

In Their Own Words:  
Individuals with Learning Disabilities, Dropping Out and Graduating From  
A Rural High School

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Abstract

This post hoc study examines the reasons attributed to graduating from or dropping out of a rural high school in southwestern Virginia by four white males identified as learning disabled. Through participant interviews supported by archival data and essential informant interviews, a picture emerges of an ongoing process in which interactions with adults play critical roles. All four participants described psychosocial events, which led to a chain of events in which adults played decisive roles. It is within these chains of events that decisions were made either with the participant or for the participant by an adult. Two of the participants graduated from and two dropped out of high school.

Each participant of this study describes himself as an individual with unique characteristics, relationships, and responses to psychosocial events. The psychosocial events and the resulting chain of events as described by the participants, could not have been anticipated. The participants' interactions with adults in regards to the psychosocial events could not have been scripted. Finally, the participants' interpretation of the adult interactions and the participants' resulting responses could not have been foreseen. Additionally, the participants in this study did not perceive the interactions as the adults perceived them.

Previous researchers have designed studies to examine dropout data for the purposes of generalization, early identification and predictions. Future researchers may want to approach the dropout dilemma from each student's perspective.

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## CHAPTER 1

### The Problem

#### Background

In a small rural county in southwestern Virginia, the actual event of dropping out of high school is viewed as the shortcut to employment, self-sufficiency and independence. In 1990, nearly forty percent of the county's adults over the age of twenty-five do not have a high school diploma or a General Education Developmental program certificate (G.E.D.) (1990 US Census). The overwhelming majority of this community's adult dropouts are employed, self-supporting, and law abiding. They are also good parents who want a brighter future for their children. Many of this county's adult dropouts carry and express feelings of shame and failure regarding their lack of a diploma, although they are successful by many standards. Yet, the county's adult dropouts willingly discuss and offer explanations to the researcher regarding the circumstances that surrounded their decisions to drop out. All stories include "on a different day I would have..." or "if only..." (conversations with dropouts while piloting the questionnaire).

This researcher felt that graduating from or dropping out of was not so much an event as an interaction between the individual and his environment. For graduates and dropouts, the decision and the reasons that support the decision are unique to each individual. Each individual has boundaries and expectations from family, school, and community that are unique to them that influence the

student's decision to graduate or drop out. Individuals with learning disabilities are no different from their general education peers.

Since Jencks...et al. (1973), researchers have recognized that dropping out involves much more than a single background characteristic or an isolated event. Yet, much of the dropout literature continues to focus on counting, defining, describing, or predicting the event. Consequently, researchers focus upon identification of the characteristics of the "typical" dropout. Once the typical at-risk youth is identified then prevention and intervention programs are developed around this 'typical' profile.

Students identified as learning disabled are often held to the same standard as the general population. To graduate from high school, students with disabilities must work harder, study longer, or possess greater academic aptitude than their general population peers. The added work and frustration associated with a disability can take its toll over time: national and local studies reveal that youths with disabilities drop out of school at higher rates than the general population (McMillen, Kaufman, & Klein, (1997).

Thirty years of experience as a teacher of youth with learning disabilities from inner-city, suburban, and rural areas suggested to me that there was still much to be learned concerning an individual's reasons for dropping out of school. I realized the complexity of the reasons for dropping out while working as a secondary instructor involved with intervention programs for at-risk youth with learning disabilities. Students I worked with were successful in academic classes, programs, activities, and social interactions in high school yet they

dropped out. A straightforward cause-effect relationship did not exist. There was something else at work. What was it?

One way to answer this question, was by having both graduates and dropouts with learning disabilities share their stories from their perspective.

### Statement of the Problem

Quantitative and qualitative research approach the dropout phenomenon from an adult perspective and apply the data to a two-dimensional linear model. Few studies include explanations given by students during the high school completion or dropout decision-making process. In those which do, the adults and students had very different perceptions of the circumstances leading to the student 's decision to drop out. If researchers are to examine the dropout phenomenon in a comprehensive manner, it is imperative that they investigate, record, and include what the students thought and how the students reacted to events during the process.

### Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this study were (1) to identify reasons attributed to the students with learning disabilities decision to either graduate from or drop out of high school and (2) to determine if a pattern among the reasons exists. Four males identified as learning disabled who either graduated from or dropped out of a rural high school in southwestern Virginia were interviewed too gain their perspective.

The data collected from this study add to the growing volume of information on the process of dropping out. It is the student's perspective that makes this information unique. From this ideographic perspective, data assisted with the identification of potential dropouts, not from the categorical perspective, but from the complex interactions in which they live. From this data, suggestions for dropout prevention or intervention programs were developed.

### Research Questions

The case study design is selected to address four research questions that are of a naturalist inquiry form. More specifically, research questions include:

- What reasons did four individuals with learning disabilities indicate contributed to the process of graduating from or dropping out a rural high school?
- Did the individuals identify one reason or a combination of reasons for graduating from or dropping out of a rural high school?
- What, if any patterns emerged among the four cases?
- What factors seemed to be common among the graduates versus the dropouts?

The four individuals of these cases related in their own words the reasons leading to their decisions to graduate from or to drop out of a rural high school.

### Limitation of the Study

Findings should be considered valid only for these four individuals in this particular time and place. Other combinations of ethnic, gender, disability category, time frame or geographic setting might share or produce different reasons. Therefore, this post hoc study is confined to reporting individuals' reasons, which led to their decision to graduate from or drop out of high school. The students are four white males identified as learning disabled from one rural school division in southwestern Virginia.

### Overview of the Study

This study is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 presents the rationale for the study. Chapter 2 reviews dropout models from the input, process, and input /process designs used by other researchers. Studies from the last five years that supported the models are discussed. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology for this study. Chapter 4 provides the cases framed by the research questions. Chapter 5 summarizes the study, provides conclusions related to the study objectives, and presents recommendations for further studies around a different research design.

## CHAPTER 2 Review of Related Research and Literature

### Introduction

Aristotle's "Discourse on Causes" (Cleary, 1988) spoke to the fundamental human instinct to search for the roots of any problem. Aristotle's belief was that one cannot solve a problem without first finding its root cause or causes. Causes to any problem can be found if only one looks hard enough and does enough careful research. Causes are objective and could, in principle, be proven by scientific research. Once causes to a problem are established, then solutions to the problem can be identified and applied, thus eliminating the problem.

The "production model" of the 1920's evolved out of this premise, when industry was faced with the problem of cost effectiveness with a greater demand than supply (Stone, 1988). Industry created an orderly sequence of stages through the assembly line and shaped manufacturing policy through the production model. By controlling the quantity and quality of the inputs, and by breaking down the process to the simplest basic task, then the product (outcome) is guaranteed. This simple linear input-process-outcome (IPO) design impacted governmental, educational, psychological and sociological policy and research for decades.

James S. Coleman (1966) applied this rational thought when investigating whether governmental financial support improves student learning in the schools in his Equality of Educational Opportunity. He concluded that resources allocated

to schools counted minimally toward the outcomes of student performance. What children brought from their homes (inputs) contributed most to their academic achievement. Not good instructional materials, equipment, curricula and pedagogy in schools (process), but whether or not there were well-educated, reasonably affluent parents at home accounted most for the differences in children's educational achievement (outcome). His research approach set the precedent for dropout research for the decades that followed.

Christopher Jencks, (1973) supported Coleman, in part, when he concluded that variations in academic achievement were the results of socioeconomic and IQ characteristics, both of which were determined by factors outside the schools (Jencks, Smith, Bane, Cohen, Gintis, Heyns, & Michelson, 1973). These studies established the base for the application of the production model in ensuing dropout research since the 1960's. Up to the mid 1970's, the research focus tended to be on the inputs, which categorized and counted the individuals who had graduated or dropped out. A few studies from the sociological and psychological fields began to view graduation and dropping out as the process to the outcomes of incarceration, unemployment and public assistance.

Researchers continued to investigate high school dropouts from the IPO perspective. Eventually researchers applied Tinto's (1975) college attrition theoretical model to what was happening within the high schools. These studies focused on the process areas such as, family interactions, peer interactions and school programs. Finally, advanced technology for data collection and data

aggregation encouraged researchers to pair inputs with processes and to report their impact on the graduation or dropout outcome.

Of the studies reviewed, none were conclusive. Not one of the reviewed studies could be replicated with identical results, although some studies supported each other. Moreover, some studies refuted others. Tinto's (1975) theoretical model provided the base for most of these studies. Careful examination by the researcher found these studies all had one thing in common. Their original design was the two-dimensional, linear production model of input-process-outcome.

Chapter 2 is organized around dropout studies and models as they applied the production model to rural, white males identified as learning disabled.

Models and supportive studies that focused on inputs are discussed first, followed by models and supportive studies that examined processes. Finally, the most recent studies paired inputs with processes are discussed.

### Input Studies

This first section concentrates on studies that focused on one or multiple input variables related to dropouts. Input-focused research started with Coleman in 1966 and continues to the present. Finn (1993) defined input factors as “demographic and historical characteristics, often used to classify large groups of individuals, that are difficult or impossible to alter” (p.1).

Most researchers during the 1990's did not concentrate solely on inputs since the data collection and aggregation had become more sophisticated and educators were moving away from labeling, counting, and categorization of individuals. The bulk of input focused research was completed during the seventies, eighties and early nineties.

### Special Education

A review of special education literature involving 1980's and early 1990's studies identified weaknesses in the areas of defining dropouts and determining the characteristics that differentiated dropouts from graduates. “If the characteristics of dropout-prone students in special education could be clarified, early identification of the students and the subsequent application of intensive preventive strategies should help deal with the problem (Wolman, Bruininks, & Thurlow, 1989, p.18).”

Blackorby and Edgar's (1991) study examined the demographic characteristics, information at referral to special education and school history of dropouts and graduates. This retrospective study was conducted on purposeful

samples of two populations of young adults: public school special education graduates and those who had stopped attending school. A Chi-Square Test of Independence was used to analyze the demographic data. For all two-group single-variable analysis, an independent group t test was used. The number of graduates represented only 15% of the entire cohort of secondary special-education students for both school years included in their study. Blackorby and Edgars (1991) reported of a high rate of dropouts among special education students and supported previous research.

In a longitudinal study of 52 adolescents with learning disabilities (LD), Levin, Zigmond and Birch (1985) found that 24 (47%) had stopped attending high school before graduation. Zigmond and Thornton (1985) found a dropout rate of 33% among a sample of students with LD. Hasazi, Gordon & Roe (1985) reported that 34% of adolescents with mild handicaps failed to complete a high school graduation. An analysis of the 1980 sophomore cohort of the High School and Beyond data base (Lichtenstein, 1987; Owings & Stocking, 1985) revealed that the dropout rate was 37% among former students identifying themselves as LD and 19% among peers identifying themselves as nondisabled.

These special education input studies did little to identify the reasons for the higher rate of special education dropouts. Most of these studies generated little more than questionable numbers and confusion over a definition. They did not generate insight into developing strategies for helping special education students stay in school.

Several combined inputs in their studies and addressed special education with gender or special education with socioeconomic status. Their studies follow.

A variation of Tinto's (1975) theoretical model was the Surviving Risks Model study by Denson & Schumacker, (1996). Ex post facto survey data were gathered from seniors and dropouts from senior cohorts of three school districts in rural, low socioeconomic areas of the southeastern United States. This discrete-time survival analysis used logistic regression to establish that males were always at a greater risk of dropping out than females during any high school semester. This study also established that special education students were not at any greater risk of dropping out than their general education counterparts, thus refuting previously mentioned studies. This study began with the outcome, graduate or dropout, and linked common inputs traits. They also relied upon adult-generated fixed inputs, giving students fixed choices via a survey instrument. By applying this reversed approach, the researchers planned to account for all possible factors for the drop out event. The predictor variables used for this competing risks survival analysis were not comprehensive. Other interactions may have been incorporated such as family and school characteristics.

Mitchell (1996) combined learning disabilities with the inputs of demographic and economic factors in her analysis of data amassed by the National Center for Education Statistics. She applied a stepwise linear regression procedure that tested which of the predictors contributed significantly to the variation in the response variables. Her analysis supported a higher dropout rate

for students identified as special education than for their non-disabled peers when paired with low socioeconomic status.

Generally, studies of special education students continued to be plagued by questionable reporting practices by states due to a lack of a standard definition of a special education dropout thus leading to unsubstantiated numbers through the nineties. All studies previously mentioned this concern within their discussions.

### Rural

The three most frequently utilized definitions of geographic location (i.e., urban, rural, suburban) are from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service (ERS), and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). Research studies used different definitions making it difficult to compare their results.

The Census Bureau definition is based upon size and density of population within an area. The ERS definition is established on a rural-urban continuum code to distinguish between metro areas and nonmetro areas. The NCES-developed code is divided into seven categories ranging from a large city to rural. While these different definitions overlap, each has its own implication in terms of size, distribution, and characteristics of rural.

Ukaga, Yoder and Etling (1998) examined regressive models for urban and rural subgroups using the data from the national survey of eighth graders (NELS:88) conducted by the National Center of Educational Statistics. This study

found no significant differences between rural and urban eighth graders in regard to the expectation of their completion of high school. In fact, this study found similar trends in both rural and urban settings with regards to the six variables identified in the study. This does not support the findings of DeYoung & Lawrence (1995); Herzog & Pittman (1995); and Franklin & Streeter (1992), who suggested different intervention and prevention models were needed for dropout prone youth in different settings.

### Socioeconomic

Individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds and minorities were overly represented in dropout studies (McMillen, Kaufman, & Whitener, 1994; Bottoms & Presson, 1991; Rumberger, 1987). Data after 1994 examined socioeconomic status, not in isolation, but in context of rural and urban.

Data showed that 59% of rural/ small town and 63% of central city students were enrolled in mid- to high-poverty schools (1993-1994 Schools and Staffing Survey). However, poverty in this study was not strictly controlled due to the lack of a definition of poverty and non-standardized identification of individuals in the poverty range.

In 1990, the South (52%) had the highest poverty rate and the Northeast the lowest (Hodgkinson, 1994). Rural poverty was not evenly distributed across the country, and was concentrated in pockets of rural areas (1995 March Current Population Survey).

Nationwide, 9 percent of rural youth aged 16-19 were dropouts in 1994. (Kids Count Data Book, 1997). The number of rural special education students who dropped out in 1995, was 14.6% (McMillen, Kaufman, & Klein, 1997). Studies after 1994 generally combined dropout research and socioeconomic status of family in the context of rural, suburban or urban location. These studies are included under the input/process section of this chapter.

This focus on the fixed attributes (inputs) was detrimental to educational reform as it classified large groups of individuals based on unalterable demographic and historical characteristics. This hindered changing school policies and practices (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) as the focus was outside the school environment. Many of these attribute inputs were recognized by researchers as beyond the control of the school and produced little more than numbers. Researchers began investigating other variables that contributed to the longitudinal process of dropping out of school. For the purpose of this study, this research style was identified as process.

### Process Studies

Dropout research that was process driven continues to be dynamic and not static. Process studies of family and peer interactions avoid categorical labeling and focused upon the interactions. Background characteristics or inputs were controlled to a minimum for these studies. Only program/ practice studies that account for background characteristics of the participants or the participants' families are included in this section. One vocational course study is included as it

did not single out the out-risk population in advance, but included them in their discussion.

### Family Interactions

Family interaction studies avoided categorical labeling of membership in a particular group. The focus was upon the relationships within the family and the effects on educational attainment. Astone & McLanahan (1991) examined contextual factors and social relationships within the family from the High School and Beyond: A national longitudinal study for the 1980's (1985). Their research indicated that parental practices like involvement in school activities, family discussions of daily school events and regular interaction with school personnel not characteristics of the individual or the family correlated to the school completion indicators.

A meta-analysis by Frymier and Robertson (1990) found that family instability, family tragedy, and personal pain were significantly related to failing in school and ultimately dropping out. Other studies that related similar findings were: Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Ediger, 1987; Catterall, 1986.

Garnier, Stein & Jacobs' study (1997) formed a process model that identified the long-term relationships of individual, family, school, and school dropouts using 19 years of longitudinal data of 194 Euro-American families. Their model added the time component to the production model (figure 1).

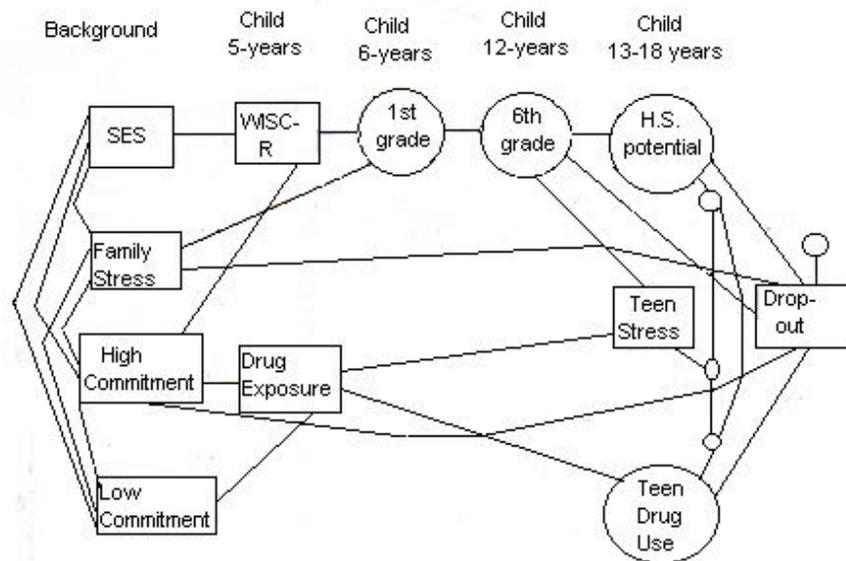


Figure 1. Garnier Model predicting dropout including direct effects of distal variables. Garnier, H., Stein, J., & Jacobs, J., 1997>

This study supported Weisner & Garnier's (1992) and Garmezy's, (1993); findings that the impact of family structure on school achievement and completion did not depend upon household and marital criteria for family categories, but upon the interactions or processes within the family. The experiences and support throughout a child's school years were multidimensional, and the process of dropping out of school was complex.

The importance of parental involvement was the strongest and showed the most consistent differences between high school dropouts and a matched sample of students who remained in school (Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter and Dornbusch 1990). Parents of the dropouts reported being much less

involved in school activities, and the dropouts surveyed were more likely than graduates to rely on their peers for help with homework. This supported Baker and Stevenson's (1987) study on parental involvement in helping solve both academic and behavioral problems at school.

Anderson and Keith (1997) found no evidence of an overall effect of parental involvement on achievement or school completion among 8,100 at-risk students in their study on a school learning model for at-risk high school students.

### Peer Interactions

Peers possibly played a role in the decision to drop out of school in a study of individuals that showed future dropouts tended to be friends with previous dropouts (Eliot and Voss 1974). Interpretation of these relationships, however, were not definitive. It was not clear, if the lack of success the students experienced at school, predisposed them to seek friendships with others of similar difficulties, or if their association with dropout friends pulled them from their studies and ultimately from school. This social network who do not value school could accelerate a disassociation with school. Finan II (1991) supported this conclusion and expanded it to include school peer rejection and lack of popularity at school drove the potential dropouts to seek acceptance outside of school.

Claes and Simard (1992) used a mapping technique to examine the social networks of dropouts and found dropouts had a high concentration of out-of-

school-friends. Following this, Kelly (1993) identified ways in which the peer group was involved with the process of disassociation.

### Programs and Practices

Educators have long looked for early identification of at-risk learners to provide educators with an opportunity to make a significant difference for those at the greatest risk (Kraizer, Witte, Fryer, & Myoshi, 1993). Once identified, these students receive special help that encourage them to remain in school and graduate.

Robinson (1992) examined teacher expectations and student performance and found a strong correlation with school completion. Negative teacher behaviors towards at-risk students can cause students to drop out as they see little hope for success (Lehr & Harris, 1988). Curwin (1994) supported Lehr and Harris' study and offered ten suggestions for teachers to help at-risk students develop positive attitudes about school. Davidow 's (1994) study led to suggestions for school psychologists to better understand their biases and how these biases might limit their recommendations of intervention choices for at-risk students

Mahoney and Cairns (1997) assessed 392 seventh graders and followed up annually until twelfth grade using an Interpersonal Competence Scale and a person oriented cluster analysis. Findings indicated that at-risk students who participated in extracurricular activities had a markedly lower dropout rate.

Extracurricular involvement was only modestly related to the school dropout rate for students that were not identified at-risk.

For some time, placements in vocational/technical courses have been a key strategy in high school dropout prevention. Pittman and Chalker (1994) crosstabulated 442 dropouts against 442 graduates for level of participation in vocational various programs. Results indicated that the graduates and dropouts did not differ in their exposure to or their participation in vocational education. Vocational courses, whether one or a completer series, have little influence on the educational decisions of rural high school students to graduate from or drop out of high school.

As with the input studies, no process model or study represented the student/dropout's perception in his/her own words. All variables studied and reported were adult generated; however, in some instances, student/ dropout validation via surveys was solicited. The introduction of a temporal factor and the longitudinal analyses within the process studies increased the dynamics of the IPO model.

#### Input/ Process Combination Studies

Natriello (1987) identified essential elements for a renewed research agenda on dropping out. Figure 2 represents a "pattern of reciprocal" relationships (p.169) between the personal and social characteristics of the student and the process aspects of the school environment. However, the figure

Natriello presented was two-dimensional, static, and did not address multiple, changing relationships between the student and his/her environment over time.

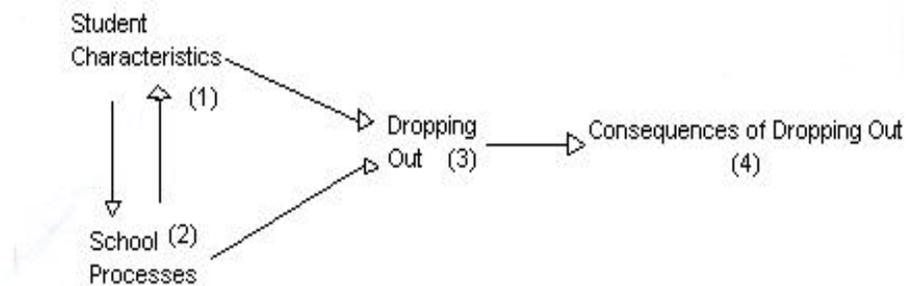


Figure 2. Key Elements for a Renewed Research Agenda on Dropping Out. Natriello, G., Pallas, A., & McDill, E. 1986.

In his model, dropping out became the process for the consequences of dropping out. Natriello identified an interaction between inputs and processes in the dropout decision.

This concept was not new. Eleven years prior to Natriello's call for a renewed research agenda on dropping out, Tinto's (1975), building on Coleman's and Jencks' studies, theoretical model of college attrition initiated research regarding dropouts at the college level. Tinto (1975) linked the inputs of student and family background and demographic characteristics with the processes of academic and social integration, goal satisfaction and institutional commitment. He theorized that the interactions among these factors determined the outcome of a college graduation. Historically, individual and family characteristics

accounted for the majority of early research. Tinto's theoretical model was modified and applied to secondary populations and dropout research. Later, size and location of community or also of school accounted for a growing body of input-process research

Everett, Bass, Steele and McWilliams' study (1997) validated Tinto's theoretical model for use with 331 high school students in rural, low socioeconomic areas of southeastern United States. Ex post facto survey data were gathered from seniors and dropouts from the senior cohorts in three school districts. The CHAID statistical procedure for segmentation modeling showed high school grades, not rural or socioeconomic inputs, to be the most significant predictor for identifying students in danger of dropping out of high school. This study supports prior studies by Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971; Cervantes, 1965; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986; and Weis, Ferrer & Petrie, 1989.

Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) investigated an input and process combination. They hypothesized that at-risk students would have more dropout friends, more friends outside of school, and more working friends. They assessed the risk of dropping out by using the Prediction de l'Abandon Sociale questionnaire (P.A.S., Lavoie, 1983). Significance testing was employed by using Analysis of Covariance with age as covariate (ANCOVAs) and an additional ANCOVA as a control for the effects of ethnicity, family composition, parent's occupation, and siblings. Their findings supported the conclusion that at-risk youth tend to associate with out of school youth more than with their school

peers. Most noteworthy about participants in the study was the increasing association of at-risk youth with full-time workers.

One interesting input-process study variation was the Path Model developed by Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock (1986). It related demographics, family educational support, behavior, sophomore-year ability, and student school behaviors to the student's decision to stay in school. Surveys included a list of reasons for leaving school generated from the researcher's perspective. Students responded to these forced choice surveys but that provided no opportunity for student input. As seen in figure 3, the Path Model of the decision to stay in or drop out of school continued the use of the linear production model

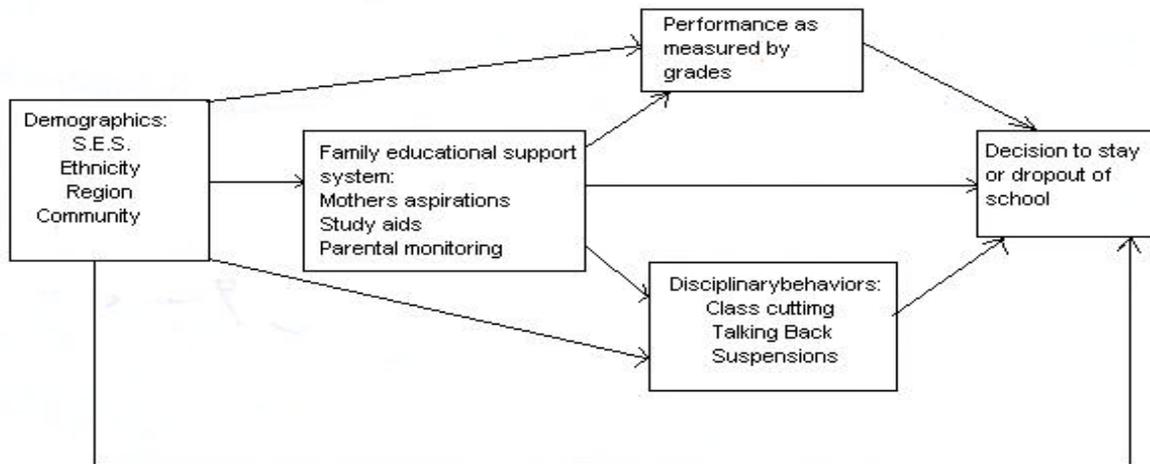


Figure 3. Path model of the decision to stay in or drop out of school  
Ekstrom, R., Goertz, M., Pollack, J., & Rock, D. 1986.

with a slight variation. The input section within the Path Model included only the demographics of ethnicity, region and community. Student behaviors within the school environment, such as academic performance and disciplinary behavior

were identified as processes. Family educational support also were identified as part of the process. This family support system was outside the school environment but part of the “path” to the educational attainment decision. Ekstrom et al. (1986) used the 1980/1982 High School and Beyond data to develop the Path Model.

### Summary

There are several research paradigms investigating the nature of students' decisions to drop out or graduate. Retrospective studies based upon Tinto's (1975) model pooled disparate groups of people, excluded subgroups, reported biased educational attainment and gave little more than numbers. Two-dimensional input studies aggregated students by schools, not grades, and provided little insight into who dropped out and why. Process studies added the temporal component, which reflected a dynamic component rather than the static event approach of the input studies. Input-process based studies, were misleading in that they only included identified at-risk students in the studies. Dropouts who were gifted, affluent, upper middle class students, white or did not fit the at-risk profile were often not involved.

This review of existing literature explored models and studies of high school dropouts from the input-process-outcome perspective. This research failed to capture what this researcher saw as the essence of the individual's decision-making capabilities. The decision to drop out involved a struggle over alternatives at a given time in a given place under a unique set of circumstances

as perceived by the individual. The research paradigms based on the two-dimensional linear model did not represent the complex issues of dropping out from the student's perspective, but constituted the overwhelming majority of research available.

## CHAPTER 3 Methodology

### Introduction

The ad hoc multiple-case approach was selected for this study to yield a deeper understanding of the reasons in the high school completion or drop out decision (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The information was triangulated over five months through multiple interviews with each participant, external archival data and supporting interviews with participant contacts (Yin, 1989).

### Population

For this study, white male students identified as learning disabled retained at least once who had exited high school by graduating or dropping out during the 1992- 1993 school year served as the population. The study was conducted during the last month of the 1992-1993 school year, summer and two months into the 1993-1994 school year. In this high school, there were no minority students identified and learning disabled. The minority population for the entire county was less than one percent. Females were not considered for the study to eliminate pregnancy as a possible reason. From this pool of 15, only eight white male participants identified as learning disabled and aged nineteen or twenty met the criteria. Four of these eight individuals finally agreed to participate in the study.

## Data Collection Procedures

### Final selection of study participants

Letters were sent to the eight white male individuals identified as learning disabled and aged nineteen or twenty from the 1992-1993 school year cohort and their parents explaining the nature of the study. They were asked to contact the researcher concerning their willingness to participate in the study. Seven individuals responded affirmatively. A follow-up telephone call to the eighth individual resulted in a negative response. No reason was requested or given.

The researcher visited each of the seven individuals in his home with the parent(s) present. Although all individuals were nineteen years or older, parents were requested to be present for the initial contact. The researcher did not want the perception that the individuals with disabilities were misled. During this introductory contact, the researcher explained the purpose for the study. This included a detailed explanation of the participant's and researcher's roles. The researcher discussed with the participants who would see the study and how it would be used.

Six of the seven agreed to participate in the study. The initial six participants included two graduates and four dropouts. One of the dropouts returned to school during the study and graduated. The seventh agreed to participate if the researcher paid him \$2500 (the amount paid to a local minister with two wives for his story). The researcher declined.

### Questionnaire development

Six individuals participated in an initial interview at the community's public library. During this initial interview, a set of instructions adapted from Ericsson & Simon (1984) was read to each participant (Appendix A).

Following this introduction, all participants responded to the same questions (Appendix B). These questions reflect the third revision of the questionnaire. The first questionnaire was designed around the research questions for this study and used a model found in Ericsson & Simon (1984). This first version of the questionnaire was revised by the researcher after it was piloted by five dropouts from a neighboring county, five past graduates, and six past dropouts from the participants' rural high school.

Questions in the first version encouraged participants to answer with single word responses. This did not give the researcher the information needed for the study. Questions in the second version were too open ended and resulted in vague and rambling answers. The same participants as in the first version had difficulty responding to these open-ended questions and the researcher often had to ask additional leading questions or give examples to get a response.

Version three, found in Appendix B, allowed participants to respond in their own words and eliminated the rambling answers and leading by the researcher.

### Participant interviews

Each participant was paid twenty-five dollars for his time and transportation costs per interview. Each interview was two to three hours in duration. Tapes from each interview were transcribed and coded by the researcher. Codes were adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994) codes and coding, pattern coding and mapping concepts. This guided the researcher's questioning for the next contact.

Five of the participants were interviewed for a second time within a seven-to-ten-day window. The sixth participant moved after graduation to live with his natural father in another state. This information was related to the researcher by the sixth participant's stepfather and mother. Thus, he was dropped from the study.

The second interview started with the same questions asked in the initial interview. Participants were encouraged to give the names, telephone numbers, or locations of people who could verify what they had related in the interviews. Responses to the two interviews were later compared for similarities and/or discrepancies. During this interview, the participants and researcher read a release-of-information form provided by the school division. The researcher explained the purpose of the form. How the information would be gathered and used was discussed. Four of the participants signed the form. The fifth chose not to sign without giving a reason. This left four participants: one graduate and three dropouts. Tapes from these interviews were also transcribed and coded by the

researcher to guide the planning for the archival data (Appendix C) collection and essential informant interviews (Appendix D).

The release of information form permitted the researcher to gather corroborative information from the essential informants and the archival data. Checking data obtained by a variety of methods was one way of contributing to trustworthiness. Triangulation depended upon convergence of data gathered either by different methods or over time (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steimetz, 1991). Different methods and interviews over time were incorporated into the data collection process.

#### Interview data corroboration

During the next four months, archival data were collected to learn more about the participant in regard to his ability, achievement, attendance, interests, and events in his life. These data also corroborated or refuted the perceived conditions or situations related in the participant interviews. However, some information included in the archival data about birthdates, siblings, position in family, parental education level, and sociological information were incorrect, missing, or implanted with subjective comments.

Interviews with essential informants (Appendix D) corroborated or refuted perceived conditions, archival data, and situations related in the participant interviews. Additionally, many telephone contacts were made by the researcher to the participants during this four-month period for the purpose of clarification or location of essential informant(s).

The third and final interview was conducted five months after the initial interview at the homes of the participants with their parent(s) present. During this interview, all data were presented in a narrative form. Participants and parent(s) were asked by the researcher to validate the findings. Participants and parents were asked if the narrative accurately reflected (1) what happened; (2) who was involved; (3) the correct order of events; and (4) the reasons as they remembered them. Both parents and participants clarified and added to the report. It was important that reasons within the context be heard not just the reported causes.

### Data Analysis

#### Development of matrix

All interviews were taped, and notes were taken. Tapes were transcribed, and lists of supporting documentation needed for corroboration were made. Data were coded, sorted, logged, and placed initially in an explanatory case matrix to define the conceptual themes by the researcher. The researcher realized during the corroboration of archival data with informant and participant interviews that a simple code and matrix did not adequately relate the information. The data had to be standardized to fit the matrix.

The sources of the interview and archival data formed the columns on the initial explanatory case matrices. The data sources were recorded from left to right chronologically as data were collected. Participant interviews were placed first, followed by corroborative essential informant interviews, and archival data.

Four major themes common in dropout literature formed the rows on the initial matrices. The themes were background characteristics of the individual and family, school policies and procedures, student behaviors, and community. Each theme included multiple characteristics. A cell was formed by the intersection of a row and a column. Each cell contained one-to-three-word descriptors and a log cite number. The log cite number enabled the researcher to identify and locate the data and source from the contact summary sheets or logs. A matrix for each case was used to trace the emerging strands of causality.

This researcher discussed problems with the explanatory matrix and the sorting/ coding of data with a colleague. A revised explanatory matrix was subsequently developed and the data were reentered. A third party then re-sorted the data and placed it on the revised explanatory matrix. Each case generated an explanatory matrix.

The explanatory case matrix for each case was complex. The researcher included all the different study perspectives. As a clarifying example, in the case of Matthew, seven different perspectives emerged around one incident: study participant, parent, central office administration, school administration, special education teacher, bus driver, and classmate on the bus. There was no written report to support or refute any account. This required seven sub-cells within a cell. What was reported as a negative response from one viewpoint was a positive response from another viewpoint. Chronological organization of data did not inform the analysis process.

The researcher developed a second explanatory case matrix was developed that maintained the original four themes with some minor changes to the characteristics (rows). A major reorganization of the data source columns was completed. This matrix was applied to all four cases. Data sources were not grouped by chronology or data type but by relevance and triangulation to the participant interview and theme characteristic. The one-to-three-word descriptors were replaced by a code. Coded entries were placed in each cell.

#### Development of data coding system

Each code included five types of information: data source, presence of characteristic (+ or -), classification of data by event, activity or fact (Appendix E), evidence of triangulation (+ or -) and a reference number to the exact source (Appendix F). For example, NIM+f+34 referred to a non-participant mother interview that reflected the presence of a factual characteristic and corroborated participant given data. The cite number in the data log was 34. This established a clustering of like data throughout the matrix.

These explanatory matrices did not get smaller and more refined as expected. They became more convoluted and complex as the researcher maintained the richness of the data on the standardized matrices. Coded data required the researcher to standardize unique information. This action compromised the students' words and reasons. For instance, data on socioeconomic status (SES) were obviously flawed. All four participants qualified for free lunches. Luke and Mark described their families as middle income level

based on living conditions, decent clothing, expenditures on some luxuries, and participation in a variety of activities. Yet, these two participants' family incomes were the lowest of the four. Matthew had the highest family income. However, different priorities on expenditures within the family led Matthew to describe his family as poor. He wore threadbare and ill-fitted clothing. He had no winter coat or independent means of transportation, whereas, the other participants in the study owned their own cars. Matthew often did not get the proper food or medical care needed. John never considered the family income level to be low since he usually got what he wanted. He did not have a clear understanding of his family's financial situation. Although the researcher checked 'yes' to low SES on all four, it clearly reflected neither the actual circumstances nor the participants' perception of their circumstances. Data in other cells were standardized in similar ways or by simple majority among the subcells.

After an examination of each cell and selection of only the cells that contained both a positive presence of characteristic and evidence of corroboration, a case dynamic matrix was developed for each case. The case dynamic matrix was necessary for a thorough causal analysis of the case (Miles et al, 1994).

Four case dynamic matrices were then developed around themes that emerged from the data. Data were force fit into themes by the researcher in an effort to control and 'standardize' the data. This was needed in order to compare and contrast the four dynamic matrices. This compromised the uniqueness and complexity of the data further.

Finally, analytical text was written from the dynamic matrices. Again, it was felt that much of the data's richness and uniqueness was lost because of the two-dimensional structure of the matrix.

### Summary

Data from four participants, essential informants and archival data were transcribed, coded, sorted, logged and placed initially on explanatory case matrices to define the conceptual themes of the study. The standardized data lost its uniqueness and richness when moved to the dynamic matrices. Dynamic matrices were needed for a thorough causal analysis of each case. Analytical text was written from the case dynamic matrices. Where possible, this researcher described in the student's own words the reasons for his decision to graduate or dropout and the complexity of the decision. The findings are reported in Chapter

## CHAPTER 4 Results

### Introduction

Chapter 4 is organized around the four research questions. Each participant in the study was given a pseudonym to protect his identity. Matthew and Mark are the dropouts. Luke and John are the graduates. All four participants describe psychosocial events that indirectly influenced their school completion. Both dropouts had the decision to not finish school made for them by adults. Psychosocial events delayed graduation for one graduate and nearly resulted in the other graduate dropping out of high school. Adult intervention for both the graduates altered the outcome for them. The participants' stories in their own words with supporting documentation follow.

### Research Question # 1

- What reasons did the four individuals with learning disabilities indicate that contributed to the process graduating from or dropping out of high school?

All four individuals reported psychosocial reasons that contributed to their high school outcome. Because of these psychosocial reasons, one graduated and two dropped out. The fourth individual dropped out and later returned to complete his high school course work and receive his diploma. Their stories follow.

Matthew

Dropout I (Matthew) left school involuntarily. Matthew's permanent records indicated that he left school due to too many absences in his junior year and did not return the following year. The following is Matthew's story in his own words.

The summer before Matthew's junior year he was caught sexually molesting his male cousin. During the trial, it became evident that a male member of Matthew's family had also molested him as a child (informant: probation officer). Matthew's probation officer and court records indicated that offenses by Matthew occurred outside of the school and were a non-school related crime. He was placed on probation, reported to a probation officer, thus probation was not to affect his schooling. Arrangements were made concerning transportation as both Matthew and the male cousin rode the same school bus (informant: director of pupil personnel). Matthew sat behind the driver and was to "not talk, look at or in any way interact with his cousin (informants: probation officer and director of pupil personnel)." The bus driver did not recall this being violated by Matthew. Matthew reported that he did not interact with the cousin while on the bus. He did not violate the conditions of his probation.

School administrative officials removed Matthew from the bus after repeated complaints by the cousin's mother (informants: principal and director of pupil personnel). The cousin's mother did not indicate that Matthew had violated the terms of his probation. She did not want him on the bus with her son. Matthew was removed from the bus for ten days. The school division provided no alternate transportation (informant: director of pupil personnel, principal and letter

from the school). At that time, Matthew was passing all classes (informant: special education teacher; report cards). Matthew and his parents did not understand or question why he was removed from the bus. Matthew did not have his own means of transportation and did not secure a ride. He did not attend school during the ten days, upon his return, he was informed by school administration that he had missed too many days, and he would fail for the year. He was told to leave and return the following school year (informant: principal). Again, Matthew and his parents did not question the decision because they not want to “drudge up the whole thing again.” No credits were earned during his junior year. During this time he “hung out” and tried to get a job, but he was unable to secure employment because he had to rely upon transportation from other people.

The following school year he tried to reenter as a junior at the age of 20. He would turn 21 in October. At that time, he was advised that he would be unable to graduate before he turned 22 and was refused admittance (informants: principal and special education teacher). However, a guidance counselor made an appointment for him with the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) (informants: guidance counselor and DRS agent).

Matthew and DRS did not make a successful connection for several reasons. Matthew missed a scheduled meeting because of lack of transportation. The DRS agent assigned to him left the agency (informant: DRS agent). The agent was replaced after the position was vacant for several months. Matthew got lost in the shuffle.

A DRS office was not located in this rural county. Its main office was in a neighboring county. An agency representative regularly visited the high school and met with students. The agent was also scheduled twice a month at the health department in the community. Additional visits could be scheduled by going to the main office in the other county.

Matthew liked the high school and planned to be the first in his family to graduate. Older friends had told him to get a high school diploma if he wanted a good job. He felt he was a victim of the school system and that the decision to drop out was made for him. He also blamed the courts and the rehabilitative service agency.

The relationship between Matthew and his parents was alienated, especially after the court case (informants: parents, peers, and participant). He was isolated and felt he had no advocate to represent him except possibly his probation officer. However, he did not disclose everything to his probation officer.

In follow-up sessions, Matthew related that he thought he probably could have gotten a ride to school with friends, but he had not made the effort. His age, however, he couldn't change. He "ran out of years before he ran out of school."

Mark

Dropout II (Mark) was removed from the public high school prior to graduation in order to attend a residential facility. Mark's records indicated that he left school and did not return the following year.

When Mark was ten he attended a private school designed for students with learning problems (informant: parents and records). This school was a day school outside the county, and he was transported daily. The trip was nearly one-and-one-half hours each direction every day (informant: director of pupil personnel).

He attended for four years. Acting-out behavior was controlled with medication (records). During his last school year at the private school, his father and stepmother planned for him to attend a private, vocational-based summer program (letter from private school to parents and parents). This was to be a trial session with the possibility of Mark attending this school full time during the following school year. Mark did not attend the summer or fall program. Mark nor his parents could recall why he did not attend. School officials reported the school division would not pay for the summer session and might have contributed to Mark not attending the summer session.

An involved father and a new stepmother (and stepsisters) met with high school and central office administrators to find a niche for Mark. He was placed in a self-contained class designed primarily for youth that were mentally challenged at the high school. Mark's category was severe learning disability. The LD classes were course-specific and he "lacked the basic skills to be successful." He

was registered as an eighth grader, had skills of a second grader, and was the age of a tenth grader (comments from an IEP meeting minutes).

At sixteen, a vocational aptitude test at the regional assessment center determined he had an aptitude for a general carpenter's helper. The high school did not offer this class so Mark was enrolled in a building and grounds course. This was a custodial/ maintenance class. The DRS agent recommended Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center (WWRC) to his father and stepmother (letters between parents and DRS agent in parent home file).

The family and a DRS representative continued to meet during this year, independent of the school division's personnel (letters between the parents and DRS in parent home file). During the summer, Mark was assessed at WWRC during a four-week stay. His family did not have Mark return to the high school on advice from the DRS representative. Mark could only attend WWRC if he was not enrolled in a public high school. An exit Individualized Education Plan (IEP) dated August 1991 was not signed by Mark. The exit IEP meeting was requested by the school division prior to releasing Mark's records to WWRC. The IEP explained the school division's disapproval of the placement and described a program for Mark to be provided by the high school. (IEP).

Mark attended WWRC for eighteen months and was trained as a carpenter's aide (certificate from WWRC). He was unable to secure full-time steady work and reentered the high school each fall for the next two years (guidance counselor & school register). Each time he remained less than a week because he found part-time employment mowing lawns or farm work. He finally

reached the age of twenty-two and stopped reentering school.

The father's remarriage was described as a psychosocial event by the study participant. Mark did not want to move away from his father; however, he felt that his new stepmother and stepsisters wanted him out of the house. He explained that they didn't like him, and he embarrassed them at school. Father, stepmother and stepsisters did not support this idea.

Mark felt that dropping out was the best thing for him to do since the high school didn't have classes for him. By his dropping out, his father didn't have to pay for the WWRC classes, the state of Virginia paid. WWRC gave him the skills he would need to get a job and live on his own. Mark would like to see more of this type of training in the high school.

In follow-up sessions, Mark did not elaborate or change any of the information he had given the researcher earlier. He repeated the information, nearly verbatim, in a monotone voice. There were no discrepancies between interviews.

### Luke

Graduate I (Luke) began this study as a dropout. The death of his younger brother was described as a psychosocial event by Luke. However, the events after the death of his brother led Luke to quit.

The summer before Luke entered high school, Luke and his younger brother were walking home on a narrow country road. A pickup truck flew around the corner and hit his younger brother, killing him (obituary and story in local

paper). School was to begin in a few weeks and Luke began eighth grade in depression (informants: teacher, guidance counselor, school psychologist & mother). The mother requested financial assistance from the school division for counseling to help Luke deal with the death of his brother (letter in student file). Recommendations were made for counseling, but no counseling was received by Luke (sociological component of I.E.P.).

Over the next two years, Luke experienced conflicts, truancy, shaky academic success, and suspensions (academic and discipline records). There was no evidence that the behavior was the norm for Luke.

Luke left school in October of his junior year. Two issues brought him to this action. Corroboration for the effects of the two issues was given by his mother, the teacher involved, vocational assessment, IEP, and his permanent file. The first issue was placement in the building trades class instead of the automotive class. Automotive class was the course his vocational assessment had recommended and the program of study he wanted to enter. He wished to follow his father's example. His father was a mechanic. The automotive class was full and he was placed in the building trades class. He was not asked or notified prior to the opening day of school. No IEP meeting convened to discuss the program change. His IEP was not altered to reflect the change. Luke was placed in building trades.

The second issue was an insensitive comment made by a teacher about the death of his brother. The adult comment was "meant to toughen him up", to help Luke get on with his life, and get out of the blues. Luke did not take the

comment this way.

Luke left with a construction crew one week after the comment was made and moved to Georgia for one year (employer & pay stubs). During this time his supervisor befriended him and convinced him to go back home and get his high school diploma.

He returned to school in 1992 and took a full course load (school records). He failed government and still lacked English 12 to graduate. Luke initially decided not to go back to school for the two classes. Luke's mother intervened. Luke's mother had attended college and felt a high school diploma was important (informants: mother and sociological history).

Luke and his mother met with the principal, and they made 'special' arrangements for him to take the repeater class, government, and a new class, English 12, during the summer session (principal). Students could only take two repeat classes or one new class because of the number of contact hours required for course credit. There were not enough summer school contact hours to take both a repeat class and a new class. Permitting Luke to take both repeat and new classes during one summer session was a highly irregular action by the school administrator. He took both classes and received his diploma in July 1993 (informant :principal and diploma).

Luke was on a diploma course until placement in the wrong vocational course and an insensitive remark by a teacher. During the follow-up interview, Luke asked why an IEP meeting was held and papers signed, if it didn't mean anything. Luke was referring to his placement in the building trades class instead

of the automotive class. The I.E.P. had been explained to Luke and his mother as a contract that listed the services he would receive. He felt he had been cheated.

### John

Graduate II (John) nearly dropped out during his senior year. His psychosocial event as he explained it, was his mother enrolled in the senior class of his high school. His mother was a high school dropout. When the Graduate Adult Education (GAE) program became available in this rural county, his mother enrolled. The Graduate Adult Education Program permitted dropouts who were missing one or two high school classes go back to high school and take the needed classes. Upon successful completion of the classes, these adult students would then receive a high school diploma, not a G.E.D. During John's senior year in high school, John's mother enrolled in the same small rural high school. She took senior English and government, the two classes she was missing for graduation under the school division's GAE program. John would also be taking these classes (newspaper story, school records and parents).

John had very uncertain feelings about having his mother in his classes. He was not sure how his friends would react. His transition to high school had been rough (informants: guidance counselor & parents). His elementary school was small, approximately 160 students grades k-7, and the high school was large with 750 students. John indicated problems adjusting to the bigger school. He had made few friends (informants: guidance counselor and teachers). He was

finally feeling accepted as he approached his senior year. While John's psychosocial event paled when compared to sexual abuse or death of a sibling, the thought of John's mother attending classes with him and his friends was devastating. At this point in his life peer acceptance was important.

He discussed his feelings with friends but not his parents. He tried to make a joke of it. When he suggested dropping out and joining the Navy, one classmate told the guidance counselor (informants: guidance counselor and peer). He tried to enlist, but the Navy recruiter also talked with the guidance counselor (informants: guidance counselor and naval recruiter). The guidance counselor intervened, a schedule different from his mother's was arranged, and John remained in school. His mother was scheduled first to accommodate her employment schedule. Because of the schedule change, his vocational program was altered (informants: guidance counselor and school records).

John graduated from high school but had no career plans. He joined the Navy and completed his basic training. His follow-up interview occurred after basic training. He laughed about his original plan to quit school and join the Navy. If he knew then what he knew now, it wouldn't have even been an option. John did not have a positive experience during his basic training. He missed home, friends and family. John left the Navy after basic training with an honorable discharge (discharge papers).

All four individuals experienced self-identified psychosocial events. Matthew became involved with courts as a result of sexual misconduct; Mark's father remarried; Luke's younger brother was killed by a drunk driver; and John's mother returned to high school in John's senior year to graduate with him. For

three of the individuals, these events changed their educational outcomes. None of the psychosocial events could have been predicted.

### Research Question #2

- Did the four individuals identify one reason or a combination of reasons for graduating from or dropping out of high school?

All four individuals described a particular event followed by a set of actions and reactions. The individuals and adults within their families, schools and community service agencies participated in the actions and reactions that resulted in the educational outcome.

Positive or negative adult interactions with the study participant or adult interventions affecting the participant were identified by all four as reasons for their high school completion status. Luke and John nearly became dropouts but did graduate. Shared information and decisive action by key adults changed their outcomes. Matthew and Mark were affected by negative adult interventions. Matthew was removed from the bus by an administrator responding to a mother's concern for her child (informants: director of pupil personnel and principal). In an effort to support this mother, Matthew's rights were abrogated.

Mark's father and the DRS case manager acted in Mark's best interest in trying to find a suitable program to meet his unique needs (informants: father and DRS agent). Mark felt it separated him from his family, school, peers, and community. Mark had not made any friends at the special school he attended during his early teens. When he returned to his high school, he was two years

older than his classmates did not get along well with his peers (informants: teachers, school administration & father).

Adult actions, community services, professional workloads and schedules, trained professionals, home-school communication, support -service coordination, school program offerings, and service agency and school procedures were identified as reasons for the graduates and dropouts' outcomes.

Three of the participants recognized the lack of adequately trained accessible professionals in health, social, psychological, and legal areas. This lack combined with poor coordination of services in a small rural community, contributed to their outcomes. Indications that things were amiss with Matthew in second grade were evident in the archival data. Multiple reports within Matthew's files listed failure to thrive, malnutrition, uncleanness, nightmares, bedwetting, and many bumps and bruises. One wonders if central office staff had been familiar with the rights of special education students, would Matthew have been removed from the bus without alternative transportation plans. Also, if the probation officer been full time in the community would the removal from the bus have occurred.

Mark needed a comprehensive program the small rural school could not supply. Mark's parents acted on his behalf to provide a suitable educational program. However, they didn't include the local educational agency or Mark (correspondence between DRS agent, WWRC and the parents). Coordination of services did not work effectively as the school was left out of the decision making process.

Luke needed counseling after the death of his brother (school psychologist report in files). Luke's behavior deteriorated after the death of his brother and this acting-out behavior was seen by the school psychologist as cries for help. As an eighth grader and new to the 8 –12 high school, acting-out behavior was not perceived as out of character for Luke. High school guidance counselors did not meet with elementary principals or teachers for student information exchange (informants: guidance counselor and high school administration). Elementary guidance counselors were not part of the staff in this rural community. Intervention by an involved mother and a nonprocedural action by an administrator changed the outcome for Luke.

John indicated that strong family support and expectations coupled with good communication between home and school impacted his high school outcome. Although he was uncomfortable with his mother's presence in the school, her presence made her more accessible to the school officials and helped the communication process. This familiarity helped his parents and the school counselors approach each other to discuss John and resolve his problem.

In two cases, Mathew's and Mark's, adult interventions resulted in dropping out. In the other two cases, Luke's and John's adult interventions resulted in graduation.

### Research Question #3

- What, if any patterns emerged among the four cases?

All four participants described psychosocial events that impacted their educational outcomes. The actual psychosocial events themselves were very different among the study participants.

Had the study examined input themes and placed the data upon a two-dimensional causal matrix, the four participants would have looked alike in gender, ethnicity, disability category, school retention, community membership, socioeconomic status, attendance, psychosocial event, and discipline problems at some time during their school career. Had the study examined process and program themes, all four participated in vocational programs, and special education classes from elementary school through high school (yearbooks, student records, IEPs).

Differences among the four participants included number of years retained, elementary school attended, size of elementary school attended, number and gender of siblings, special education classes attended, parent involvement in IEP meetings, vocational aptitudes and programs, and involvement in school and community activities. An interesting mix among participants occurred in parental marital status and parental education level. Matthew and John lived with both natural parents. The parents of Mark and Luke were divorced. At least one parent of Matthew and John was a dropout. Mark, Luke and John each had a parent that attended college.

#### Research Question #4

- What factors seemed to be common among the dropouts versus the graduates?

Dynamic home-school relationships were present for the graduates and not for the dropouts. The participants and their parent(s) had many parent-school communications, and face-to-face meetings. Luke, John, and their parents met with the school personnel to arrive at acceptable solutions for their unique situations. Luke and John's parents had been actively involved throughout their entire school career as evidenced by IEP meeting notes and letters on file.

Mark perceived his parental involvement as negative since he was removed from the school division twice, first, during elementary school and second during high school. However, the parent perceived his actions as necessary and positive. He felt he had tried to get the best possible education for his child. In the middle school years, the parent removed the participant from the public school. Mark felt this began a disassociation process from the public school, his friends and family. When it became evident that the high school did not have a program to meet Mark's unique needs, a dialogue was started with a support agency that excluded the school and Mark. One wonders if the school division had been involved in the dialogue, if Mark's outcome might have been different. Mark's father did not perceive his action as negative but decisive in getting the best

education for his son. Mark's father did not think to include the public school personnel as he felt they had had their chance.

Matthew stood alone. Repeated requests for parent signatures on I.E.P.'s and permission to test went unanswered. There was only one-way communication between the school and Matthew's home. That direction was from the school to the home. Both Matthew and Mark had parents whose actions further distanced them from the public schools and directly impacted their educational outcome.

Luke and John's parents communicated on a regular basis with school officials. Sometimes the communication was positive and sometimes it was not. Two-way communication, however, was in place for the two graduates.

### Summary

Chapter 4 answered the four study questions. All four participants had similar input characteristics and processes within the school environment. All four experienced psychosocial events that impacted their school outcomes. Adult and parental involvement as perceived by the participants differed from the perception of the adults and parents involved. Differences between the graduate's and dropout's parent(s) communication with the public schools were noted. Graduates' parents were more actively involved throughout the school career and involved with face-to-face problem solving meetings. Dropouts' parent(s) were disassociated from the public schools by non-involvement in educational decisions. This disassociation was initiated by the parent or the

school. The study participant's own words revealed new information in regard to the process of dropping out.

## CHAPTER 5 Study Findings and Recommendations for Future Studies

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the reasons as described by the participants attributed to graduating from or dropping out of a rural high school by four white males identified as learning disabled. Participant interviews triangulated by archival data and essential informant corroborating interviews indicated that psychosocial events played important but not critical parts in the decision to either graduate from or drop out of high school. These psychosocial events, as perceived and explained by the study participants, led to a chain of events in which adults played decisive roles. It is within these chains of events that decisions are made either by the participant or for the participant by an adult.

### Findings

Six findings are noteworthy. First, adults' perceptions of events in the lives of the students vary greatly from the students' perceptions. Second, evidence indicated the participation of adults, both positive and negative, in the process of dropping out. This includes all adults in the students' world: home, school, employment and community. Of equal importance is how these adults communicate and interact among each other for the benefit of the student. Third, participants that appear to be homogeneous on paper are not in actuality. Fourth, the idiosyncratic complexity of each individual is compounded by their environment and the randomness of events causing their responses to be unique. Fifth, a list of alternatives or choices is formulated by the individual based

on the his/her experiences, communication network, and circumstances peculiar to that particular point in time. This option list is key in the decision-making and ultimately the response process. Sixth, contextual data's importance in the research arena cannot be overshadowed by numbers.

#### Adult perceptions

The participants' and adults' interpretations of the interactions were different. In one particular event, seven different perceptions were described. From the adults' perspective, reactions and responses by the participants were not predictable. However, the participants in this study, explained their reactions and responses in the context, as they perceived it. For each reaction, there was a decision process in which a list of alternatives was considered by the participant. Consequently, the participants' felt their reactions to the situation were just and the adults did not. Educators need to get into the student's quality world (Glasser, 1992), to truly comprehend what to do about dropouts. Finally, the gathering, analyzing and reporting of the data from the adults' perspective without benefit of student input is questionable in light of this study.

#### Adult interactions in the process

Participants in the study perceived and related both positive and negative adult interactions impacting their educational decisions. Adults such as, teachers, administrators, coaches, school psychologists, guidance counselors, and teaching assistants, as well as parents, employers, probation officers, and service agency representatives, are adults who have direct contact with the students throughout their schooling. All such interactions should be considered

critical. As with the studies and conclusions of Curwin (1994), Davidow (1994), and Lehr and Harris (1988), this study comes closest to supporting the findings of parental influence in the school completion process. However, this study also finds that many adult interactions and interventions with the participants play the decisive role in the decision to graduate from or drop out of high school. These adult interactions are part of the chain of events and often follow a psychosocial event. It is the adult interactions and how these interactions are perceived that are relevant to the educational outcome of graduation or dropout.

This study also supports the findings of process driven studies such as Astone and McLanahan (1991), Frymier and Robertson (1990), Garnier, Stein and Jacobs (1997), and Gramezy (1993). These studies examined the importance of parental involvement and downplayed the importance of input characteristics. The participants in this study described specific adult interventions that led to graduation or dropping out. This is unlike Anderson and Keith (1997), who found no evidence to support parental or adult involvement at crucial times as an effective deterrent to dropping out of high school. Claes and Simard (1992) and Kelly (1993) concluded that peers, not parents or input characteristics, are the key to the dropout process. This study does not support the findings of Claes and Simard (1992) and Kelly (1993). All participants knew one another, had friends and companions who were both graduates and dropouts and often socialized together. In small rural school systems, it is difficult not to know or associate with graduate and dropout peers, especially when your cohort group consists of less than 125 students.

### Homogeneity of student characteristics

The four study participants shared the same socioeconomic status and categorical labeling for special education; lived in the same rural county; and attended the same elementary school with the same classes and teachers. They were all white males, 18 to 20 years old and belonged to the same cohort group. Three of the four study participants received all of their schooling in the same rural school division, but their outcomes were different. For participants in this study, combining these input characteristics did not prove to be effective in predicting their educational outcomes. Extracurricular activities and vocational class involvement were not supported by this study as deterrents to dropping out in that all four of the participants had similar classroom, extracurricular opportunities and experiences, yet, their outcomes were different. Two of the study participants graduated and two dropped out.

### Idiosyncratic complexity

Each participant of this study described himself as an individual, with unique characteristics, relationships, and responses to particular psychosocial or life events. These events and the resulting chain of events as described by the participants, could not have been anticipated so that appropriate prevention or intervention programs could be provided. In two cases, the intervention program became part of the chain of events that led to dropping out for one study participant and graduating for another study participant. The idiosyncratic complexity of each participant, his interaction within his world and his unique response to this world suggests that the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to dropout

prevention programs has outlived its time. The students' quality world as envisioned by Glasser (1992) has implications for dropout prevention.

#### Individual decision making process

Choice involves comparisons among alternatives. The way in which a decision-maker sorts through, evaluates and selects an alternative is by employing decision rules (Johnson and Payne, 1985) learned through observation, contact and interaction with others. Primarily, but not solely, these others are adults. In individuals identified as learning disabled, as were the four study participants, attention, memory, and calculation may be distorted through perceptual difficulties. The effects of these limitations on judgement and decision making are important. Because individuals cannot deal with large amounts of information at one time, they tend to simplify situations and formulate decisions through limited viewpoints that focus on only one or a few aspects of the situation. Individuals respond to situations as they perceive them. All four of the study participants explained they would have acted differently given additional information or certain events had occurred on another day..

#### Contextual data

Three of the four participants, all of whom were considered low socioeconomic status, did not perceive themselves in this category. The concept that input characteristics and categorical one to three word descriptors of events leads to dropping out oversimplifies a very complex problem. From Coleman (1966) forward, studies in which inalterable characteristics are used to label students as at-risk have not been conclusive. These studies refute each other's

findings, cannot agree on definitions of dropouts, rural areas, socioeconomic conditions or special education dropout populations and homogenize the data in an effort to generalize a problem that is very individual and complex. Based on the review of missing and inaccurate data located in all four files and reported as such, one wonders how many other erroneous reports were filed on which quantitative analysis was based. Surely, this rural school division is not alone in making human error.

### Recommendations for Future Studies

In light of the current results, future dropout research should address the dropout as an individual and not assume a generalization capability. The data are unique and rich for each case. Additional qualitative studies are needed to examine the reasons why some students graduate from or some drop out of high school. The focus of these studies should be to gather additional data, verify it from multiple sources, and include the participants' perceptions. This type of research approach elicits three recommendations.

First, qualitative research data are not for generalizing and predicting. Each case is unique and may not have generalization capabilities. Researchers should reexamine their approach to dropout research and to the collection of data for the purposes of generalization, early identification and predictions. Instead of continuing research based on the IPO research model with Coleman's and Tinto's influences, researchers need to approach the dropout problem as unique to each individual and focus on the individual's evolving interactions. Just

as educational leadership is now applying the new science of chaos to administration and management issues, educational researchers need to look for a new model that is vibrant, a model that captures interactions and decisions on a temporal continuum. Chaos is the science of discovery and explanatory structures (Gleick, 1987). Through the models emerging from chaos, researchers may find the solutions to the dropout dilemma.

The research should include actual dropouts and graduates expressing their self-reported perceptions of events and activities leading up to and the realization of their educational attainment. There is a need to determine how well the adult perceived likelihood of dropping out mirrors the actual student dropout behavior as compared to the adult perceived likelihood of graduating mirrors the actual student graduation behavior.

Like most qualitative studies in which only a few cases are involved, it is difficult to determine whether the results of the study apply to a particular person, location, or background. Future qualitative studies should include a minimum of two cases, one dropout and one graduate with similar identifiable variables for comparison reasons. Studies should examine other geographic areas, disability categories, genders, ethnic backgrounds, parental involvement and relationships with the schools and socioeconomic status groups.

Second, all students should be considered at risk. Too much emphasis has been placed on inalterable background characteristics used to label certain students as at-risk. If the expectation for dropping out predicts dropout behavior (as it is assumed it may), why do non-identified at-risk students dropout and

identified at-risk students graduate? Future studies should investigate the individual reasons for the educational attainment of each individual and the most critical events as described by the individual.

Third, parental and other significant adults' involvement in a student's life has been identified as an important component of student success. This involvement takes many forms, including participation in parent-teacher organizations, volunteering at the school, contacting the school about the child's progress, monitoring homework, talking with the student about what he or she does in school, and talking about future education plans. More important than talking is listening to what the student has to say and getting into their quality world. Further study is needed on the interactions between students with parents/adults/ school personnel, parents/adults with school personnel and students with peers. Analyses of the conversations as well as the perceptions of what was said among the groups have potential use for parent and staff inservice when working with students.

These recommendations illustrate how little we currently understand about the reasons attributed to graduating from or dropping out of high school from the student's perspective. This study suggests that adults play a major role in the decision process to graduate from or drop out of high school. This role may be viewed as positive or negative from the student's perspective. Additional information is needed from different individuals' perspectives.

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## Appendix A Initial Interview

In this study, I am interested in what you can remember about decisions you made about yourself and your school. In order to do this, I am going to ask you some questions that may help you remember. No answer is right or wrong. Just try to remember as much as you can. If you cannot remember, that is all right.

Please don't feel that you must answer all the questions. If you remember something that you think is important, write a note to yourself. I will be back in about two or three weeks to talk with you again, and you can share it with me then. If you do not understand a question, please ask me to say it again. I will be tape recording our questions and answers. I will let you listen to the tape before I leave today. At that time if you wish to add, delete, or change anything, you may. All the information I gather will be confidential. That means I will not tell anyone your real name or address.

This information will be studied and discussed with other educators and may help other students in the future when they have a decision to make about themselves and their school. Do you understand what I want you to do? Do you have any questions?

Appendix B  
Interview Questions

1. What is your full name?

---

2. What is your address?

---

3. What are your parents' name(s)?

---

4. What is your telephone number?

---

5. When were you born?

---

6. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you have any brothers or sisters? If so, how many of each and are they older or younger than you?

---

8. How long have you lived at your present address?

---

9. What schools have you attended?

---

10. Are you employed?

---

11. What kind of jobs have you had and when?

---

12. What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?

---

13. Do you have any hobbies or special talents?

---

14. What are your plans for the future?

---

15. How many years of school did you attend?

---

16. Were there any classes that you liked?

---

a. What were they?

---

b. Why did you like them? \_\_\_\_\_

17. Were there any classes that you did not like?

---

a. What were they?

---

b. What didn't you like about them?

---

18. Did any classes help you get a job or select a job?

---

a. Which one(s)?

---

b. Why do you feel they helped?

\_\_\_\_\_

19. When you decided not to return to school, did you:

a. talk with anyone about it? \_\_\_\_\_

1. who
2. when
3. where
4. relationship to you

b. know anyone else who had not returned to school? \_\_\_\_\_

1. who
2. when
3. where
4. relationship to you

c. have someplace else to be or something else to do? \_\_\_\_\_

1. what
2. where
3. why
4. outcome

20. Do you participate in any clubs, sports, or activities in school or the

community? \_\_\_\_\_

## FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Ask questions 1-20 again for data verification.

21. It has been a couple of weeks (months) since you were last in school.

Please talk about your last couple of days at school and how you felt.

What were some of the good things you can remember? What were some of the bad things?

22. Talk about some of the things you did and the people you saw and spoke to about leaving school.

23. Talk about the first time you thought about not finishing school. What made you think you might not finish?

24. What were some of the things you did, people you talked with, and some of your feelings about school from the time you first thought about leaving, to the time you actually left. Did you ever change your mind? If so, what made you change your mind?

25. \*(to be used if there is time span between ideation and implementation that exceeded three months) There was quite a time span between your first thoughts of leaving school and actually leaving school. Talk about your feelings towards school, your activities, and your plans during this specific time. Talk about the good things. Talk about the bad things.

26. Talk about your thoughts and feelings about school since you left.

27. If you could change something or tell your teachers something that might have changed your mind about leaving school, what would it be?

Further questions were developed based upon the individual's answers to these leading questions. Individuals mentioned by the participants within the interviews were also interviewed for corroborating statements.

Appendix C  
Archival Data

From school records:

1. Full name\_\_\_\_\_

2. Parents' name\_\_\_\_\_

3. Address\_\_\_\_\_

4. Telephone number\_\_\_\_\_

5. Date of birth\_\_\_\_\_

6. Date of eligibility\_\_\_\_\_

7. Primary disability\_\_\_\_\_

8. Last year of attendance\_\_\_\_\_

9. Attendance patterns in number of days absent:

K\_\_\_:1\_\_\_:2\_\_\_3:\_\_\_4:\_\_\_5:\_\_\_6:\_\_\_7:\_\_\_8:\_\_\_9:\_\_\_10:\_\_\_11:\_\_\_12:\_\_\_

10. Settings in which student received educational services:\*

K:\_\_\_1:\_\_\_2:\_\_\_3:\_\_\_4:\_\_\_5:\_\_\_6:\_\_\_7:\_\_\_8:\_\_\_9:\_\_\_10:\_\_\_11:\_\_\_12:\_\_\_

\*1= special school; 2= self-contained class; 3= regular education classes;

4=resource room; 5=other

11. Primary course of study: College prep\_\_\_\_\_; gen ed\_\_\_\_\_; spec ed\_\_\_\_\_;

voc ed\_\_\_\_\_

Other\_\_\_\_\_

12. Grade(s) retained? K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

13. Number of days suspended? K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

## 14. Courses taken and grades received?

8 <sup>th</sup>	9 <sup>th</sup>	10 <sup>th</sup>	11 <sup>th</sup>	12 <sup>th</sup>
_____	_____		_____	_____
_____	_____		_____	_____
_____	_____		_____	_____
_____	_____		_____	_____
_____	_____		_____	_____
_____	_____		_____	_____
_____	_____		_____	_____
_____	_____		_____	_____

## 15. Activities:

- a. school related \_\_\_\_\_
- b. community related \_\_\_\_\_

## 16. Most recent I. Q. test:

Test name \_\_\_\_\_ Scores \_\_\_\_\_

## 17. Most recent achievement test(s) and scores:

## 18. Most recent mandated competency test and scores:

## 19. Most recent vocational aptitude and/or achievement test(s) and scores:

20. Employed during school career and what years?

8<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ 9<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ 10<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ 11<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_

12<sup>th</sup> \_\_\_\_\_

21. Type of employment: \_\_\_\_\_

22. Any outside agencies involved with this student? \_\_\_\_\_

23. Which agencies? \_\_\_\_\_

24. Any special circumstances relating to this student? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D Essential Informant Interviews

Four white male students identified as learning disabled named essential informants to corroborate their information. Interviews were held with the following essential informants:

- Dropout I (Matthew\*): mother, father, five teachers, five special education teachers, two school administrators, six peers, probation officer, bus driver, Director of Pupil Personnel, and school psychologist;
- Dropout II (Mark\*): father, stepmother, natural mother, three special education teachers, administrator of private school, Director of Pupil Personnel, two school administrators, school psychologist, Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) representative, Woodrow Wilson representative and two peers;
- Graduate I (Luke\*): mother, five teachers, five special education teachers, two school administrators, school psychologist, employer, five peers, older brother, and girlfriend;
- Graduate II (John\*): mother, father, three teachers, one special education teacher, guidance counselors, two school administrators, Navy recruiter, and four peers.

All interviews were numbered and entered into a data log.

\* Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the participants' anonymity.

## Appendix E Definitions

**Dropout:** A student enrolled at any time during the previous year not enrolled at the beginning of the current year, and not graduated or transferred to another school (NCES, 1998).

**Event:** A single isolated occurrence that stands alone and was not repeated or part of a sequence of happenings; for example, the death of a sibling.

**Activity:** An individual action, or participation in an action that was repeated and was part of a sequence of happenings; for example, truancy or participation in sports.

**Fact:** Demographic or historical characteristics that were difficult or impossible to alter, for example, gender, age or ethnicity.

## Appendix F Case Codes

Explanatory case matrices included five information components. These components and order were as follows:(data source) + (presence of characteristic) + (data type) + (evidence of corroboration) + (data log cite number).

### Data source codes

Data Source	Code
Participant interview	PI
Nonparticipant interview	NI(*)
Mother	*M
Father	*F
Stepmother	*m
Stepfather	*f
Teacher (current)	*T
Teacher (other)	*t
Special Education Teacher	*s
School Administrator	*A
Peer (in school)	*P
Peer (not in school)	*p
Psychologist	*z
Central Office Administrator	*a
Bus driver	*B
Probation officer	*O
Agency representative	*R
Employer	*E
Brother	*b
Sister	*s
Recruiter	*r
Private school administrator	*D

### Presence of characteristic

Characteristic present or expressed	+
Characteristic not present or not	-

### Data Type

Event	E
Activity	A
Fact	F

Evidence of corroboration

Supporting data available	+
Not able to support	-

Data log cite number

All data were numbered and entered into a spiral ring notebook. Each case had its own notebook and was coded to reflect the specific case.

	Start	End
Dropout I	DOI1	DOI372
Dropout II	DOII1	DOII519
Graduate I	GRADI1	GRADI387
Graduate II	GRADII1	GRADII187

Dynamic case matrices followed the following coding schemata:

(data type) + (data count)

Data type identified the information as event, activity or fact. Data count reflected the number of times an event, activity, or fact was present in the data collection. The minimum recorded on the dynamic case matrices was three. The maximum was 61.

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Education

Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA. Administration and Supervision of Special Education, May, 1993.

Post Graduate Study, University of Virginia, Continuing Education Center, Roanoke, VA., Critical Thinking Skills (Fall 1989) and Seminar on alcohol and substance abuse, Summer 1992.

Danforth Regional Program for the Preparation of Principals, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Roanoke, VA., Fall 1988.

Post Graduate Study, Radford University, Radford, VA. Critical Thinking Skills, Fall 1985 and Gifted Education, Summer 1986.

Post Graduate Study, Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT. Administrative Core Certificate, Spring 1980 through Fall 1981.

Master of Science, Central Connecticut State University, New Britain, CT., Education, Learning Disabled and Emotionally Disturbed, December 1977.

Bachelor of Science, Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, CT. Elementary and Special Education, May 1969.

Certifications

Postgraduate Professional State of Virginia

### Endorsements

Elementary School Principal  
Elementary School Supervisor  
Supervisor of Special Education  
Specific Learning Disabilities NK-12  
Director of Instruction  
General Supervisor  
Emotional Disturbance NK-12  
Gifted Education

### Work Experience

1993-present: Director of Instruction and Technology, Floyd County School Division, Floyd, VA.

1992-1993 : Graduate Assistant, College of Education, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, VA.

1993: Vocational Assessment and Transition Forum, Charlottesville, VA.  
Presenter, *Postsecondary Outcomes*.

1993: Consultant for Southwestern Virginia Transition Center, V.P.I. & S.U., Blacksburg, VA. Regional Competitive Grant Writing Workshops for Project Unite, Abbingdon and Roanoke.

1989-1992: Gifted and Talented Resource Teacher/Program Coordinator, K-12, Floyd County School Division.

1989-1992: Transition Specialist, Floyd County School Division.

1989-1992: Co-representative for Floyd County to the Southwestern Virginia Technology Consortium. Co-chair of subcommittee for recruiting national vendors for regional conference.

1986-1989: Teacher for students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance at Floyd County High School, Floyd VA. Co-chairman of the special education department, Floyd County High School, Floyd VA.

1985-1986: Teacher for students with learning disabilities and/or emotional disturbance at Floyd County High School, Floyd VA.

1984-1985: Half time teacher for learning disabled students at Floyd County High School and half time educational evaluator for Floyd Elementary School.

1975-1984: Teacher for learning disabled students, Memorial Middle School, Middlebury, CT. Learning Disability Team Leader for Region #15, Middlebury/Southbury, CT.

1969-1970: Teacher for the Educable Mentally Retarded, Broadview Junior High School, Danbury, CT.

1969 (Summer): Floor Supervisor for Derby, Sheltered Workshop, Derby, CT.

1968 (Summer): Teacher for trainable mentally handicapped at New Haven Regional Center, New Haven, CT.

1967 (Summer, weekends and holidays): Southbury Training Center, Southbury, CT.

#### Memberships

1996-present: Board of Directors for Floyd County Chamber of Commerce, Floyd, VA.

1993-present: Phi Delta Kappa, member.

1992-1996: Council for Exceptional Children, treasurer of local Chapter 1043, alternate delegate for State Convention.

1992-present: Virginia Vocational Association, member.

1992-present: Virginia Association of Vocational Education Special Needs Personnel, member.

1989-present: Zoning Board of Appeals, Town of Floyd, Floyd VA..

1988-1996: Order of Eastern Star, McDaniel Chapter, Christiansburg, VA.

1988-1989: Advisory Board, LEAP Program, New River Community College; Dublin, VA.

1987-1993: Committee member, treasurer of Boy Scouts of America, Troop 6, Floyd, VA.

1987-1988: Twenty Year Plan Committee, Board of Education, Floyd, VA.

1987-present: Old Church Gallery, volunteer and grant writer, Floyd, VA.

1986-1997: Floyd County Women's Club, Education Chairman, Floyd, VA.

1986-1988: Women's Resource Center Executive Board, representing Floyd, VA.

1985-1986: Parent Teacher Association, President, Floyd Elementary School, Floyd, VA.

1980-present: Delta Kappa Gamma, Alpha Kappa Chapter, President (1988-1990), Vice-president (1986-1988), and Treasurer (1982-1984).