienced phases him.
He was urging me to believe that he is fine with the circumstances that were handed to
him and that other people may not be, but that is their problem because every situation is
what you make out of it. I imagine this way of thinking has served as somewhat of a
coping mechanism for him during difficult times.

One of the students, Daniel, spent some of his childhood in El Salvador and still
visits from time to time. He spoke a little bit about his experiences in unsafe
neighborhoods in the United States. However, when Daniel chose to speak about the
neighborhoods he has lived in, he usually focused on El Salvador. This seemed to be
where his most poignant memories were – memories that really affected who he is today.
No matter what challenges Daniel faced in the neighborhoods he lived in here in the
United States, those experiences always paled in comparison to his experiences in El
Salvador. The description Daniel gave me of the El Salvador that he knows coupled with the look on his face as he told me is something that I will never forget. Come to find out in the second interview that this story was just the tip of the iceberg for Daniel:

The gangs weren’t as powerful as they are now. Now, over there, you gotta be in the house by like 7 before it gets dark. Or else . . . if you’re out at night, and you’re not with someone who knows the area real well, like I do, you’re better off dead.

The fact here is that this is a real experience from a high school underperforming Latino male who, according to him, disengaged from school many years ago.

**Frequency of moving.**

For most of these students, it was not just one neighborhood like the ones Aaron, Rafael, and Daniel described that they had to contend with but sometimes as many as three or four different neighborhoods that they had to survive in and adjust to throughout their childhood and adolescence. The frequency of moving was also a topic that the students brought up without being asked. Most of the students spoke about the frequent moving occurring throughout their lives – elementary, middle, and high school. Before the interviews, I imagined that the neighborhoods these students are growing up in might not be the best, but it never occurred to me how frequently most of them have moved, which means so much more than a physical change in space. It means learning how to survive in a new environment and changing schools, just to name a couple.

Alan describes the amount of moving that occurred in elementary school in terms of neighborhood and schools: “[For elementary school, I went from] Pannerton, to Planter, then I went to Stater and a school named Evans, and then I moved to another place in Stater, and then I went to Stater Elementary.” Rafael shared a similar situation:
“I was living first in San Felipe, then Pannerton again, then Palton for a little bit, then Pannerton and San Felipe.”

So, these students are already having difficulty staying engaged in school, and now they have the added complication of frequently moving. Now, imagine moving without any notice. Aaron shared this story with me:

I moved a lot. When I was little, I went to move to Mighty Hills, but I didn’t know where I was moving . . . I thought we just went to random houses just to go there. But like from school they [my parents] picked me up, and we straight went to the other house and never went back to school and said goodbye to my friends and that was like, wow.

In this case, not being given any notice compounded the negative experience of moving for Aaron, but either way, what we are talking about here is a variety of disruptions in the students’ living situation, school of attendance, and social environment. The students commented on how the frequent moving made it difficult for them to trust that it was worth building relationships or working hard in a new school environment because they never knew when that environment might change again. Each move resulted in these students starting over at a vulnerable age. They had to start over with a new dwelling, new neighborhood, new school, and new authority figures at that school. The students who described moving the most also happened to be the ones who spoke the most about difficulties with authority figures. Whether this is a valid connection or not, it is an interesting point to consider in peeling apart the layers of the lives of these students.

**Characterization of family.**

Each student spoke in great detail about his family. Most of the conversations were
focused on how their parents have attempted to teach them throughout their childhood how important school is for their lives. Here is an example from Alan:

Yeah, cuz my parents tell me, like, without high school you’ve got nothing. You gotta keep going. Don’t just give up in high school. You’ve got to keep on going to college . . . because without it, you’re not going to go nowhere. Nowadays they won’t even take you at McDonalds without a high school diploma.

Here is an example from Leo:

And my dad told me . . . You gotta think about it, think about your future and how it’s gonna impact you. School is not for everybody, but it’s good to have at least a diploma, something that will get you a good job or something that will get you ahead in life.

Here is an example from Aaron:

Cuz my dad says like, well he uses this term a lot, cuz I’ll say like oh but [so and so] is doing it. My dad will say, oh if this kid falls off a cliff, you’ll fall off a cliff?
And I’ll say no, and he’ll say, then why are you trying to copy him?

In these cases, it is clear that the parents have been communicating to their children that school is important. However, each student I interviewed has a history of poor grades and poor behavior. So, despite the parents’ urgings, there seems to be a missing link between their words and the actions of their children.

Then there are the cases where the parent does not appear to be as involved or involved at all. For example, Gabriel spoke at great length about his dad’s lack of involvement. Gabriel is faced with this type of relationship with his dad: “I always talk with my dad on the phone, [but] he never comes. He tells me he’s going to come pick me
up, and I’m waiting and I’m like, where are you?” The pain was apparent on his face when he told this story.

Another interesting case was one where the Daniel described his mom’s tolerance of him smoking marijuana as long as he had a job and decent grades:

See, but the thing with [smoking marijuana] is that I have a job, I work, so I mean my grades the last year were where she wanted. I had a couple Cs and Bs and As. I’m working where she wants me – she wants me to have good grades. I’m pretty sure sometimes she knows [about the marijuana], but she doesn’t say anything about it at all because I’m doing everything right. I’m doing everything the way I’m supposed to be doing, but that’s one of my hobbies. I didn’t mention that earlier because I didn’t know that’s where this [interview] was going to go.

This paints a picture of where Daniel perceives his mom’s expectations to be. I am not looking at drug use in this study so I will not focus on that part; however, the part of this quotation that is related to this study is the part where Daniel describes how he is doing everything right by meeting his mom’s academic expectations of him. I interpreted this to mean that he is making sure that he is engaged just enough to achieve certain grades so that he can consider it acceptable to smoke marijuana or do whatever else he wants to do outside of school (which he described in another part of the interview).

In this section, it is apparent that the participants in this study all had their own ways of characterizing their families. Unfortunately, even the students with families who deliver frequent messages of encouragement to perform and behave well in school, the reality of poor behavior and poor grades demonstrate that these messages of encouragement are not enough. These messages are not enough to maintain the level of
engagement in school needed to behave well and perform well academically.

The next section begins a new theme – relationship with school and peers. This theme is directly related to the definition of engagement. However, it was imperative to first develop a sense and frame of the participants by discussing the influence of neighborhood and family through the eyes of the students.

**Relationship with School and Peers**

This theme relates directly to the definition of emotional engagement. Within this theme, I will be discussing the following codes: impact of school structure and organization, impact of extrinsic rewards, and influence of friends. In the interviews, I asked some general questions about the students’ relationship with their school and peers, but these are the three specific codes that emerged from the data.

**Impact of school structure and organization.**

This code is directly related to a section that was covered in the literature review: Role of School Structure and Organization in High School Dropout. In this section, school structure, academic organization, and social organization were discussed. School structure is most commonly described in terms of sector, urbanicity, and size (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Academic organization primarily refers to the high school curriculum, the rigor in particular. Social organization is about the relationship between students and teachers beyond the hour in the classroom each day. Most of the students hit on all of these components when discussing their experiences in school.

Aaron differentiated between the school structure of the non-traditional, small charter school he was currently attending and the traditional, large high school down the street that he formerly attended:
I think over here it’s mostly like everyone’s family, everyone knows [each other]. And over there at the school [pointing in the direction of nearby large, traditional, public high school], cuz I’ve been to [that] high school before, and everyone’s in different groups and stuff. And there’s like the cool kids, and there’s the nerds, and then there’s the skaters, and the girls, and stuff like that.

He placed emphasis on everyone being like family and knowing each other. He elaborated on this concept in a few other parts of the interview, letting me know that this is an important element for him in a school environment. If the other engagement pieces had fallen into place for Aaron at this charter school before he withdrew from the school, the element of a small, family-like feel may have proven to be a key in creating a successful environment for a student who is at risk for dropping out of high school.

Alan commented on school structure, academic organization, and social organization in one single response to a question about what made the two middle schools he attended different from each other:

Over here, it’s pretty small. Over there, it was huge. You could, your teachers don’t even know if you’re there or not, don’t even know your names. Teachers, like, they call themselves English teachers but they can’t even talk English. Can’t understand your English. They’d be like whoa, I can’t understand you . . . They don’t pay attention to you.

He, like Aaron, also commented on the size of the school. Alan followed that by explaining why being at a huge school results in a negative experience. He really focused on the teachers not knowing the students, not being competent, and not having compassion.
Leo discussed some similar frustrations, but in this case, he was specifically talking about his experience with an extremely unprofessional teacher:

Yeah and my friend, she used to pick a lot on my friend. And my friend is the type of student who, you tell him to be quiet, and it’s really hard for him to be quiet, for him to able to stop. And she kicked him out like twice, three times. And he was like, ‘No, I’ll be quiet,’ and the second time she was like, ‘Get the F out!’ I was like – to me the first time I heard it come out of a teacher. All the students were like, ‘What? What did she just say?’

While Leo was the only one to share this type of experience, this narrative illuminates a real concern here with equal access to high quality teachers.

Daniel touched on school structure and academic organization, with a focus on social organization during a tirade about adjusting to multiple teacher and principal changes within one school year:

One of the contributions to my bad grades in other schools is teachers getting fired, teachers getting hired, just different teachers coming in probably like every month. I mean they would fire the principal and get a new principal in one semester. That principal would fire a certain teacher, get a new teacher in a certain semester. And it’s just messing up everything. I mean you can’t learn like that. You got different people trying to come in and teach you in a different way, different style when you’ve already had like months with a certain teacher. That throws off everything.

What mattered most here to Daniel is that he could not learn. He felt as though the school structure, academic organization, and in particular the social organization was preventing him from learning. This experience caused Daniel to, at least in part, lose
interest in learning. This was a time in Daniel’s schooling when his cognitive engagement was clearly challenged.

The students discussed teachers’ lack of competency, lack of relationship with the students, unprofessional behavior, and frequent change of teachers within the school year, which all relates to school structure and organization in terms of unequal institutional access. It is apparent from these four examples of students’ perspectives that school structure and organization influences school engagement. As the students spoke about these experiences, some of them spoke with a great amount of frustration and anger towards the institutions that they believe contributed to their lack of success in school. On the other hand, there was one topic that came up with most of the participants that had a positive impact on their educational experience – the use of extrinsic rewards.

Impact of extrinsic rewards.

This code does not directly relate to any topic that was raised in the literature review, however, it does directly relate to engagement. The positive impact that extrinsic rewards have had on these students relates to engagement simply because most of them discussed how well these rewards worked to improve their behavior and academic performance. The argument from the scholars who vehemently oppose the use of extrinsic motivation is that these rewards only synthetically increased engagement for one specific moment in time – just enough to earn the reward (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 2001; Ledford, Gerhart, & Fang, 2013). The argument from the scholars who are in favor of extrinsic motivation is that in some cases you have to use extrinsic rewards in moderation so that the person will eventually develop intrinsic motivation later on as a result of seeing positive results from the extrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001; Ledford
et al., 2013). There is no winner here but rather dichotomous scholarly views on the topic of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. This is a debate that has been going on for decades. However, one thing is apparent – the use of extrinsic rewards not only had a positive impact on the students in my study in the moment, but the extrinsic rewards had a strong enough impact to remain engrained in their memories many years later.

I asked the students to describe a time in their life when they remember that school was going well for them. Most of them spoke about elementary school, which will come up in a theme discussed later in this chapter. However, it is important to mention that most of them also shared one or more specific instances when they were offered a reward for reaching an academic goal. Gabriel shared: “I liked the fact that every time I did good, I’d get like candy [in second grade].” The use of candy is one of the most commonly used extrinsic rewards. There are certainly teachers, parents, and scholars who would argue against the use of candy for academic motivation. However, I think it is important to recognize that the end result of the extrinsic motivation in this case was that Gabriel remembered doing well and remembered feeling successful. Almost everything else in his interview was a discussion of failure after failure. I am not arguing that this is a case of the end justifying the means, but I am saying that the end result should at least be a contender in the discussion of how, as educators, we can motivate these types of students.

Aaron spoke about a time when he was offered a reward to work towards in middle school: “I remember if you had good grades you could go to the hall to watch a movie. And I was like, oh I’ll probably get good grades and go there. [And I did].” I remember Aaron saying this to me in such a cavalier manner. It was as if he was saying, “Yeah, I
mean if someone is going to offer me something I want, then I will do the work.” I remember thinking to myself, “Wait a minute. You have failed almost every class you have taken. You disrupt every single class that you are in for most of the period. But if we say you can see a movie after earning a certain grade for a month, then you will work hard and not misbehave?” In one sense, this was unfathomable to me, yet in another sense, this made sense. As a young child who has grown up in the environment and circumstance that these students have grown up in, getting to miss a couple classes and see a movie on a big screen with friends and popcorn might be a much bigger deal than I ever thought it was.

Daniel shared about a similar experience when he was sent to a boot camp through the local police department:

But the only reason I was doing good in boot camp and did all my work was because they rewarded me. They were like, alright look, if you get all this work done, we’re going to Six Flags. And I love Six Flags.

This quotation is particularly poignant because Daniel admitted that the only reason he did his work is because he was rewarded and that the reward held value for him because he loves Six Flags. Some scholars may frown upon the use of extrinsic rewards, but there is no refuting that in these instances, the effect was positive.

In addition to the use of extrinsic rewards, the students spoke in general about elementary school being easier and more enjoyable. They did not identify any other specific reasons except for a few of the students who mentioned that their elementary school teachers were “nicer” than their middle school or high school teachers. It is important to note that in elementary school, students are with the same teacher all day as
opposed to the typical six teachers that middle school and high school students see each day.

**Influence of friends.**

Within the theme of relationship with school and peers comes a code that clearly emerged from each interview – influence of friends. While the extrinsic rewards appeared to have a very positive impact on the students, at least in the short-term, the influence of their friends, on the other hand, proved to hold quite the opposite impact in most cases. The most shocking response came from Daniel when I asked about his closest friends: “They’re dead. They died in El Salvador. They got murdered, like two of them I used to play soccer with. A gang [murdered them].” Daniel shared this information in the same way that he would have shared with me what he had for lunch today. He was not disregarding the severity but rather communicating to me that this is a normal part of his life. However, at the same time, Daniel also made it clear to me that he learned from this experience of watching his friends choose this life and receive that fatal consequence. In a sense, these friends influenced Daniel in a positive way because they indirectly taught him the true dangers of being in a gang. Daniel’s experience causes me to think how staying alive and keeping your friends alive would probably be on a higher priority level than being engaged in school.

On a completely different level, Alan describes his perception of the influence that friends can have:

Well, after a while just the people you hang out with, the stuff makes you change. I remember pretty much the people around you make you change. You can choose the right path, the wrong path, there’s a lot of ways to go.
Here, Alan is recognizing how hanging out with the wrong people can make you change. Alan talked about this with such a sense of sadness and regret in his eyes and in his voice. He looked down at the table, took a deep breath, and shook his head. He continued to repeat this message in different ways a couple more times. It is common knowledge in our school that Alan has been in and out of gang affiliation in his neighborhood since the seventh grade. I imagine that these are the friends and the change he is referring to, however, once I questioned him further, he backed off quickly and changed the topic. I left it alone.

Gabriel spoke a lot about guilt by association when I asked him about the influence of his friends. Gabriel started by saying, “I guess because I would hang with the wrong people, and they thought I was the same. It’s kinda crazy how people just think you are how your friends are.” Then he followed that statement with this story:

Well, I had a friend who, he’s dumber than dumb. He’s about to go to jail right now, he’s – he should be in jail already for – what did he do? For grand theft auto, destruction of private property, lots of stuff. And they thought I was like him, and I was like no. I’m the one who is trying to get him out of everything. And you’re – and then his mom tried to blame me for him doing drugs, and I was like, you have no idea. You have no idea what is going on.

Gabriel spoke about how poor choices he has made with his friends have impacted his academic and behavioral track record in a negative way.

On a different note, Rafael described his plans for navigating the process of making friends in a new school and intermingling them with his old friends:
And I would introduce my group of homies to them [my new friends], to everybody, and like I’m a fun guy so it’s not going to be hard to make friends. And if somebody wanted to get down in this school, I know I probably wouldn’t have no problems because it’s a chill school. But if something were to happen, I wouldn’t need nobody for me. Put it like this. If I get fucked up, I still back my shit up, do you get me?

While I had my own interpretation, I did ask for clarification, especially on the last statement. My interpretation was that Rafael could easily make new friends and mix them with his old friends but that either way, he did not need friends. If someone wanted to mess with him, then he would stand up for himself and fight back. Rafael listened closely to my version of his statement and assured me that I had, in fact, interpreted it correctly. The relevancy of the influence of friends in terms of school engagement will be further discussed in chapter five.

**Relationship with Authority Figures**

Emotional engagement refers to relationship with school, peers, and teachers. Relationship with school and peers was covered within the last theme. Relationship with teachers was such a big topic for these students that it needed to be a theme on its own. This is one of the places that the students elaborated on the most. I chose to phrase the codes and theme with the term authority figures instead of teachers because the students referred to some adults in schools who are support staff. For the codes, I broke this theme up into positive and negative impact from authority figures. I assumed that a code would also emerge for neutral impact from authority figures, but that was not the case. The students had very polarized things to say about authority figures. The stories were
either overwhelmingly in favor of the authority figure or overwhelmingly against the authority figure.

**Positive impact from authority figures.**

I asked the students if they could recall a specific teacher or other school authority figure who impacted them. Six out of the seven students were able to recall at least one specific person and speak in great detail about the impact that person had on them. Aaron discussed the impact that another teacher and I had on him:

Cuz I probably would have flunked 8th grade if you guys didn’t tell me to do my work. Cuz it made me push harder and do work. Like Ms. Baring actually had me go into Mrs. White’s [office], and we had a meeting just us three telling how I should push harder. Yeah making a plan to try to better myself. It was like, oh they care.

It really mattered to Aaron that he perceived that we cared about him. This is understandable from the standpoint of a human being and from the standpoint of the research that I referenced in chapter two on the topic of the importance of students perceiving that a school authority figure cares about them (Saenz and Ponjuan, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). However, I have to share that I was absolutely shocked to hear that Aaron felt that I impacted him. There are so many students that I feel I put so much extra time and care into with the goal of making an impact. Unfortunately, I cannot do that with every student, and he was never one of those students. Hearing from him that I had such a positive impact was reassuring and frightening at the same time. On one hand, it was reassuring to know that I had a positive impact on a student that I was not going out of my way to do that with, but on the other hand, it was frightening because I
wonder how much greater of an impact I could have made if I had put that extra effort in with this student. A few months after the interview, his poor behavior was so severe that he was sent to a discipline hearing. Since the day he went through that hearing and was given the choice to withdraw or get expelled, I have replayed his words in my mind a thousand times – of course in hindsight, now feeling more frightened than reassured.

It is important to consider school authority figures beyond the teachers because some of the students did share positive stories about coaches and deans. Daniel shared the positive relationship he had with his coach:

He would always help me out with anything. I would get kicked out of classes, and he would be like, what happened? A bunch of times I would mess up, but a bunch of times it was a teacher not paying attention to the situation. And he would get it. He would get me out of trouble in that situation. But if it was me, if I had messed up, he’d be like alright, just chill here, do your work. He told me some of his personal things that have helped me out. It was a relief – it was a back up kind of thing. I could always air whatever I needed to air out with him. This story also reinforces how important it is for these students to find an authority figure at school who they trust and feel comfortable approaching.

Sometimes the one teacher who creates that positive relationship with the student does not even teach that student. Gabriel spoke about one of his homeroom teachers who never taught any of his classes yet who he felt always went out of her way to help him:

She’d always find out if I wasn’t doing my work. She’d always help me with my classes. She helped me cuz even almost at the end of school I was about to fail my math classes. She got like a bunch of sheets of work for me to do, and I did
them, and it was like the end of school. The bell was about to ring, and then I did a few pages, and I ran to my math class like, ‘Here, I’m done! Hey, I’m finished!’

She helped me a lot. I would always talk to her when I was having a bad day. This is yet another example of a student appreciating individualized care and attention.

One of the underlying messages here is that if this teacher had not communicated with the math teacher to help Gabriel, then he would have failed the class.

In some cases, the positive relationship is focused on social aspects that may result in some coexistent academic buy-in. Leo discussed a teacher that he really bonded with on a personal level:

His name was Mr. Denton, and I used to talk to him about my things, my hobbies. He’ll ask me like a lot of questions like, ‘Oh, what do you want to do when you grow up?’ and something small like that will end up being a big conversation. And the conversations we had, I would really listen to him and tell him about my struggles, and he would give me good advice to overcome those struggles.

Leo did not mention anything academic here, but clearly this teacher took time to develop a positive relationship with his students, which may have led to increased academic engagement.

Most of the students spoke about a positive personal or academic relationship with a school authority figure. Rafael’s offering was unique because he spoke about the importance of instilling discipline and kindness at the same time. Rafael described a positive relationship that he had with the dean at his previous school:

Because that dean, he would tell me straight up like when I would go in there, he would say what did you do now? And I’d be like, I did this. And he’d be like,
‘Rafael, you got to stop this because you’re a sophomore, and next you’re going to be a junior, and that year is going to fly like that, and then next year you’re going to be a senior, and then you’re off into the real world. You got to stop because you gotta just do what you’re gonna do and you gotta stop acting like this. You’re a really good kid. I know you are.’ But he would straight up tell me how it is, and I appreciate it. I still talk to him. Yeah, he was the sort of person that everybody needs. He would give me advice, and he was also there to discipline me, and he was there for me. He was a cool guy.

In this description, Rafael makes it clear that it is important to him to have an authority figure who strikes a balance between care and discipline. Rafael really liked that he could get the one-on-one time and advice he needed while being held accountable at the same time. Of all the students I interviewed, Rafael appeared to physically and verbally be the roughest around the edges. It is of interest to note that Rafael was the only one out of the seven students who chose to highlight the importance of an authority figure imparting discipline. These students may have come from a difficult background, but they were all able to describe at least one authority figure at school who had a positive impact on them.

**Negative impact from authority figures.**

A significant amount of data came in on this topic. In most cases, the students were expressing discontent in circumstances where they perceived that unfair treatment occurred. For example, there were quite a few instances when the student felt unjustly accused of negative behavior by an authority figure and then chose to act out as a response.
Alan describes the criteria he uses to predetermine how he will perform academically and behave in a classroom:

I remember the teachers that were nice, I’d have good grades. Teachers I don’t like, I’d straight up have fails. Teachers that they were chill with me, I’d participate, I’d give a damn. But teachers that were rude, I don’t know, just rude, they didn’t like me, so I’d be rude in their class, and not pay attention.

Alan mentioned to me several times during the interview how he chooses how to interact with an authority figure based on how he sees that authority figure interacting with him. If he feels that person has been rude or treated him unfairly, then he shuts down. In these instances, it is as if any potential engagement that was there in the beginning keeps getting erased each time Alan shuts down.

Daniel described a specific situation in which he felt greatly misunderstood and unjustly accused. Daniel shared what happened in a meeting between the principal, his mom, and him in his previous school:

Then my mom, the principal, they had a whole meeting where they were like look, because of the whole situation, innocent kids from Ichra are getting beat up, so it’s better if you go. I was like, you’re really going to do this, and he was like look, you’re already in enough trouble with this school and with other schools, and I was like, oh alright then. And they sent me here. Oh, definitely [I was misunderstood].

Daniel told me that some kind of rumor started that caused students to think he was the root of all these problems between two local high schools. He explained that it was as if he became the focus of an investigation for a crime that he did not commit.
principal asked Daniel to withdraw from the school, he felt like his hands were tied because he had been in previous trouble, which he admitted was valid. He told the story with sadness and frustration in his voice, as if to say, “Of course the last straw had to be the one bad thing I did not actually do.”

The experience of the negative impact from an authority figure was not an isolated incident for Daniel. Daniel also shared frustrations about teacher quality. He explained that math is already a difficult subject for him and how that difficulty is compounded when the teacher is of poor quality. Daniel gave an example of his attempt to understand math from a teacher he had last year:

Man, kids would correct her constantly! I was like, like I can’t get it straight. She would mess up, but then she would erase a bunch of her mistakes and do it herself and wouldn’t explain it. So, I’m copying the answers, and I’m like, how am I going to get this for the test?

In this case, the teacher was making frequent mistakes, which can be confusing for the learning process. Then to add to the confusion, she did not explain the correct way to do the math problem.

Leo also had some experiences with poor teacher quality. Leo describes an experience with a teacher acting unprofessionally:

It was for World History, and I didn’t pass her class because she was really, really rude. She would cuss at the students. And at one point I stood up, and I said, okay, I’m just going to walk out of the class. And she said, okay get out, I don’t care, you’re here to learn. And she cussed, and I turned around and looked at her, and I had to bite my tongue really hard because I was like, I’m in school.
Leo recalled similar instances of poor teacher quality throughout his interview.

Leo and Daniel were not the only ones who recounted stories pointing towards poor teacher quality. Gabriel described how his level of participation in class has deteriorated over time, partly due to the response he would get from teachers when trying to participate in class:

I do [participate], but I don’t do it as often anymore. It was, I would always raise my hand to answer a question and now when I do, I just open my mouth. I don’t raise my hand or anything. I just open my mouth like, ‘oh yeah that’s that.’ And they’re like, ‘you need to raise your hand. It doesn’t count.’ After a certain number of times hearing that his participation “didn’t count” unless he raised his hand, he became discouraged and made the choice to not participate as often and sometimes not at all. Gabriel also described the cycle he has been through with certain teachers of not understanding, asking questions, still not understanding, trying to get help from a peer, getting in trouble for talking to the peer, and eventually shutting down – in essence, disengaging:

It was some of the work, I guess the teachers didn’t explain it to me, like, I guess I wasn’t taught in a way where I was able to understand it as good. Yeah, and like I would ask questions sometimes, and I still wouldn’t understand so I was like, ‘Aw I’m on my own.’ And then I would ask someone next to me, ‘How do you do this?’ and then I would get in trouble for talking. I’m like, but you don’t – I’m asking, ‘How do you do this?’ And they’ll say, ‘Why didn’t you ask me?’ And I kinda argue that like I did ask you, but I didn’t understand how you’re teaching me.
This is really unfortunate because in this case, the teacher had a student who was cognitively engaged – he wanted to learn. Instead of finding a way to help him learn the concepts that were confusing to him, the teacher’s reaction resulted in Gabriel shutting down and disengaging. Gabriel told me that this kind of thing happens to him all the time and that sometimes he just chooses not to ask anymore because he is tired of not understanding and tired of getting in trouble for trying to understand. Now, Gabriel is disengaged on all three levels – behaviorally, socially, and cognitively.

In listening to the stories from the students, I realized that their experiences with authority figures at school were overwhelmingly negative. I did not share all of them here, but looking at the transcripts, it is clear to see that all of the students experienced far more negative experiences with authority figures than positive ones. Based on the data, there appears to be a connection between the theme of relationship with authority figures and the upcoming theme of behavioral conduct.

**Behavioral Conduct**

As covered in chapter two, poor behavioral conduct is one of the greatest risk factors for dropping out of school (Suh & Suh, 2007). It is also one piece within the behavioral engagement component of the overarching definition of school engagement. In the interview, I asked the students to describe their behavior at school. First, I asked them to describe their behavior based on a continuum with the worst behaved student they could recall on one end of the continuum and the most well behaved student they could recall on the other end of the continuum. Next, I asked the students to share specific instances of their behavior at school. The three codes within the theme of behavioral conduct that emerged were general poor behavior, ditching, and fighting.
Poor behavior.

All seven students placed themselves on the exact same place on the continuum when asked to compare themselves to the worst and most well behaved students that they know. Each student even used the same phrasing – “in the middle.” Some of the students leaned slightly in one direction or the other from the middle, but all of the students still placed themselves in the middle.

Aaron explains his perception of himself on this continuum:

[I’m] kinda in the middle but more [bad] because sometimes I talk a lot. I don’t really yell out a lot, sometimes. Sometimes I do care but then sometimes I don’t. Sometimes I’m into class, like when it’s fun I get into it, but if it’s just boring, I’d rather talk to someone else.

Andres explains his placement on the continuum:

[I’m] in the middle and a little to the smart, good kid. Cuz, like, I get in trouble, so it’s not in the good. Like, talk too much. So, that’s in the middle. But I want to learn, so that’s why I’m saying leaning to the smart kid.

Leo explains why he sees himself in the middle on the continuum:

I think I’m in the middle because there’s something about me – I just can’t be too serious. But there’s other days when I’m doing my work – I’m serious, but then all of a sudden I could goof around with the other kids. And when the teacher says something, I’ll try to stop, but then they’ll be like, ‘Hey, you wanna…?’ and I’ll be like, ‘No, I don’t want to get in trouble no more.’ I think I’d be just in a little bit more to the bad kids side just because I don’t like to disrupt the class, but once in a while when I would say something funny, one kid would laugh and then
the whole class would laugh. I try not to – like, [I try to tell myself] okay now it’s
time to be serious. I try to fall right in between that – not too bad but not too good
but right in the middle.

In these examples, it appears as though the students enter a daily battle within themselves
with regards to their placement on this continuum. They want to behave well, but it is
almost as if certain factors get in the way of their best intentions – whether that be the
other students in the class, the interest level of the academic material, or some other
miscellaneous circumstances. Regardless of the reason, once again we are seeing this
reoccurring pattern of disengagement from school.

This pattern becomes even more apparent when you listen to these students
describe instances of their poor behavior. Aaron describes what types of behaviors get
him into trouble: “[I don’t] put in effort or try. That I probably would talk a lot. And I
don’t raise my hand at good times. And I try to distract the class. Like, try to be the
center of attention.” I specifically asked about behavioral conduct, however, Aaron also
included academic effort. Both components fall under behavioral engagement, and
clearly Aaron is disengaging on both levels.

Alan referred to himself as a troublemaker five different times during his
interviews. Each time he used this word, he looked down and shook his head. This is the
way Alan describes himself as a troublemaker:

I was just a troublemaker. I used to make fun of my teachers. And like dumb
stuff, I’d joke around too much. [A troublemaker means] like pretty much I won’t
be doing anything, I’ll be throwing stuff at people, messing around, being loud,
being rude to the teacher, not listening, pretty much.
The way that Alan described himself was as if the way he behaved was set in stone. He was a troublemaker, and there was nothing anyone could do about it, including himself. He described it as a matter of fact piece of his identity. He admitted that many times he does commit the act that gets him into trouble, but that there are other times when he gets unfairly accused and sorely misjudged. Alan explained that when the authority’s perception of fairness and justice does not align with his, he loses control of his behavior. This is often when his behavior go through the most severe spikes.

Gabriel describes his battle between good intentions and transgressions in the beginning of high school:

Ninth grade was fun. The beginning of tenth grade, I was like I’m ready, [but] I just went bad. I was supposed to do good, and I just went horrible. I was just doing the wrong things. But I wouldn’t talk to all the same [bad] people, so I kinda changed the people I talked to. I changed the type of person I am. Even my mom knows that I’ve changed a lot.

Gabriel spoke with an opposing perception to Alan’s in terms of how poor behavior plays into his identity. Gabriel made it clear that no matter how bad he has been in the past, he wants to change this pattern. He credited part of this potential change to the type of people he chooses to interact with, which lines up directly with the prior code about influence of friends. In fact, Gabriel pointed to influence of friends several times as a significant part of the impetus for his behavior.

Rafael descried when, how, and why his behavior went downhill:

School has been, it’s been pretty good until I hit high school. That’s when I started to begin messing up. Basically, people think you’re cool, you’re this,
you’re that. Oh yeah, if you talk back to your teacher, you’re cool, or if you don’t
do your homework, you look cool, you’re that bad kid, you’re bad ass. And I
kinda messed up.

Rafael made it clear that his poor behavior started in high school by doing things that
made his peers perceive him as cool. Unfortunately, in Rafael’s social group, acting cool
means disrespecting authority figures and not doing academic work. However, in the
social group I grew up in, being cool meant getting good grades and playing sports.
These social influences often impact behavior, which in turn often impacts school
engagement.

Each student spoke about at least one parent encouraging them to behave and do
well in school. However, despite this positive parental encouragement, the poor behavior
in school still persists. All of the students were able to point to at least three reasons for
their poor behavior. For three of the students, intermingled among those reasons was also
a feeling of not completely knowing why their poor behavior persists. Discussions about
poor behavior came up in a few different parts of the interview. In one of those parts,
Aaron, Andres, and Alan all responded to my question about why they exhibit this poor
behavior by saying, “I don’t know.” I asked each of them if they wish they knew why
they exhibit this poor behavior, and all three students responded with a resounding, “yes”
and with a facial expression of disappointment.

All the students gave various reasons for their behavior throughout the interviews.
In Table 3, I charted the reasons so that I could visually present the frequency of the
different reasons from the students’ perspectives.
Table 3

Reasons for Poor Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academic Difficulty</th>
<th>Authority Conflict</th>
<th>Friend Influence</th>
<th>Fun</th>
<th>Bored</th>
<th>Stress</th>
<th>Not Caring</th>
<th>Not Knowing</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Daniel</td>
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</table>

The table indicates that according to the students, the six most common reasons for the poor behavior are: not caring, academic difficulty, authority conflict, friend influence, fun, and not knowing. Not caring was the reason that the highest number of students had in common. Not caring is directly related to engagement. According to the definition of engagement, students only become engaged when they care about their academics, behavioral conduct, relationship with the school, relationship with teachers, relationship with peers, and have an interest in learning.

**Ditching.**

Part of the criteria for selecting my sample of students was a behavioral track record because that is one of the greatest risk factors for dropping out of school. So, of course I expected to hear stories about poor behavior along the lines of the ones I
reported so far. However, I did not expect so many of the stories to revolve around ditching and fighting. In addition to the general stories about poor behavior, most of the students shared stories about ditching and fighting. Therefore, I made those two subtopics within the theme of behavioral conduct. This section is about ditching and the following section is about fighting.

For the purposes of this study, ditching refers to one of the following circumstances: skipping the whole day of school, skipping the first part of the school day, skipping the last part of the school day, or skipping one or more classes in the middle of the school day. Ditching has one of the most obvious connections to school engagement. It is simple – if the student is not there, the student is not engaged. As noted in chapter two, Finn, Fish, and Scott (2008) identified ditching as one of the seven most frequent types of misbehavior that lead to dropping out of school. The students were not shy to share their experiences with ditching.

Alan was expelled from our school part way through seventh grade and shares his experience with ditching at his new school: “Yeah, once I was over there, I went to my classes – I wouldn’t ditch. But once I started 8th grade, I was like for sure I’m not going to my classes.” Alan followed this by speaking negatively about his new school in terms of its structure, organization, and teacher quality. He made it sound as though he decided to start ditching in eighth grade because these elements had caused him to become so greatly disengaged from school that he did not want to physically be there.

Daniel explained his logical progression from struggling academically to ditching: I was just not good at anything in school. I would try, and then I would get mad because I couldn’t get it, and then that’s when I would just not go to that class.
That happened with every class, therefore, I would not go to school.

This explanation is painfully logical. Daniel basically indicated that because he was not able to succeed academically, he did not want to attend school. There was no support in place to encourage school engagement at Daniel’s breaking point.

Rafael describes the peer pressure that led him to a pattern of ditching:

I sometimes thought I was the shit. Don’t get me wrong, my cousins, sorta like [used] peer pressure. They try to pump you up, ‘Come on man, yeah let’s ditch, fuck that class, let’s go off ground.’ I’m like nah, I have to get back to class, but I didn’t want to look like a little bitch – screw that class, whatever.

Rafael brought up the influence of friends and peer pressure several times throughout the interview. He focused on how important his reputation and image is at school. Rafael clearly cares about his relationship with his peers, which means that he is emotionally engaged in school, but unfortunately not in a positive way.

Three examples of ditching were described in this section. In each example, the reason was different. For Alan, it was the school and the teachers. For Daniel, it was the academic difficulty. For Rafael, it was the peer pressure from his friends. However, the result for all three students was the same – disengagement from school led to a poor behavior choice, which in this case was ditching. The reason is important because, hopefully, having a better understanding of the reasons for ditching from the perspective of the students will aid with ideas of how to put necessary preventative supports in place.

**Fighting.**

For the purposes of this study, fighting refers to threats given and received about a physical fight as well as actual physical fighting. I was taught growing up that fighting is
wrong, and that it is never a solution to a problem unless it is self-defense from severe injury or death. As an adult, I must admit that I strongly agree with this philosophy about fighting. This is a strong bias that I feel is important to disclose in this section. Given this bias, I had to be very careful during the interviews to not actually let my jaw drop as each student described the fights they had been in and almost been in as part of their school experiences. Most of the students described these situations related to fighting as an effective, necessary way to maintain their own safety and reputation at school and on the streets.

Rafael spoke the most about fighting compared to the other students. He spoke about fighting with a great sense of pride. In most cases, Rafael described fighting in terms of protecting his reputation. This is a situation when Rafael was influenced by his friends to protect his reputation:

I was about to get in [a fight], but the other guy didn’t want to. Cuz like I said, at Minter I know everybody, and I guess that guy, I knew him, but I didn’t know he had a girlfriend, and I guess this girl I was talking to, it was his girlfriend, and he told me like, ‘Hey are you trying to get on my lady?’ And I’m like, ‘You’re stupid.’ And then one day he tried to check me, like he tried, and he hit me right here, and I’m like, ‘Alright, I see how it is.’ I went in class and all the homies are like, ‘What happened to you?’ And I’m like, ‘This fool tried doing something.’ And I have friends that know my older cousin, and they’re like, ‘Fool, you gotta go check this fool. You gotta catch hands with him.’ I’m like, ‘Alright then.’

There were two terms in this story that I was unfamiliar with – checking somebody and catching hands. I could have guessed based on the context, but I wanted to be careful to
get Rafael’s definition so I could deliver his intended meaning. In response to checking somebody, Rafael explains and finishes the previous story:

Check somebody is like if somebody is acting stupid, and you have to tell them whatever like you’re going to sock them in the mouth or something so that they really listen. Like this fool, I guess he tried doing that on me. And I had him turned around, and I wasn’t expecting it, and he hit me like right here [slapping the location], and I was like, ‘Fool, you couldn’t even check my ass,’ and he’s telling everybody. ‘Yeah, I checked this fool,’ and I’m like, ‘You’re going around telling everyone you checked me. You’re a funny ass – fine, I’ll fuck your ass up.

In response to catching hands with somebody, Rafael explains:

[It’s] like when you're swinging at each other, like both of your hands are up, and if we’re going to throw down, like I'm hitting at you, I'm swinging at you. It's like you're catching my hands cuz I'm hitting you or whatever.

This description was a bit convoluted, but what I got from it is that catching hands is when one person’s body catches the hands from the blow sent by the other person. The point here is how much Rafael talked about fighting, has been in fights, and how familiar he is with the subtleties in the slang for different types of fighting.

Daniel spoke about fighting more in terms of physical protection and less in terms of reputation protection. Daniel told a story about a time when he was going to Ichra High School and a girl from Cableton High School spread a rumor to her cousin that Daniel was speaking ill of the cousin’s clique, which Daniel says he never did. I asked Daniel to clarify for me what he meant by clique, and he described it as one step below a
full-blown gang. He said that ever since this, the guy who ran the clique kept trying to plan a physical attack on Daniel. Daniel tells the story about how he knew he was in danger and knew that he needed to protect himself:

Well, the first day when I went out from school, I had a wrench with me because I knew I take the bus [that] went in front of Cableton High School. And my mom was like, ‘I don’t want you taking the bus no more because they can hurt you.’ And I’m like, no I’m going to school. I’m not going to let some kids stop me from going to school. So, I had a wrench with me, a big old wrench, just in case, and I was right. Some kids got on and they knew I took that bus. They got on the bus trying to find me on the bus. And one of them tried to swing at me, and I just threw him like that [showing with his hands] and pulled out the wrench and he was like, ‘I’m good.’

After this story, Daniel continued to share stories about all the fights he had been in, almost been in, and people he had to protect himself from during elementary, middle, and high school. Hearing these stories really caused me to reflect on my beliefs about fighting. I wanted to know, in hindsight, if he felt like fighting was an effective way to deal with all the conflicts he described. I will never forget the look on his face, when Daniel shrugged, nodded, and said:

It’s been effective so far, for me. There were fights, like in the alley, in the school. They were like the regular school fights. Not like the stabbings – just he quits because his nose is bleeding too much. I wouldn't really hurt them. I mean I would but not to the degree that they like have to go to the hospital. So then they knew like oh I could kick your ass, and so they would leave me alone.
I was truly floored by his nonchalant, logical explanation. Daniel made it clear that because he never sent anyone to the hospital and got the results he wanted, fighting was in fact a very effective strategy to use during his schooling experience. The other students who spoke about fighting insinuated this same belief about the effectiveness of fighting as a survival strategy to use at school.

**Participation in Academics**

The theme of participation in academics is also an element that has the potential to produce a significant impact on school engagement for underperforming, high school Latino males. In this section, I will discuss the following three codes that emerged from the data within this theme: poor grades, math as a gatekeeper, and perception of benefits of learning. The first two codes apply to behavioral engagement in school and the last code applies to cognitive engagement in school.

**Poor grades.**

As covered in chapter two, in addition to poor behavioral conduct, earning poor grades is also one of the greatest risk factors for dropping out of school (Suh & Suh, 2007). For the interview questions about poor grades, just as in the interview questions about poor behavior, I started by asking the students to describe their grades based on a continuum with the worst grades one end of the continuum and the best grades on the other end of the continuum. Next, I asked the students to share specific instances describing the reasons for the grades they have earned. As with the section on poor behavior, all seven students placed themselves in the middle of the continuum when asked to compare themselves to students with the worst and best grades. Some of the
students leaned slightly in one direction or the other from the middle, but all of the students still placed themselves in the middle.

Daniel describes his fluctuations with regards to his placement on the continuum:
In the middle. I mess around a bunch, but I get good grades [now]. Last year my lowest grade was a C-. I would always get in trouble in Ms. Tucker’s class for sleeping, talking, but I passed her class with like a B. That’s what I mean. I would not get things at all, but I would pull it off. I’d wing it, and I’d get the grades I needed, but I’d be that kid. [Before last year], I was the worst kid. The lowest, the bottom.

Gabriel describes some ups and downs on the continuum as well:
I’ve always been able to pay attention. I could pay attention, and when I couldn’t, I would choose not to. How school is, since I was young till now, I could say that I’ve kinda gone downhill, but then I would always find my way back up. I would do bad, but I would do good also. So, I would always try to balance myself so I wouldn’t be too bad and wouldn’t be too good I guess – just being in the middle.

Just as with the examples in the section on behavior, in these examples about grades, it appears as though the students enter a daily battle within themselves with regards to their placement on this continuum. They want to do well academically, but it is almost as if certain factors get in the way of their best intentions – whether that be the other students in the class, the interest level of the academic material, or some other miscellaneous circumstances. Regardless of the reason, once again we are seeing this reoccurring pattern of disengagement from school.
This pattern is once again evident in listening to the students themselves describe what their grades have been like throughout their schooling and how they feel about it. Andres shares his feelings about his grades: “Like, that I don’t put a lot of effort. [I feel] sad because they’re like, bad grades.” Andres was the only one out of the seven students to directly express sadness about his academic performance. This is fairly significant considering how much this expression of his emotions, particularly about academic performance, opposes the machismo persona referenced in chapter two, that many underperforming, Latino high school males project (Carter, 2006; Oguntoyinbo, 2009; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009).

Leo shared a sense of regret about his grades through his body language. As soon as I asked the question, he shook his head and looked down for a moment. Leo evaluates his academic performance:

I kinda think I did pretty bad in my last report card just because I didn’t even try towards the end of the semester, and most of my grades were F’s. I’m not too proud of the grades I had.

Before Leo earned the F’s, there was most likely at least one factor that led him to not put effort forth in his classes. There was likely at least one factor that led him to disengage from his academic responsibilities. In Leo’s case, he referenced academic difficulty many times, so I would deduce that academic difficulty served as one of those factors that led to poor grades and disengagement from school.

Daniel also shared a feeling of regret about the grades he earned. However, he expressed himself more through a sense of frustration about poor decisions. Daniel describes his academic performance:
Grades, dumpster grades. Like middle school, didn’t pass one class in 6\textsuperscript{th} or 7\textsuperscript{th} grade. In 8\textsuperscript{th} grade, barely passed. I graduated on stage but scraping by – it was ridiculous. There’s no grades to be proud of. They were just in the toilet. Like, [I feel] not embarrassed, just stupid. Like, that’s a dumb decision. I coulda done the work. I just didn’t want to. I know I coulda done it.

The regret was evident on his face when he shared the status of his grades. Daniel was not engaged in school in a positive way. He was exhibiting poor behavior in the classroom, ditching, fighting, and allowing friends to negatively influence him. Daniel was displaying many of the characteristics that have been described so far as factors that can lead to disengagement in school.

When the students describe the reasons for the poor grades they have earned, it lines up pretty similarly to the reasons for the poor behavior they have exhibited. In Table 4, I charted the students’ reasons for earning poor grades so that I could visually present the frequency of the different reasons from the students’ perspectives as I did with the reasons for poor behavior in the previous section.
Table 4

Reasons for Poor Grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Academic Difficulty</th>
<th>Authority Conflict</th>
<th>Friend Influence</th>
<th>Low Effort</th>
<th>Feeling Bored</th>
<th>Poor Behavior</th>
<th>Not Caring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andres</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leo</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rafael</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table indicates that according to the students, the five most common reasons for the poor grades are: academic difficulty, poor behavior, low effort, not caring, and influence of friends. Academic difficulty and poor behavior were the two reasons that all seven students had in common. Not so coincidentally, poor academic performance and poor behavior are two of the greatest risk factors that lead to disengagement from school, which in turn can lead to dropping out of school (Suh & Suh, 2007).

Math as a gatekeeper.

Another unanimous assertion among all seven students was that math acted as an academic barrier for them. For most of the students, this began at some point during middle school. Aaron said, “Math is not my good subject.” In response to a question about when school became difficult for him, Andres explained, “When I was in sixth
grade, because [the math] was new. They were showing new stuff, like division and all that stuff.” I am a math teacher so I think Daniel was trying to let me down gently by saying, “It’s not that I hate [math], it’s just I don’t – the only reason is because it’s so hard.” Gabriel did the same thing by responding, “[I don’t like] a little bit of math. I’m sorry.” Clearly math was nobody’s favorite subject.

Leo had the most to say about his clashing experiences with math. He shared his feelings about math with such a sense of hopelessness and frustration. Leo shares his experiences:

In math, I would get lost. Like, what am I doing? I really, really struggle in math. When I started advancing into new math classes, like in the beginning of 8th grade, I was really not going to graduate because of the grades, and it was always my math, math, math.

Leo and the other students are not the only ones who have had such negative experiences in math classes. This topic did not come up in the literature review because I did not have any questions specifically about math in the interview protocol. I asked what the students do not like about school, and all of them included math in their responses. Therefore, it is important to note that there is a significant body of research that corroborates the same successive negative experiences in math, which will be discussed further in chapter five.

**Perception of benefits of learning.**

The one component of the definition of engagement that has not had much coverage in this chapter is cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement means having an interest in learning. In the interview, I asked the students if they like learning new
things. Most of the students had a response that revolved around wanting to appear more intelligent in society and wanting to be prepared for a job in the future.

Daniel describes an internal conflict between the part of him that wants to learn new things to appear more intelligent in society and the part of him that feels so unhappy about his boredom and lack of success in school:

I don’t go to any class excited. Yeah, like it [school] wouldn’t be my first choice in how I want to spend my day. I like learning new things, but I don’t like learning things that are not necessary. Yeah, cuz [if you don’t learn new things] then you’d just be ignorant. That’s why I’m here. I’m here at school. I totally have the option not to come.

Daniel’s conflict here seems to revolve around the fact that he likes to learn new things but only the things he thinks are necessary, and there are a lot of things he is supposed to learn at school that feel unnecessary to him. He also made it very clear that dropping out of school is an option that he could take but that he is making the choice to stay in school.

Leo explains how he not only likes to learn new things that are interesting, but he also wants to encourage the students around him to do the same thing:

Yes, when it seems like it’s interesting and something new, I would really take my time and try to learn it. And the kids [around me], [I] try to talk to them, like, ‘This is something we have to learn, and you have to pay attention.’ Yes, because it’s also going to impact what kind of job you get. Every single job requires you know everything that you learn in school – it’s out there in the real world. So, yeah I think it’s important to come to school.
Leo wants to learn, wants the kids around him to learn, understands that what you learn in school will help with a job in the future, and thinks it is important to come to school. Despite Leo’s positive attitude towards learning, he is part of my study because he has exhibited clear signs of poor academic performance and poor behavior. There appears to be a great disconnect between behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement for Leo. He is not behaviorally engaged. He is partially emotionally engaged. He is completely cognitively engaged. As highlighted in chapters one and two, school engagement only successfully occurs when all three components of engagement are being fulfilled (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004).

Rafael shares his perception on learning new things:

Honesty, I like learning new things because this is how I think of it – everyday you learn something. No matter what it is, you learn something new and learning new things makes you smarter and makes you more intelligent and the way you talk, it just makes you even look better. So, I like learning new things. I don’t want to be simple plain dudes like sit over there in Pannerton. Like, yeah I talk like that, but if I’m going to go to an interview, I’m going to talk – I’m going to be respectful. I’m gonna sound better. Honestly, I think it is cuz like I said, you learn something everyday, and I think it’s pretty good because your grammar gets even better, and the way you talk and the way you speak gets even better, and it makes you look or sound smarter.

Rafael was chosen for this study, just like the other students, because he was performing poorly academically and had an extensive discipline record. Yet, he clearly likes learning new things and thinks it is an important part of life. Rafael knew he enjoyed learning
new things, however, somewhere along the way of his schooling he began to exhibit behaviors that greatly disengaged him from this process of learning. When did this happen? Why did this happen? The students’ responses to these questions lead into the final theme in this chapter – the transition from elementary school to middle school.

**Transition from Elementary School to Middle School**

During the interview, I asked the students to describe their experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. I asked them to describe when their grades and behavior were good and when it all started going downhill. Then I asked if they were able to identify the cause of this turning point. Only a few of the students were able to identify the cause, however, every single student described this experience happening in the exact same gradual way. Elementary school was good for the most part. Middle school is when grades and behavior began to take a negative turn. There were critical negative experiences in the eighth grade that kept the students heading down a path of poor grades and behavior. By high school, poor grades and behavior had completely set in, and each student was left largely disengaged from school.

**Positive elementary school experiences.**

As I asked the students to recall a time in school when everything was good, the emotion was apparent in most of their faces. There were some long pauses and shaking of heads. A few of the students scoffed at the thought, wondering if there really ever was a time in their memories when everything was good at school. Sure enough, one by one, each student was able to recall at least one positive school memory – all of which resided in elementary school.
Aaron spoke in a nostalgic tone as he recalled: “I used to finish my work ahead of the kids. They actually gave me an award, and all the teachers were there – the principal, everyone was there.” Aaron received this award in the second grade and brought it up three times during the interview. He also repeated a couple of times how everything was fine in elementary school.

Alan describes his positive experience in elementary school:

Well, in elementary [my grades] were pretty good. Probably like 3rd grade [was the best]. I remember all my friends, we would all do our work, help each other out. The teacher would let us talk in groups and stuff, and I was smaller too so I was focusing on my stuff.

Alan is one of the students who described his friends having a negative influence on him in middle and high school. It is interesting to note that in elementary school, he describes quite the opposite. Alan remembers that he and his friends used to do their work and help each other. He also remembers that he liked the opportunity to participate in cooperative learning – this kept his friends and him engaged.

Rafael described elementary school with a great sense of nostalgia. He mentioned several times that he was just a kid back then. Rafael inferred that now as a teenager in high school, life just is not as carefree as it used to be as a kid in elementary school.

Rafael explains how different life was back then:

[Elementary school] was just like typical kids, have fun, do your work, you’ll get prizes, just fun. Awards, I would go and mom would go, and she’d be proud, and then we’d go celebrate. We’d go to Chuck E. Cheese cuz I was a kid then. I’ve made my mom proud, and it feels good.
The use of extrinsic rewards comes up again here as a positive memory. In this case, there were two extrinsic rewards involved – the award given by the school and the reward given by his mom. It is also important to note that Rafael values making his mom proud, not only for the extrinsic reward but for the intrinsic reward as well – simply because it feels good.

**Negative middle school experiences.**

In elementary school, the students were having positive experiences. The students were learning. The students were engaged. Something occurred in the transition between elementary and middle school that caused their engagement in school to decrease. In this next section, students discuss the factors that led to their negative experiences in middle school.

Rafael explains that, for him, it was a spike academic difficulty: “When I got to middle school, it started getting harder, like, ‘Ah this is harder,’ and when it would be harder, basically, like everybody, I’ll probably give up, like, ‘Ah that’s just too hard.’” How different might Rafael’s middle school experience have been if that academic gap was not as large? The same question applies to each of the students in this study because they all had similar responses.

Leo specifically pointed to math as one of the culprits of his downhill turn in middle school: “[School started becoming difficult] when I started advancing into new math classes.” Throughout the interview, Leo continually described math as the cause of his disengagement from school. He said that no matter how well he did in his other academic classes, it did not matter because math always held him back and was the
source of endless frustration. Leo said that this is even more so the case now that he is in high school.

In these cases, it seems that the poor grades came first and the poor behavior followed, possibly as a result of the academic disengagement. Aaron and Daniel were the only students who described poor behavior preceding poor grades in middle school. Daniel shares his memory: “I didn’t listen to anybody. I got into a lot of trouble. I didn’t do anything I was supposed to. I was having a blast.” Daniel went on to explain that he did not pass sixth or seventh grade and barely passed eighth grade, largely due to his behavior.

**Critical eighth grade experiences.**

Whether the poor grades or the poor behavior came first, unfortunately, the trend of both these experiences heightened even more in the eighth grade. Eighth grade is when most of the students mentioned ditching for the first time, talked about an increased feeling of not caring, explained that academics took the greatest spike, and shared that grades and behavior worsened. The transition from elementary to middle school was already challenging. The transition from seventh to eighth grade presented even more significant challenges.

Alan and Daniel spoke the most about ditching in eighth grade. Alan explained that in the middle of seventh grade when he went from our school to Fern Middle School, he attended his classes. However, Alan explains, “Once I started 8th grade, I was like for sure I’m not going to my classes.” Alan made that decision once he started eighth grade, which means that he must have had an experience in seventh grade negative enough to result in that kind of attitude towards school very early on in his eighth grade year. Alan
shared two contributing experiences in seventh grade, although there may be more that he did not mention. Alan shared that his feelings about school changed significantly when he was expelled from our school, which in his opinion was unjust. He also shared an intense dislike for the structure and organization of the new school that he was forced to attend as a result of the expulsion.

Aaron and Leo talked the most about not caring. Each of them explained that when it came to anything related to school, they just did not care. Aaron describes this perception: “Well, in 8th grade I didn’t really care. But it was mostly my behavior that messed up everything in 8th grade. Cuz I got sent to the office a lot.” Aaron admits that he did not care in the eighth grade but also points to his behavior as the culprit. Aaron recognizes that by exhibiting poor behavior and getting removed from classes resulted in his lack of success in eighth grade.

Gabriel and Rafael described eighth grade as the year when their grades and behavior suffered the most in middle school, which they both described as a result from their perceived spike in academic difficulty. Gabriel reflects on this perception: “I think in the middle of seventh grade, nah, more like the end of 8th grade I started going downhill with my grades. I started talking more, started drawing in class, not paying attention.” Rafael also reflects on this perception:

I think probably in 8th grade it got hard. Seventh grade was kinda easy, 6th grade it was easy, but I think 8th and 9th grade kinda hard. My behavior, it’s pretty good, but it’s just sometimes when I talk that kinda distracts me. If a teacher acts kinda dumb, then my behavior gets kinda bad. [If a teacher] disrespects me, or
tells me, ‘Oh, stop talking’ when I wasn’t talking or stuff like that – when you get in trouble for no reason.

Both Gabriel and Rafael believe that school suddenly became more difficult in the eighth grade. This is the point at which Gabriel and Rafael became behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively disengaged from school.

All of the students described sixth grade as mostly okay, with very few academic and behavioral problems, if any. All of the students described seventh grade as the beginning of poor grades and behavior. All of the students described eighth grade as the most negative experience in middle school with regards to grades and behavior. All of the students experienced a gradual decay in school engagement as each middle school year passed. It was a sort of chipping away of school engagement for these students. They came from elementary school fully, or close to fully, engaged on all three levels – behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. In seventh grade, one or two of these levels of engagement began to fade away. By the end of eighth grade, in the best case, all three levels of engagement had been tampered with, and in the worst case, all three levels of engagement had been compromised completely.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter were built logically from the original problem statement, research questions, and methodology that guided this study. The findings were organized and presented according the following six themes that emerged from the data analysis process: influence of neighborhood and family, relationship with school and peers, relationship with authority figures, behavioral conduct, participation in academics, and transition from elementary school to middle school. Under each of these
themes, I described specific codes that emerged from the data. The themes and codes have elements that tie closely to the three-part definition of engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) that was used to guide the literature review, the methodology, the development of the interview protocol, and the analysis of the data.

The findings suggest the following conclusions that will be discussed in chapter five. The students are influenced by the safety of their neighborhood, frequency of moving, and their family. The negative impact of school structure and organization is indirectly recognizable to the students. The use of extrinsic rewards had at least a short-term positive effect on all of the students. Most of the students experienced negative influences from their friends. All of the students had positive and negative stories to share about the impact from authority figures at school – most were negative. All of the students described some level of poor behavior, and some students described instances of ditching and fighting. In terms of participation in academics, all of the students experienced poor grades, with the most difficulty occurring in mathematics. The students perceived several benefits to learning, however, a disconnect presented itself between these perceived benefits and the actions that the students have taken in school. All of the students had a positive elementary school experience, negative sixth and/or seventh grade experiences, and increasingly negative eighth grade experiences.

All of the students described a myriad of negative experiences in school. There were many similarities in the experiences across the students in this study. The unfortunate similarity that all of the students shared was that the negative experiences illustrated within their narratives resulted in a gradual chipping away of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in school.
Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter contains a summary of the study, an analysis of the findings, implications for educational policy and practice, and recommendations for future research. The summary of the study provides an overview of the problem, purpose statement, research questions, methodology, and major findings. The analysis includes relating the findings to the larger body of literature, interpreting themes that emerged from the data, reflecting on the study’s contribution to the field, and discussing the generalizability of the findings. The section on implications for educational policy and practice is where recommendations are made for change in policy and practice. The chapter ends with a concluding statement and recommendations for future research, describing topics that may need closer examination and may generate new research questions for further study.

Summary of the Study

This study is centered around the problem that very little qualitative research has addressed the risk factors for high school dropout and even less qualitative research has addressed the experience of these risk factors from the perspective of the Latino male students who are at risk of dropping out of school. The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the perceptions of underperforming Latino male high school students about the factors that they believe have led them to disengage from school. The focus of the study is to answer the following research questions that are based on the three-part definition of engagement that was presented in the purpose and background section of the first chapter:
1) How do underperforming high school students describe their academic and social behavior throughout their educational experience?

2) How do these students describe their emotional connection to school, teachers, and peers throughout their educational experience?

3) How do these students describe their cognitive interest in school throughout their educational experience?

4) What are the educational and policy implications of school engagement for Latino males?

In order to address the research questions, I conducted two semi-structured interviews each with seven students for 45-60 minutes per interview, for a total of fourteen interviews. The students were Latino males in the 10th grade who qualified for free/reduced price lunch, had a GPA below 2.0, and had a school discipline record.

The findings build logically from the original problem statement, research questions, and methodology that guided this study. The findings consist of six themes that emerged from the data analysis: influence of neighborhood and family, relationship with school and peers, relationship with authority figures, behavioral conduct, participation in academics, and transition from elementary school to middle school. The first major finding is that the students described their academic engagement and behavioral conduct as progressively getting worse as they went through middle school and into high school. The second major finding is that the students described a negative emotional connection to school and authority figures, which also became progressively worse as they went through middle school and into high school. The third major finding is that the students described a cognitive interest in learning that wavered very little from
elementary school, through middle school, and into high school, despite a long-term experience of academic failure, behavioral problems, and disengagement from school.

**Discussion**

**Influence of neighborhood and family.**

This theme was discussed within the context of the following codes: safety of neighborhood, frequency of moving, and characterization of family. The students described living in neighborhoods that were dangerous, primarily because of gang and drug activity. There is literature that documents a relationship between growing up in an unsafe neighborhood and engagement in school (Jensen, 2009; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011). For example, the literature discusses competing for basic survival, gaining equal access to academic resources, and the level of parent involvement as factors that impact school engagement.

When you have to worry about basic survival and human needs, engagement in school may not always be a top priority. Abraham Maslow is famous for the paper he published in 1943 about the hierarchy of human needs. His theory states that all humans must have these three basic needs met before they can be motivated for anything else: physiological, safety, and love/belonging. Maslow argues that only once these three basic needs are met can a human being be motivated to move up the hierarchy of needs towards the highest levels of esteem and self-actualization. He describes esteem as self-esteem, confidence, achievement, respect for others, and respect by others. He describes self-actualization as morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, and acceptance of facts (Maslow, 1943, pp. 381-382). After reading about Maslow’s theory and the modern interpretations, it makes it easier to understand the perspective
from which the students are speaking. The modern literature identifies a notable
correlation between basic survival and school engagement by arguing that the more a
student has to be concerned with basic survival, the less likely the student is to be fully
engaged in school (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Jensen, 2009;
Jensen, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

In addition to living in unsafe neighborhoods, the students described frequently
moving from one unsafe neighborhood to another. Moving can make it challenging to
establish a connection with a school, teachers, and peers because if and when any of
those connections are made, moving to a new neighborhood typically severs those
connections. The literature agrees that frequently changing schools, known as student
mobility, makes it difficult to maintain most aspects of school engagement (Hartman,

Each student spent time characterizing the impact of his family. Despite some of
the negative experiences, each student had at least one positive experience to report in
terms of the impact of a family member. The students spoke about all the expectations
and words of encouragement from their family regarding their education. However,
when the students in this study went to school, they behaved poorly and failed
academically. The implication here is that there seems to be some kind of disconnect
between the door of the home and the door of the school.

Anecdotally, I remember talking to a student a couple years ago who was in a
similar situation. His parents appeared involved and invested in his education. He loved
his parents and could recite their daily words of encouragement and importance placed on
school. However, something happened between home and school each day. Almost
every day, he displayed poor behavior in school, received a phone call home, and then begged his parents and teachers for forgiveness the next day. One day after one of his wearing apologies, I stopped him, sat him down, and had a real conversation. I asked him exactly what I wanted to know. What happens to you between home and school? I will never forget the way he looked at me – serious, heartfelt, and earnest as could be, when he said with sadness in his voice, “I just don’t know. I want to be good. But something happens when I shut the door to my dad’s car every morning. I just turn bad.” To this day, I still do not know how to respond to that. Could it be that he is so severely disengaged from school that it results in this battle of internal contradiction? Either way, I heard each student in the interviews share similar paradoxical experiences.

At some point in several of the interviews, I heard the students talking about wanting to be “good” and not really knowing completely why they are “bad.” As noted in chapter four, some of the participants were not able to fully explain why they continue to display poor behavior despite the positive encouragement from a parental figure. The literature indicates that in some cases, the positive encouragement from a parent is not enough to combat other negative factors that students from a low SES background experience (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Jensen, 2013; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Jensen (2013) argues that there are seven reasons why students from low SES backgrounds are more likely to struggle with engagement in school: poor health and/or nutrition, limited vocabulary, low academic effort, hope about future and mind-set about learning, cognition deficiencies, disruptive home relationships, and chronic stress. Given this research, it is understandable why the positive messages from home may not be enough to transcend these other elements that many students from low SES backgrounds
face. This is a reasonable explanation for the persistent disengagement of the students who have parents delivering frequent messages about the importance of school.

**Relationship with school and peers.**

This theme was discussed within the context of the following codes: impact of school structure and organization, impact of extrinsic rewards, and influence of friends. Some of the students spoke about the appeal of the small size of HMS compared to other larger, traditional high schools. They talked about how the school feels like a family because everyone knows each other. This is a benefit because the family-like feeling has the potential of contributing towards a feeling of school connectedness. Monahan, Oesterle, and Hawkins (2010) argue that increasing school connectedness would be a large part of the solution to disengagement and dropping out. School connectedness results in less behavior problems, better emotional well-being (Eccles et al., 1993), and increased academic achievement (Osterman, 2000). It is important to note, though, that school connectedness encompasses much more than a family-like feeling at school. For the level of school connectedness to be strong, a connection must be felt academically and socially. School connectedness at any level is relevant to school engagement, however, it is not the only factor that needs to be in place in order to decrease behavioral problems and increase academic achievement. Other factors that need to be in place are discussed in the recommendations section of this chapter.

Within the same topic of school structure and organization, there is evidence shared in chapter four where several of the students spoke about the impact of teacher quality and teacher turnover. For example, Alan shared that once he determines a teacher is acting rude towards him, he will be rude in return and not pay attention in class. Daniel
described a math teacher who made frequent errors and never explained the correction of her own mistakes. Leo talked about a teacher who directed profanity at the students. Gabriel described circumstances in which he tried to participate in class but because he did not raise his hand, some of his teachers would say it does not count, therefore, he chose to stop participating. According to the data, negative experiences with some teachers seemed to contribute to the level of disengagement experienced by the students in this study.

The impact of teacher quality on student engagement has been a hot topic in the literature for a number of years (Klem & Connell, 2004; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rivers & Sanders, 2002; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The consensus among most researchers is that teacher quality and teacher relationships with students greatly impacts student engagement in school. In addition, minority students from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be the recipients of the lowest quality teachers, which is a compounding factor that impacts their engagement in school (Klem & Connell, 2004; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rivers & Sanders, 2002; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Along with teacher quality, teacher turnover is another significant concern in the literature (Guin, 2004; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013). In chapter four, one of the students in this study spoke about how teacher turnover directly impacted him. He pointed out how difficult and confusing it was to learn in an environment where the teacher and principal were frequently changing.

This means that these students are experiencing unequal access to central educational needs such as high quality teachers (Peske & Haycock, 2006; Rivers & Sanders, 2002; Rumberger & Rodrigues, 2002; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). This type of
unequal access to educational needs is directly related to the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive components of engagement. It makes sense that these students probably do not want to participate in the academic environment, develop relationships with teachers, and show an interest in learning if they are not experiencing competent and caring teachers.

On the other hand, most students spoke about the use of extrinsic rewards as a favorable part of the school structure and organization, primarily in elementary school. When I asked the students to recall a time when school was going well, almost all of them referred to experiences in elementary school when there was some sort of extrinsic rewards, usually in the form of candy or prizes. Of course we want all students to be intrinsically motivated and want to do the work on their own volition, but when that is not happening, particularly in the case of the students in this study, extrinsic motivation may be a good alternative. In their very recent article on the topic, Ledford et al. (2013) argue that extrinsic motivation is a useful tool for any K-12 student in these cases as long as it is used with caution and with the long-term intention of promoting intrinsic motivation. Regardless of whether the use of extrinsic rewards in educational settings is validated by the literature or not, it is clear from the experiences of the students in this study, that it resulted in a positive school experience where, even if only for a moment, they felt successful in school.

With regards to the students describing their elementary school teachers as “nicer,” it is possible that there are characteristics of typical elementary school teachers that these students gravitate towards and are not feeling from their middle school or high school teachers. Also, in elementary school, the students are with one teacher for the entire day as opposed to approximately six teachers per day. The positive interaction with one
teacher for the entire school day may have authentically promoted intrinsic motivation and more enjoyment of the educational setting and process in elementary school.

The influence of friends is a code that emerged in a much less positive light than the impact of extrinsic rewards. Most students described being in friendships with people who also exhibit poor behavior and poor academic performance in school. Some students admitted that having these types of friends directed them down a negative path in school, while others explained that it was just the nature of the type of neighborhood and schools they have experienced.

The influence of friends is relevant in this study because it is a piece of the puzzle that impacts school engagement. For example, one of the most risqué things I remember doing with my friends in high school was placing monetary bets on who would get the highest score on a math test. It may be wrong to place bets, but I think most people can agree that this level of influence from friends is remarkably different than the influence from friends that the students in this study are experiencing. According to the scholarly research on this topic, the influence of friends as a teenager can be particularly impactful, especially with regards to engagement in school (Conchas, 2001; Suh et al., 2007; You, 2011).

**Relationship with authority figures.**

This theme was discussed within the context of the following codes: positive impact from authority figures and negative impact from authority figures. Most of the students spoke about at least one positive relationship with an authority figure at school. In chapter two, I cited multiple researchers who demonstrated the importance of students developing at least one positive relationship with an authority figure at school (Fine,
For example, in chapter four, Gabriel described a positive relationship with his homeroom teacher. This homeroom teacher communicated with Gabriel’s math teacher to gather work that he needed to complete and turn in so he could pass the class. It is not to say that it should be another teacher’s responsibility to make sure a student passes another teacher’s class, however, the result of the personalized relationship that developed here did result in at least a momentary feeling of academic self-confidence and success. If this teacher had more time to work with Gabriel after this instance, maybe she would have been able to guide him in the process of communicating with the other teacher so that next time he could advocate for his own needs.

After reading about all of the positive relationships in chapter four, one might wonder, what is the problem? Why are these students still failing classes and misbehaving? Stanton-Salazar (2001) says that students like these just need one positive relationship with a school authority figure to have a chance at success. Chance is the operative word here. For some underperforming, Latino male high school students, that might be the case. However, for many of them, I think the issue lies in the fact that the relationship with that authority figure was fleeting – good but fleeting. If these students had more experiences with higher quality teachers over the course of their educational experience, maybe this population of students would have an abundance of positive experiences with school authority figures to describe instead of the fleeting few and far in between.
In the time that the students spent talking about the negative impact from authority figures, the topics most commonly shared were the issue of fairness and the historical existence of being a troublemaker. Some of the students felt as though they had been treated unfairly in some of the discipline cases that they received consequences for – the idea that the teacher was picking on them or trying to get them expelled from a school. Some of the other students felt as though they had the label of troublemaker, that is just who they had become, and that is who they would be for the remainder of their schooling experience – as if there was no way out of this label. In these cases, the perceptions of the students illuminate a serious concern about the negative relationships that sometimes exist between students and authority figures at school – a concern that is equally raised in the literature (Belfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Betts et al., 2010; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Juvonen, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lohmeier & Lee, 2011; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rios, 2010; Stout & Christenson, 2009; Suh & Suh, 2007).

Behavioral conduct.

This theme was discussed within the context of the following codes: poor behavior, ditching, and fighting. The qualitative data that the students provided is consistent with findings from scholarly experts in terms of poor behavior being one of the greatest risk factors leading to disengagement from school. This is valuable data because it is important to know whether or not the students’ perceptions are aligning with the adults’ research and perceptions. However, what is most important in addressing the goal of this study is to peel apart the next set of layers in an attempt to understand how and why these students believe their experiences in school have centered on poor behavior.
Most of the students explained that their behavior was good in elementary school, started going downhill in middle school, and has continued to be poor in high school. The literature confirms that poor behavior leads to disengagement from school (Belfanz et al., 2007; Chavez, Belkin, Hornback, & Adams, 1991; Janosz, Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000; National Collaboration for Youth, 1989; Rumberger, 1983; Suh & Suh, 2007; Wells, 1990). However, part of the aim of my research was to understand why the students perceive their poor behavior to be happening so that solutions can be developed. When asked why the students have chosen to behave poorly, most of them said that it was because they did not care.

In the literature, this concept of not caring about poor behavior or poor academic performance is referred to as student apathy. Most of the literature on student apathy agrees that the implication here is a need for practical motivation strategies that will encourage students to become more engaged and less apathetic. However, there is not much consensus in the literature about what these motivation strategies should be. For example, Mendler (2014) suggests the following five ways to increase motivation with apathetic students: (1) show students how achievement benefits life, (2) create challenges that students can master, (3) focus on the teaching and learning process, (4) establish relationships, and (5) give rewards for an immediate gain. On the other hand, Walsh (2006) says the secret is to abide by these three positive engagement principles: (1) get to know students so they can experience an adult who shows genuine interest in them, (2) take time to talk to students even if they reject you, and (3) do not take student opposition and apathy personally – instead work on building trust and always use positive regard. As another example, Brophy (2013) argues that these are the crucial elements needed to
motivate students: (1) establish a learning community in the classroom, (2) support students’ confidence as learners, (3) socialize uninterested students, (4) respond to students’ needs, and (5) adapt traditional learning activities. Despite the variation in the specific proposed strategies, the literature is clear in advising that the most direct way to decrease student apathy is to increase student engagement.

Several of the students specifically spoke about the behavior of ditching. The students who have a history of ditching reached a fairly severe point of disengagement from school. They went out of their way from the daily schedule planned for them by adults to find a way to avoid this schedule. These students were so extremely disengaged from school that they found ways to physically remove themselves from the experience of school altogether. The reasons that the students gave for ditching mirrors several reoccurring themes and codes in the data: school structure and organization, relationship with authority figures, academic difficulty, and influence of friends. In this case, I believe that the charge of the educational community is to find a way to alleviate the pressures and negative experiences that these types of students are feeling within these contexts at school so that ditching becomes a less appealing choice. Some suggestions for how to accomplish this are discussed in the implications for policy and practice section.

The students who shared stories about fighting focused on the element of maintaining a reputation. This reputation helped the students protect themselves from social, emotional, and physical danger. Before these interviews, my perception of fighting was always very black and white in the sense that fighting is wrong, and there is always a non-violent solution. After hearing all the stories about the students fighting to
protect themselves, I honestly did not know how to reconcile my beliefs about fighting with the experiences that they described. I do know that as I listened to student after student talk about fighting as a means to protect their reputation and survive, my once clear-cut, black and white bias about fighting suddenly had some gray streaks painted into it, especially when the reason for fighting was protection.

As noted in chapter two, Finn, Fish, and Scott (2008) identified fighting, in addition to ditching, as one of the seven most frequent types of misbehavior that lead to dropping out of school. Fighting is another way of emotionally engaging in school but in a negative way because the students are creating negative relationships with their peers. The negative peer relationships limit the level at which these students can have positive engagement experiences in school. Through the discussion of the theme of behavioral conduct and the codes within, it is apparent that this element has the potential to produce a significant impact on school engagement for underperforming, high school Latino males.

**Participation in academics.**

This theme was discussed within the context of the following codes: poor grades, math as a gatekeeper, and perception of benefits of learning. The qualitative data that the students provided is consistent with findings from the scholarly experts in terms of poor academic performance being one of the greatest risk factors leading to disengagement from school. When I asked students to explain why they believe the history of poor academic performance has occurred, academic difficulty and poor behavior were the most popular explanations. When the academic material is perceived to be too difficult and poor behavior is the norm, students tend to experience disengagement from school.
The educational community needs to find ways to alleviate the academic spike in difficulty that most of the students described occurring at some point in middle school so that students are not cornered into beginning their travels down the path of disengagement in middle school. Suggestions for how the educational community can do this are discussed in the implications for policy and practice section.

With respect to academic difficulty, most of the students spoke about math as the subject that caused them the most frustration and anguish academically. Math is very rarely a favorite subject. In addition, it is no secret that in comparison to other countries, the performance on standardized math tests in the United States is significantly sub par (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Most of the students in my study highlighted math as the subject that resulted in the greatest academic upset in their schooling experience.

Anecdotally, as a math teacher for underperforming Latino males for the last seven years, I can speak to the intensity with which so many students dislike math and perform poorly in it, despite the myriad of strategies I have tried. In fact, researchers have gone as far as implicating math as a gatekeeper to high school graduation. The research states that for students in this predicament, not being able to earn the necessary math credits to graduate either contributes to disengagement from school, in general, or ends up being the only barrier to high school graduation (Schneider, Martinez, Ownes, 2006). The educational community, particularly within the field of mathematics, needs to identify structures, strategies, and solutions that can be implemented to address the nationwide epidemic of severely poor academic performance in math and the math phobia that often goes hand in hand with this. The literature suggests that the following
four fundamental changes need to occur in mathematics classrooms across the country: (1) math lessons need to be more engaging and more connected to real world applications, (2) teachers need to focus on conceptual understanding in order to contextualize the procedural knowledge, (3) students need the opportunity to work in a cooperative learning setting as opposed to only in a direct instruction setting, (4) use of technology in math classrooms (Hiebert, 2013; Li & Ma, 2010; Richland, Stigler, & Holyoak, 2012; Wagner, 2013).

The final topic that I asked the students about in terms of participation in academics was with regard to their perception of the benefits of learning. This fits within the cognitive component of engagement, which is defined as having an interest in learning. The questions I asked on this topic came at the end of the interview. After everything I heard from the students about the influence of their neighborhood and family, their often negative relationships with the school and peers, their mostly negative relationships with authority figures, their poor behavior, and their poor grades, I just assumed that they would not have much interest in learning. Much to my chagrin, all of the students spoke about how they enjoy learning new things and why they believe learning is important. Most of the students spoke about the importance of learning new things in two different contexts. First, they felt it was important to learn new things and become educated to help in the future with obtaining a job. Second, they felt it was important to learn new things and become educated so that other people would perceive them as smart in various social settings.

This is a significant finding because it means that despite the progressive loss of behavioral and emotional engagement for these students, at least some level of their
cognitive engagement has remained intact. The students are interested in learning. The question that still remains is what type of learning are they interested in, especially given that most of the participants professed to not care about school? It may be that they are interested in learning about topics that appeal to them but not interested in learning about topics that do not appeal to them. The topics that do not appeal to these students may be most of the topics they have encountered in the school setting. If this has been the case, it would certainly account for the discrepancy between the seemingly high level of cognitive engagement and documented low levels of behavioral and emotional engagement. Further questioning on this topic would need to take place in order to develop a more definitive conclusion about the role that cognitive engagement has played in the schooling experience for these students. However, one element that is clear from the data is that the students were engaged on all three levels during elementary school, and the decrease in engagement was initiated during the transition from elementary school to middle school.

**Transition from elementary school to middle school.**

This theme was discussed within the context of the following codes: positive elementary school experiences, negative middle school experiences, and critical eighth grade experiences. I identified the specific time period that the students began disengaging from school by asking them to describe a time when everything was going well for them in school. All of the students described elementary school as the time when they were engaged in school and having positive experiences in school. All of the students described middle school as a time when they began to disengage in school and have increasingly negative experiences in school.
Most of the students described a spike in academic difficulty as the leading cause of disengagement in middle school. This spike in academic difficulty led some of these students to a place of giving up on the chance for academic success. Once the students made the choice to disengage academically, the behavioral disengagement was not far behind. The educational community needs to find a way to bridge the gap between elementary school and middle school so that students are able to maintain the engagement in school that existed for them in elementary school. Specific recommendations for how to do this are discussed in the following section on implications for policy and practice.

Whether the poor grades or the poor behavior came first, unfortunately, the trend of both these experiences heightened even more in the eighth grade. Eighth grade is when most of the students mentioned ditching for the first time, talked about an increased feeling of not caring, explained that academics took the greatest spike, and shared that grades and behavior worsened. In order for these students to have a chance for success in school, supports, such as the ones discussed in the next section, need to be in place that can prevent these types of negative choices and experiences from happening.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

Before discussing the implications of this study for policy and practice in the field of education, it is important to reiterate the study’s limitations and delimitations. The main limitation is that I am only studying students who exhibit the three traditional risk factors for dropping out of school: low SES, low GPA, and behavioral track record (Suh & Suh, 2007). While these three factors are frequently referenced in the literature on engagement and high school dropout, it nonetheless limited the type of participants I
chose to interview for my study because there are other factors cited less frequently in the literature, such as placement in special education and repetition of grade levels in elementary school, that were not part of the sampling criteria.

With regards to delimitations, I studied seven underperforming tenth grade students, who are Latino males, from one school site in California. The data I gathered cannot be generalized to other populations, settings, or conditions because the research sample was on too small of a scale to make any substantial generalizations. Also, the data collection took place over the course of a few months. This was considered a delimitation because the time frame inhibited my ability to follow-up with participants to see if there was any change in their perceptions and/or to see if they chose to stay in school or dropout. The scope of this study strictly focused on the factors that underperforming students perceive have led them to disengage from school.

The limitations and delimitations should be taken into consideration during the following discussion about implications for policy and practice and recommendations for change in educational policy and practice. All of the students in this study described progressive levels of deficiencies in behavioral and emotional engagement in school. On the other hand, all of the students in this study described a past, present, and future level of cognitive engagement in school. This means that despite the lack of academic, behavioral, and social engagement, and the lack of positive emotional connection to school, teachers, and peers, the students are interested in learning. Despite all of the signs of failure in school that have manifested themselves in various ways over the years, the cognitive engagement has still remained intact. The students want to learn. This information is key in developing recommendations for change in educational policy and
practice because the findings have made clear which components of engagement are
damaged and which ones are still intact.

Given the findings in this study about how the students perceive the factors that
have led them to disengage from school, there are several educational and policy
implications of school engagement for Latino males. These implications are discussed in
the context of making recommendations for change in educational policy and practice for
underperforming Latino males. In terms of the influence of neighborhood and family, it
is not possible for a schooling experience to alter the socio-economic circumstances of a
student, at least not in present time. However, it would be useful for teachers to have a
general understanding of the reality that many of these students are facing with respect to
the safety of their neighborhoods, the frequency that they have moved, and certain family
experiences. The literature argues that it is imperative to develop a cultural proficiency
school plan where teachers can learn this type of information in addition to cultural
proficiency related strategies for engagement of a diverse student population. This type
of cultural proficiency can be generated through the development of a needs assessment
plan, followed up by the development of a cultural proficiency school action plan
(Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2012; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

In addition to developing a cultural proficiency school action plan, it is also
important to explore recommendations to improve the relationship that the students have
with the school as an institution, specifically in terms of school structure and
organization. Whether it is legislative in nature, or district level policy, the need to
ensure equal access to educational resources and equal access to quality teachers is
paramount. This can be done in the form of state funding to support the hiring of highly
qualified teachers at poor resource schools. It should not matter whether the school is in Compton or Beverly Hills. All schools need access to a reasonable amount of funding so that students in any neighborhood are provided with the same access to a quality public education. The literature confirms that currently most schools are not receiving this type of equal access treatment (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Conchas, 2001; Ginorio & Huston, 2000; Moreno, 1999; Ponjuan, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valencia, 2002; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

However, given that changes in state legislation tend to occur at a painstakingly slow pace, I have two recommendations for schools in the interim that are more timely and practical. I recommend that schools develop a parent involvement plan to aid in increasing student engagement. The literature explains that part of the reason that some Latino parents appear to be disconnected from their child’s education is because their definition of parent involvement is different from the definition that the school has of parent involvement (Hill & Torres, 2010). I recommend that the school hold meetings with parents in English and Spanish to define what the school expects with regards to parent involvement. The research that has been conducted on the influence of parent involvement on students’ K-12 educational experience states that parental involvement programs typically increase student engagement and academic achievement (Jeynes, 2012). The literature also discusses the positive impact that parental advising can have on student engagement, particularly with regards to parents regularly sharing the educational aspirations they have for their children (Fan & Williams, 2010). In addition, the literature emphasizes the importance of the parental involvement plan including the cultural proficiency school plan, especially in terms of identifying ways to value and
connect to families’ culture and experiences (Larocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011). All of the aforementioned literature on the impact of parental involvement highlights the necessity for teachers and parents to work together to minimize any disconnect that may exist for students between school and home.

In addition to the development of a parent involvement plan, I recommend that administrators make unannounced visits to classrooms on a daily basis. This would allow for better control over teacher quality. Teachers who have good intentions but who have let themselves slip into unprofessional behaviors in the classroom would likely push themselves to address their shortcomings, or ask for help in doing so, once they noticed how often administrators were visiting. Teachers who did not have the best of intentions would likely be weeded out through this process and eventually reported to human resources once attempts to intervene were unsuccessful. This is a suggestion that also does not cost the school any additional money yet helps the school maintain a decent level of teacher quality. Most businesses develop ways of controlling for quality. This would just be the school’s way of doing this for its main producer – the teachers.

The use of extrinsic rewards in grades beyond elementary school is another recommendation I am making based on the findings. With this population, if the choices are, hope that they develop intrinsic motivation because that is the more favorable circumstance or continue to use extrinsic motivation even though it might be deemed inappropriate by some scholars, I am going to vote in favor of using extrinsic motivation simply because it works. As educators, we can want and wish for all kinds of things for our students, such as natural intrinsic motivation, but until we learn how to truly develop that within these types of students in a reasonably short amount of time, I believe that
extrinsic motivation should be used as a tool to increase school engagement. Latino males have a history of disengaging from school and in some cases dropping out of school, and while short-term extrinsic rewards may not be a long-term viable solution, their use can offer schools short-term successes.

In addition to implementing the use of extrinsic rewards, I would add some changes that are more systemic in nature in order to develop a more long-term, sustainable type of intrinsic motivation among these students. I am making these recommendations based on literature that describes middle school best practices from middle schools that are succeeding in engaging students who would typically be categorized as at risk for dropping out of school. Gene Bottoms (2012) conducted a large-scale study of a set of standardized middle grades assessments that were given to 136 middle schools over a course of two years. The purpose of the study was to determine which school’s scores improved over this two-year period and which school’s scores did not improve during this time. Bottoms (2012) then gathered data from all the schools that showed improvement in order to compile the following comprehensive list of ten best practices for middle schools: (1) have a clear mission with strong faculty support; (2) have strong collaborative district support; (3) enroll more students in an accelerated curriculum; (4) engage students in learning by using more authentic problems, project-based learning, cooperative learning, and technology; (5) focus on improving students’ reading and writing skills; (6) maintain high expectations for all students and support them through reteaching, tutoring, and extra time to relearn and redo work until it meets standards; (7) identify at-risk students as early as grade six and provide them with additional instruction and support; (8) ensure students receive high quality guidance and advisement by
providing students with a personal connection with an authority figure in the school, involving parents in discussions about their child’s performance and readiness for high school, and helping students develop a six-year plan for high school and post-high school studies; (9) provide extensive professional development for staff; (10) have a strong principal and school leadership team that can work collaboratively with the school community (p. 5). In other similar research that has been conducted, the list of recommended best practices mirrors part or all of these recommendations (Klein et al., 2009; Slack, Johnson, Dodor, & Woods, 2013; Wilcox & Angelis, 2007;). I recommend that middle schools with students at risk for dropping out of school make it a priority to implement these ten best practices to improve engagement.

Another finding that should be translated into a recommendation is the capacity for authority figures to have a positive impact on students. The students in this study shared some positive experiences with authority figures, however, these experiences were fleeing and surrounded by numerous negative experiences. The literature highlights the significant positive impact that just one caring school authority figure can have on an underperforming student (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Most schools have some type of system that pairs each individual student with a school counselor. In most of these cases, the ratio of students to counselor is extremely high, therefore, often rendering that relationship largely ineffective and meaningless (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

For this reason, I am recommending that students also be paired with another school authority figure at a smaller ratio – perhaps ten students for each adult. If every adult on a school campus, including secretaries and administrators, is utilized as an advisor/mentor, each student would be guaranteed a much better chance for a positive
relationship with a school authority figure to flourish. For authority figures who remain at a school site for more than one year, the relationships with their students would have the potential to develop even more and thrive for a longer period of time. Anecdotally, I can share that I have informally developed mentoring relationships with several students each year, and I have been able to watch first hand the transformation in their engagement in school, which I believe is due, at least in part, to the impact of the relationship I have developed with them as a caring authority figure.

In terms of behavioral conduct, I recommend that teachers be given a sufficient amount of planning and collaboration time to develop truly engaging lessons. Teachers need time to create lessons that connect to the diverse experiences of Latino students and that allow the students to connect cognitively in ways that they are finding difficult to do now. A common complaint from teachers, in general, is the shortage of time given to plan quality lessons. If students are in a classroom where they are interested in the way the lessons are being delivered, then their engagement in school is more likely to increase. When students are academically engaged, they are less likely to exhibit poor behavior, make choices to ditch school, and get involved in fighting (Belfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Betts et al., 2010; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Juvonen, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lohmeier & Lee, 2011; Ream & Rumberger, 2008; Rios, 2010; Stout & Christenson, 2009; Suh & Suh, 2007).

Most public schools in the United States are currently going through a transition from state based academic content standards to one common core set of national academic content standards. The first aim of the new common core standards is to standardize educational content standards across the country. The second aim of the
development of the common core standards is to have a curriculum that connects all of the core school subjects together so that it better mirrors the real world instead of being a set of disjointed learning experiences. The third aim of the implementation of the common core standards is to teach students how to develop high-level critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis skills (Alberti, 2012; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2010). The implication of this national shift in academic content standards is that it will likely make the development of more engaging lessons a less strained process for teachers, especially because of the built in real world applications.

With respect to participation in academics, I recommend that elementary and middle school curriculum directors collaborate to make some revisions in the timing for certain content delivery. The students in this study expressed that the academic content in elementary school was fairly easy for them but that the academic content in middle school was sharply spiking in difficulty over those three years. It is possible that at least part of the spike in academic difficulty is attributed to the gradual process of disengagement. If the students were already disengaging from school for other reasons, it makes sense that the academic difficulty would feel as though it was increasing at a more drastic rate. If the curriculum directors could shift the academic content in a way that the spike in academic difficulty was spread out over the last couple years of elementary school and the first couple years of middle school, then the spike in academic difficulty would likely be alleviated or eliminated. In addition, I recommend that educators from elementary and middle schools collaborate to develop a plan to implement extra academic supports at specific critical points of the educational experience and also develop some type of academic alert system that would make it difficult for any
significant form of disengagement to persist beyond a certain amount of time.

In addition to the recommendation for the curriculum shift and academic alert system, I recommend some regularly scheduled collaboration between curriculum directors and math teachers. Math is the subject that most of the students expressed have always given them the most difficulty and the most intense feelings of academic disengagement from school. The curriculum directors and math teachers need to develop a revised curriculum that is accessible and relatable. Students need to be able to walk out of a math class feeling like they can understand the math concepts and perform the required math calculations while at the same recognizing the connection between math and the real world. Many educators and researchers believe that the new common core standards will be an important step in creating this connection, not just for math, but for all the core academic subjects (Alberti, 2012).

One of the most significant recommendations stems from the implications of the transition from elementary school to middle school. All of the students pointed to this transition as the moment in time when the experience of disengagement from school began to unfold. The students had a positive experience in elementary school and a rather tumultuous experience in middle school. I believe that all of the aforementioned recommendations would markedly alleviate this turbulent transition. However, I have one final recommendation within this transition context that I believe would smooth the transition from elementary school to middle school even more.

I recommend a four-part transition support program that would begin in fifth grade. The program would stretch over the course of four years during each of these four crucial grade level transitions: fifth to sixth, sixth to seventh, seventh to eighth, and eighth to
ninth. The program would contain the following six modules, based on the themes in the findings of this study, in order to address the factors that the students believe have led them to disengage from school: influence of neighborhood and family, relationship with school and peers, relationship with authority figures, behavioral conduct, participation in academics, and transition between grade levels in grades five through nine. This transition support program would include lessons, discussions, and activities every morning during an advisory class. Three of these modules would be covered each semester in an age appropriate manner. The students would experience the rotation of these modules four times because the program would span through grades five to nine. However, each year the curriculum for this program would be built from the age appropriate experiences that the students are having in their current grade level. In this program, the students would learn practical strategies that they could implement in order to advocate for themselves during some of the typically difficult school experiences that the students in this study illuminated. I believe that a program like this could mitigate the factors that the students in this study believe have led them to disengage from school. However, in order for a program like this to work, it would need further development and fine-tuning after some further research on the topic of school engagement.

**Concluding Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of underperforming Latino male high school students about the factors that they believe have led them to disengage from school. The participants for this study were selected based on the following three factors that the literature asserts are the most common causes leading to disengagement and high school dropout: low socio-economic status
(free/reduced price lunch), low GPA (below 2.0), and deviant behavior (behavioral track record). During the data analysis process, the following six themes emerged from the data: influence of neighborhood and family, relationship with school and peers, relationship with authority figures, behavioral conduct, participation in academics, and transition from elementary school to middle school. After careful analysis of the data within these six themes, the following major findings materialized in response to the research questions:

Table 5

*Responses to Research Questions*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Major Findings</th>
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<tr>
<td>1) How do underperforming high school students describe their academic and social behavior throughout their educational experience?</td>
<td>1) The students described their academic performance and behavioral conduct as progressively getting worse as they went through middle school and into high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) How do these students describe their emotional connection to school, teachers, and peers throughout their educational experience?</td>
<td>2) The students described a lack of or negative emotional connection to school, authority figures, and peers, which also became progressively worse as they went through middle school and into high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) How do these students describe their cognitive interest in school throughout their educational experience?</td>
<td>3) The students described a cognitive interest in learning that wavered very little from elementary school, through middle school, and into high school, despite a long-term experience of academic failure, behavioral problems, and disengagement from school. However, it is not clear whether this cognitive interest in learning applies to the content that students are expected to learn in school or whether it applies only to learning about topics of interest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4) What are the educational and policy implications of school engagement for Latino males?

4) The school structure needs to be altered in a way that provides Latino males with the type of positive, engaging school experience that they had in elementary school. Also, an effort should be made to mirror recommendations in the literature regarding the current best practices for middle schools. Middle schools and high schools need to work on developing more engaging and attainable academic objectives and a deliberately designed path that leads to more positive emotional connections to the school and the teachers.

Based on these major findings, it is clear that the students in this study have an interest in learning, although it is not clear if this interest resides at all in their academic classes. However, it is clear that the students have become increasingly more disengaged from school as the years pass. It is imperative that the educational community finds a way to minimize the amount of negative academic, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive experiences that these Latino males have reported having in school. Elementary schools and middle schools need to collaborate in order to identify ways to reduce the severity of the spike in academic difficulty that the students described experiencing in middle school. In addition, it is key for educators to make developing positive relationships between students and authority figures a priority. The educational community also needs to restructure existing programs and develop new programs that will allow the positive experiences that occurred in elementary school to continue throughout middle school and high school.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

In this section, I discuss the six recommendations I have for future research on the
topic of school engagement. Each of the recommendations stems directly from the findings and analysis of this study. The further research would help make any coinciding findings in this study more generalizable and bring forward any new findings that were not discovered through this study.

**Same study, different sample.**

I recommend that other researchers conduct this same study but with different samples. For example, it would be helpful to know if underperforming African American males would share similar data. It would also be helpful to know how Latina females and African American females would respond to the interview questions in this study. These are some of the other populations, in addition to Latino males, who typically experience the most disengagement from school and highest dropout rates. This type of data would be beneficial to the educational community because most teachers have students of different races and genders.

**Elementary and middle school best practices.**

I recommend that other researchers conduct a study that identifies best practices from elementary and middle schools. The purpose of the study would be to develop a set of best practices by examining coordinated efforts between elementary and middle schools with a specific focus on the transitional period from elementary to middle school. In order to fully address this purpose, the middle schools would ideally be the feeder schools for the elementary schools. I also suggest that this study involve elements of action research so that after the data is collected and analyzed, the researcher can guide the elementary and middle schools in developing best practices through this collaborative process. This type of data would be valuable for the educational community because the
coordinated efforts would likely help ease the difficulty of the transition from elementary school to middle school.

**Longitudinal study.**

I recommend that other researchers conduct a longitudinal study, following the same students through the end of elementary school, all of middle school, and the beginning of high school. The purpose of this study would be to gather student perceptions of their experiences in school over an extended period of time. One of the main goals of the research would be to determine the exact point in time when the students begin to disengage from school. It would not only be important to track when this began occurring but also for what reasons. Instead of relying on memories, as is the case with my study, the researchers would be able to document current and ongoing developments in the students’ perception of their engagement in school. The data would be more rich and expansive over time.

**Quantitative study.**

I recommend that other researchers conduct a quantitative version of this study. The researchers could develop a Likert scale for a set of questions aiming to understand how the students perceive the shifts in their level of engagement in school over time. Researchers would be able to gather larger amounts of data by using the quantitative method. Also, researchers could conduct the study in various regions throughout the United States, which would make the results of the study more generalizable. In addition, it would be beneficial to look for any similarities between the qualitative and quantitative results in order to increase the credibility of the results.
Spike in academic difficulty.

I recommend that other researchers conduct a study to explore the spike in academic difficulty that the students in this study spoke about occurring between elementary school and middle school, especially with respect to math. If through further study, more students can confirm this issue of the severe spike in academic difficulty from elementary school to middle school, educators can use this information to restructure the delivery of academic content at the end of elementary school and the beginning of middle school. Through collaboration with elementary school and middle school curriculum directors and teachers, the data from this type of research could be used to decrease that spike in academic difficulty that the students described occurring in middle school.

Perceptions of additional stakeholders.

I recommend that other researchers conduct a study to explore the perceptions about the factors leading to disengagement from the perspective of additional stakeholders. It would be useful to know how parents, teachers, and administrators would answer the questions about engagement that I asked the students. The purpose of the study would be to compare the various stakeholder perceptions to the student perceptions. For example, this type of research would allow us to know what parents feel they need to assist their children who may be experiencing disengagement from school. Educators could use this type of data to build a more comprehensive plan for improving engagement for underperforming students.
References


Dear ______________,

I am writing to let you know about a dissertation study that I am conducting at Hower Military School regarding student experiences in school. I am a CSUN doctoral candidate conducting this study as part of the requirements to earn an Ed.D. degree.

In this study, I will be exploring how students describe their behaviors, feelings, and thoughts during their schooling experience. As part of this research, I am conducting confidential, private interviews with students to get their opinions about how grades and behavior affect engagement in school. Responses used in my dissertation will be anonymous, meaning your name will not appear in the study. Each interview should be approximately 45 minutes in length.

If you would like to participate, please contact me at jtartaro@howermilitaryschool.org or XXX-XXX-XXXX. Your decision to participate or not participate is an individual decision and will not affect any of your grades at school.

Thank you,

Mr. Tartaro
APPENDIX B

California State University, Northridge
PARENTAL CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

High School Student Study on Engagement in School

You are being asked to consent for your child to participate in a research study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to allow your child to participate. The researcher listed below will be available to answer your questions.

RESEARCH TEAM
Researcher:
Name: Mr. Tartaro, Principal Investigator
Department: Math
Telephone Number: XXX-XXX-XXXX ext. XXXX

Faculty Advisor:
Name and Title: Dr. Ceja, Faculty Advisor
Department: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
18111 Nordhoff St.
Northridge, CA 91330

PURPOSE OF STUDY
The purpose of this study is to learn about the behaviors, feelings, and thoughts that impact a student’s educational experiences and engagement in school. For the purposes of this study, the term engagement means an interest in school.

SUBJECTS
Inclusion Requirements
Your child is eligible to participate in this study if he/she is (1) in the tenth grade (2) qualifies for free/reduced price lunch (3) has a GPA less than 2.0 (4) has a discipline record at school

Time Commitment
This study will involve two sessions of approximately 45 minutes of your child’s time.

PROCEDURES
In this study, I ask that participants participate in two interview sessions of approximately 45 minutes in length in the summer of 2013.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
This study involves no more than minimal risk. There are no known harms or discomforts
associated with this study beyond those encountered in normal daily life. The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in this study include: the nature of some interview questions that could be more sensitive, including questions related to experiences with and/or perceptions of teachers or students, experiences related to academic study within the home and family environment, and feeling about who you are as a student. If participants feel uneasy about responding to these interview questions, they may elect not to answer any of the questions and still remain as a participant in the study.

**BENEFITS**

*Subject Benefits*

As a participant in the interview, students may develop a greater awareness of their own perceptions about school, which may facilitate change for students.

*Benefits to Others or Society*

Educators may develop a greater awareness of the perceptions of students disengaged from school which could potentially help educators learn how to better engage their students.

**ALTERNATIVES TO PARTICIPATION**

The only alternative to participation in this study is not to participate.

**COMPENSATION, COSTS AND REIMBURSEMENT**

*Compensation for Participation*

Your child will not be paid for his/her participation in this research study.

**WITHDRAWAL OR TERMINATION FROM THE STUDY AND CONSEQUENCES**

You are free to withdraw your child from this study at any time. **If you decide to withdraw your child from this study you should notify the research team immediately.** The research team may also end your child’s participation in this study if he/she does not follow instructions, misses scheduled visits, or if his/her safety and welfare are at risk.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

*Subject Identifiable Data*

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The information that you provide and responses that you give cannot be legally kept confidential. Names will not be used in the reporting of findings. Every effort will be taken to ensure your confidentiality as a participant in this study. If you consent to participate, you will be assigned a random, three-digit number to protect you. No identifying information will be used, and your school will not be identified by name in any published report.
**Data Storage**

All research data will be stored on a laptop computer that is password protected. The audio recordings will also be stored in a secure location; then transcribed and erased at the end of the study.

**Data Access**

The researcher(s) and faculty advisor named on the first page of this form will have access to your child’s study records. Any information derived from this research project that personally identifies your child will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without your separate consent, except as specifically required by law. Publications and/or presentations that result from this study will not include identifiable information about your child.

**Data Retention**

The researchers intend to keep the research data until the research is published and/or presented and then it will be destroyed.

**IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS**

If you have any comments, concerns, or questions regarding the conduct of this research please contact the research team listed on the first page of this form.

If you are unable to reach a member of the research team listed on the first page of the form and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, research team, or questions about your child’s rights as a research subject, please contact Research and Sponsored Projects, 18111 Nordhoff Street, California State University, Northridge, Northridge, CA 91330-8232, or phone 818-677-2901.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION STATEMENT**

You should not sign this form unless you have read it and been given a copy of it to keep. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your child may refuse to answer any question or discontinue his/her involvement at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you and your child might otherwise be entitled. Your decision will not affect your future relationship with California State University, Northridge. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this consent form and have had a chance to ask any questions that you have about the study.

If your child is 9 years of age or older he/she will be provided with an assent form that explains the study in language understandable to a child. A member of the research team will also read the form to your child and answer any questions your child may have. Your child will be asked to sign the form only if he/she agrees to be in the study. If your child does not wish to be in the study he/she will not be asked to sign the form. In addition, if after signing the assent form your child changes his/her mind your child is free to discontinue his/her participation at any time.

If your child is younger than 9 years then an assent form will not be provided, but a member of the research team will explain the study to your child and ask your child whether or not he/she wishes to participate. If your child declines to participate then your
child will not be included in the study. Additionally, if your child says yes and declines later your child will be withdrawn from the study at his/her request.

*I agree to allow my child to participate in the study.*

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<th>Subject Signature</th>
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APPENDIX C

High School Student Study on Engagement in School
ADOLESCENT INFORMED ASSENT FORM

We would like to invite you to participate in a research project. Participating in this project is your choice. Please read about the project below. Feel free to ask questions about anything that you do not understand before deciding if you want to participate.

Informal Title of the study: How students describe their experiences in school
Formal Title: High School Student Study on Engagement in School

RESEARCH TEAM
Name and Title of Researcher: Mr. Tartaro, Principal Investigator
Department: Math
Telephone Number: XXX-XXX-XXXX ext. XXXX

Name and Title of Faculty Advisor: Dr. Ceja, Faculty Advisor
Department: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Telephone Number: 818-677-7391

Study Location(s): Hower Military School

WHAT IS THIS PROJECT ABOUT?
This project studies how students describe their behavior, feelings, and thoughts in their schooling experience.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE PROJECT?
These things will happen if you want to be in the study:
1. You will participate in two 45 minute interviews
2. You will be asked some personal/sensitive questions

BENEFITS OF THE PROJECT TO YOU AND OTHERS
As a participant in the interview, you may develop a greater awareness of your own feelings about school, which may motivate you to change as a student. Information from this project will be used to find ways to help students stay interested in school throughout their life.

DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PROJECT?
You can ask questions any time. You can talk to the researchers, your family or someone else in charge, before you decide if you want to participate. If you do agree to participate, you can change your mind and withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.

If you are unable to reach Mr. Tartaro and have general questions, or you have concerns or complaints about the research study, Mr. Tartaro, or questions about your rights as a
If you want to be in the study sign your name below.

Signature of Child  Age  Date

Signature of Researcher  Date
APPENDIX D

High School Student Study on Engagement in School
General Interview Guide

I. Pre-interview Session: Introduction/Background

Welcome and introduction:
Good morning/afternoon/evening. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Before we begin the first of two interview sessions, I’d like to give you another opportunity to ask questions about the Consent to Participate in Research form you signed at our last meeting. Here is a copy for you to look at again. Do you have any questions?

Purpose of the interviews:
As we discussed, the purpose of the interviews is to collect information for a research study that looks at students’ experiences in school. During the first interview, we will talk about your general background and home experiences. During the second interview, we will talk about your schooling experiences.

Confidentiality:
Any information you share with me today will be used for research purposes only. You will not be identified by name or any other personally identifying information in any report or document. I will separate identifiable data by coding the data. In this case, coding means that anywhere your name or any identifying information appears, it will be replaced with a three-digit number connected to your name in order to protect your identity. Today’s interview session will be audio-recorded. I will also be taking notes of the conversation. The audio recordings may be transcribed for analysis. The audio recorded file, transcribed file, and notes will be stored securely in a password-protected laptop until completion of interview analysis. Upon completion of analysis, files and notes will be destroyed. Only the researchers identified in the Consent to Participate will have access to the files and notes. The files and notes will be accessed and analyzed in strict confidentiality. Finally your name or personally identifying information will not be used in any published or public reports.

Informed consent (prior to interview date):
This consent notice summarizes some information from the Consent to Participate in Research and communicates the procedures, potential risks and discomforts for subjects, potential benefits to subjects, payment to subjects for participation, participation and withdrawal, and rights of research subjects. Procedures in this interview are limited to semi-structured personal interview sessions. Because the study deals with issues that are sensitive, some interview questions may involve issues of a personal nature. You may feel uneasy about answering some of these interview questions. You may choose not to answer any of the questions with which you feel uneasy and still remain as a participant in the study. You may not benefit personally from your participation in this study. However, findings from this study may lead to improvements in school experiences for
students. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. You are not obligated whatsoever to answer or respond to any question or to discuss anything that you are not inclined to answer or discuss. You can skip any question, or any part of any question, and will not face any penalty for answering, or not answering, any question in any way. You may ask that the audio recording be stopped at any time and/or may leave the interview at any time for any reason without consequences of any kind. You may withdraw consent at any time and discontinue participation without interview. You can halt your participation in the interview at any time. You are not waiving legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this interview.

Identification and contact information of principal investigator:
If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, the details of this study, or any other concerns please contact Jay Tartaro at this mailing address: California State University, Northridge, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, Attention: Jay Tartaro, 18111 Nordhoff St., Northridge, CA, 91330-0001. Alternatively, you may contact Jay Tartaro via telephone at 818-677-7391 or via email at jay.tartaro.77@my.csun.edu

Timing:
Today’s interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Are there any questions before I get started?

II. Interview Session #1

Main Questions

1) What are your hobbies?
   a) How long have you been doing this?
   b) What do you like about it most?

2) How many siblings do you have?
   a) What are their ages and genders?
   b) Do you get along with them?

3) Who do you live with?
   a) Has it always been this way?
   b) If not, when did it change and why?

4) What was it like growing up in your home?
   a) Do you think you had a good childhood?
   b) Do you think you had it better or worse than most of your friends?

5) What high school, if any, did you attend previously?
   a) What brought you to NVMI?
   b) What makes NVMI different than a regular school?
6) What middle school(s) did you attend?

7) What elementary school(s) did you attend?

8) What preschool, if any, did you attend?

9) Why did you decide to do this interview?

10) Is there anything else about you or your family that you think would be important for me to know so I can understand who you are a little bit more?

III. Interview Session #2

Main Questions

Grand Tour
1) How would you describe what school has been like for you throughout your life?
   a) What are some words that describe the way you are as a student?

Behavioral Engagement
2) Do you participate in your classes?
   a) Do you participate in any school activities such as sports or student government?

3) Do you think you can do the work you are being asked to do in your classes?
   a) If not, what do you think is stopping you?
   b) When did school start becoming difficult for you?

4) How would you describe your behavior in class?
   a) When did behavior become a problem for you?

Emotional Engagement
5) Do you like being at school?
   a) What is your favorite part of school?
   b) What is your least favorite part of school?

6) Do you feel like you have connected with any teachers?
   a) How would you describe one teacher who has had an impact on you?

7) About how many friends do you have at school?
   a) What do you do with your friends during lunch?

Cognitive Engagement
8) Do you like learning new things in your classes?
   a) Do you think going to school and learning new things is important in life?
9) How do you feel about your grades in school?
   a) Can you describe a year in school when you had excellent grades?
   b) What has changed between then and now?

10) What expectations do you have of yourself in school?
    a) On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the highest, how important is it to you that you graduate high school?
    b) What will it take for you to reach graduation?

**Closing Questions**
I would like to give you a final opportunity to help me examine these issues. Before I end today, is there anything that I missed? Do you have anything else to add at this time? Have you said everything that you wanted to say? Have you shared everything that is significant about these experiences with me? If there’s anything else that you think of after our interview session, I invite you to share it by contacting me.

**III. Post-Interview Session: Debriefing and Closing**
Thank you for participating in today’s interview session. I appreciate your taking the time and sharing your ideas with me. I also want to restate that what you have shared with me is confidential. No part of our discussion that includes names or other identifying information will be used in any report or document. Finally, I want to provide you with a chance to ask any questions that you might have about this interview. Do you have any questions at this time?