CAROL ASHLEY PEARSON  
Young Adolescent Male Alternative School Students: An Ethnographic Case Study  
(Under the direction of DR. DENISE GLYNN)

This ethnographic case study examined the experiences and perceptions of young adolescent male alternative school students who are at-risk for delinquency. Through the use of participant observation and interviews with students, parents/grandparents, and school staff, I examined as a primary research question, What are the experiences of young male adolescents who are placed at alternative school settings? Secondary research questions were as follows:

- How do young adolescent males perceive their traditional school experiences?
- How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences?
- In what ways do young adolescent males make connections between their schooling experiences and their involvement in delinquent activities?
- How do young adolescent males view race as a factor in their successes and failures as students?

Findings from this study describe student experiences and perceptions based upon the context of the school, and include the philosophy, the culture of transience, inadequacies in the teaching and learning environments, the role of discipline, and the patterns of interactions noted among students and among students and teachers. Additionally I describe ways in which teachers and students resist the school context. This study also examines school as a contributor and deterrent of delinquency, and looks specifically at the role of race in student schooling experiences. I discuss implications for classroom practices, the structures of school, teacher education, and future research.

INDEX WORDS: Juvenile delinquency, Alternative schools, Ethnographic case study
YOUNG ADOLESCENT MALE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STUDENTS: 
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

by

CAROL ASHLEY PEARSON

B.A., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1992
M.Ed., Mercer University, 1995

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia
in Partial Fulfillment for the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2001
YOUNG ADOLESCENT MALE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL STUDENTS:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY

By

CAROL ASHLEY PEARSON

Approved:

Major Professor: Denise Glynn

Committee: Deryl Bailey
Kathleen deMarrais
Laurie Hart
Judith Reiff

Electronic Version Approved:

Gordhan L. Patel
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
December 2001
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the seventh grade students of Bridges School. I express my sincerest gratitude for the help and fun times you provided during the course of this study. Thank you to each of you who opened up your lives and your hearts. Your resiliency and determination amaze me. Thank you for forever personalizing the literature on delinquency for me. I believe in every single one of you and expect great things from you.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who have contributed to the process and writing of this dissertation, and to them I feel a tremendous amount of appreciation. Without their support and encouragement, none of this would have been possible.

First, I would like to acknowledge the Graduate School of my university for awarding me a small grant that, in part, funded this research. Next, my most sincere thanks to my committee members who each contributed in unique ways. Dr. Deryl Bailey, thank you for taking a leap of faith, though I was an unfamiliar face, and for contributing your expertise with youth at-risk for delinquency. I will always be grateful for your insights, encouragement, and your genuine willingness to help. Dr. Laurie Hart, professionally you have challenged and opened my thinking, and personally, you have been a model of support and collegiality. I can only hope to emulate your intelligence and grace. Dr. Judith Reiff, I have felt your presence from the very beginning of my program. I have learned from you about the kind of teacher educator I want to be. Thank you for your dependability and optimism that guided me through the years. Dr. Kathleen deMarrais, words can not express the amazing gratitude that I feel for you. I hope to be just like you when I grow up! You have taught me more about qualitative research and good teaching than any other single source. I thank you for your patience, especially in your willingness to talk often and at length. Thank you for helping me to grow as a researcher and a writer, and for always clearly showing, not telling me, the connection between theory and practice. You are a rare and precious example to us all. Finally, Dr. Denise Glynn, my major professor, thank you for your tremendous confidence and
support that sustained me in the most challenging of times. I sincerely appreciate the long 
hours you devoted to me and my work. My writing is forever improved because of your
attention to detail. I thank you also for the warm and caring nature in which you
conducted our every interaction.

In addition to these committee members, I would also like to thank Dr. Randi Stanulis who made enormous contributions to this work as well. Dr. Stanulis, I will
always consider you a friend and a mentor. I truly would not have made it through my
doctoral work without you. Thank you, Dr. George Stanic, for your unwavering
commitment to students and to teacher education. You have played an important role in
my graduate school experiences. Your smiles, words of wisdom, and professionalism will
remain with me. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Penny Oldfather for her smiling face
and her continued support and enthusiasm.

To my fellow graduate students, I extend genuine thanks for the alliances that
proved more meaningful than you know. Dr. Alice Sampson, you continue to be a
shining light no matter where you go. Your enthusiasm and dedication are contagious.
Dr. Ruth Ference, Dr. Suzanne McCotter, and Dr. Paige Campbell, the advice and
friendships you provided are irreplaceable. Warm wishes and continued success to soon-
to-be Drs. Jae Hoon Lim, Stacey Schwartz, Holly Ward, Thomas Van Soelen, Bryan
Sorohan, Wendel Paisley, Rick Dixon, and Dayna Yaksic.

There are many, many friends and family who have supported me during this
process as well. Although they did not always know the specifics of what was taking
place, they continually offered a place of “home.” Eric Corbett, thank you for turning me
on to issues of social justice and to my favorite author, Alex Kotlowitz. Thank you, Dawn
Stula, for the incredible times we have shared over the years and for more to come. Christi Turner, despite your brief presence in Athens, you will forever remain my confidant and dearest of friends. I am forever grateful to Mike Matzko, who immensely enriched my time in Athens with the friendship and fun times we shared. My deepest appreciation to Michael McNulty, for serving as my cheerleader, my happy thought, and most intimate friend during this process.

To my parents, I can never adequately express how much I have relied on you for strength, courage, love, and encouragement. Thank you for your friendship and your amazing support. To Pa-Pa, thank you for being such an important part of my life. You have taught me many life lessons. To my sister, Susan, I cannot thank you enough for the endless hours you listened to me intently on the phone, with your enduring and unconditional love. I am the most fortunate sister in the world to have you. John and Ben, thank you for bringing me so much happiness. And to Granny and Grandmother Pearson, my guardian angels, thank you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ............................................................................................................. v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1 **INTRODUCTION** ................................................................................................................. 1  
   - Research Questions ........................................................................................................... 7  
   - Rationale and Theoretical Perspective ............................................................................. 7  
   - Definition of Terms ....................................................................................................... 17  

2 **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE** .................................................................................. 19  
   - The Present State of Delinquency in Our Country ........................................................... 19  
   - Explanations of Delinquency .......................................................................................... 25  
   - The Effects of Institutions on Delinquency ................................................................... 27  

3 **METHODOLOGY** ......................................................................................................... 51  
   - Research Design ............................................................................................................ 51  
   - Research Setting ........................................................................................................... 52  
   - Pilot Study ..................................................................................................................... 54  
   - Participant Selection ...................................................................................................... 56  
   - Data Collection and Data Analysis ................................................................................ 58  

4 **DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH SITE** .................................................................. 88  
   - Context of the Alternative School within the County ...................................................... 89  
   - General Overview of the Alternative Program .................................................................. 90  
   - Physical Description of the School .................................................................................. 92  
   - Members of the School Community ................................................................................. 99  
   - Description of the Seventh Grade: A Case Study ............................................................ 113  

5 **DATA PRESENTATION** ............................................................................................... 160  
   - The Philosophy of the School ....................................................................................... 160  
   - A Culture of Transience at the School .......................................................................... 168  
   - Inadequacies in the Teaching and Learning Environments ........................................... 172  
   - Discipline Plays a Central Role in the School Setting .................................................... 192  
   - Patterns of Interactions in the School Context ............................................................... 204  
   - Ways to Resist in the School Context ............................................................................. 240  

viii
# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Research Questions ................................................. 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Relationship of Data Sources to Research Questions .......... 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Timeline of Data Collection ....................................... 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Field Note Excerpt Depicting Peer Performance .................. 209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Predominant Interaction Style of Seventh Grade Teachers ....... 223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Possible School Offenses That Could Result in Juvenile Justice Involvement ................................................. 260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Summary of Findings .................................................. 292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Visual Representation of Findings .................................. 297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The scene: It is 1992, in Lithonia, Georgia, a small suburb outside of Atlanta, although to me, as a new teacher, it feels very much like an urban city. It is November and I am beginning to get adjusted to the drive to school. I turn off the highway and down the road that leads to school, where, upon my arrival, it is immediately apparent to me that for the first time in my life, my White race is of the minority. Once inside the brand new school building, I walk past the cafeteria that houses early-coming students and hear the principal’s voice projected over the microphone. She is standing on the stage, with her small frame enclosed by White skin and a stark business suit, her timid voice barely audible above childish squeals and talk as she tries rather un成功地 to calm the crowd. I walk to my classroom, stopping off at my neighbor’s classroom for the “early morning vent session” and walk into my classroom, still feeling unprepared to teach, despite the fact that my lesson plans are ready to a tee. The words of my neighboring veteran teacher ring over and again in my head as I leave her classroom. “Don’t use that cooperative learning. These kids can’t handle that. They need structure. Just use worksheets.” Still confused by exactly what she means by “these kids,” and in the middle of trying to sort out my own 21-year-old rookie opinions from that of a teacher who has been in the field for 25 years, the school bell rings and the children make their way to my classroom.

As the announcements come on, I am reminded that there are challenges beyond my own classroom and my own doubts. We hear the latest report of gang activity and
vandalism that has occurred over the weekend, reminiscent of most weekends, and we all listen to hear whose trailer was destroyed and how bad the damage is. We wait to see who will be occupying the library as a classroom until the repair work is completed. During the Monday morning report, I once again thank my lucky stars that I was afforded a classroom in the building--a lucky break for a 1st year teacher. As the announcements continue, I scan the faces in my room and catch myself wondering which of my children will fall prey to the neighborhood gangs in the coming years, or if any already have.

During the moment of silence I inconspicuously say a prayer that I will somehow make it through the day, that I will be patient and productive, and that I will make at least a slight difference today in my students’ lives. Make it through the day I do, though angered more than once by student and parent responses. I am appalled when a student mumbles, “White trash” in response to a disciplinary action, and I feel defeated when a parent wants to talk with me about why the last color-coded card of my behavior management system, signifying the most negative consequence, is black. I go home at the end of the day exhausted, confused, and disappointed because I am not at all sure that I am connecting with my students and their parents.

This scene, though reflective of my own experiences, could just as easily describe any number of beginning teachers around the United States. I, like most teachers across the nation, am White and middle class and at the time I began teaching, had relatively few experiences with people unlike myself (King, 1993; Liston & Zeichner, 1990; Marshall, 1996; Olmedo, 1997). We are likely to see an increase in cultural mismatch between teacher and student as the student population seems to be growing more
ethnically, racially, religiously, and socio-economically diverse (Sleeter, 1996), while the already large proportion of White teachers appears to be increasing (Fox & Gay, 1995; National Education Association, 1992). The phenomenon accentuates the need for teachers to be well trained for multi-ethnic teaching situations. I feel as though I was not adequately prepared, and my students undoubtedly suffered the consequences. As a result, I believe I misunderstood my students and their parents, blamed them for not responding to the ways that I wanted to teach, and became frustrated when their values and actions did not match mine as a White, middle-class female. Perhaps if I had taken the time to talk with my students and their parents to learn more about their experiences, I could have been a better teacher. Maybe I could have envisioned how to improve my role in their lives, instead of focusing on how I wanted their behavior to change to meet my needs.

This study is an attempt to bridge a gap between students and teachers. Many of today’s teachers are in situations similar to those that I experienced my first 2 years of teaching. My struggles and frustrations during that time extended well beyond the typical problems of induction. The cultural issues I faced have left me with questions I have yet to resolve, even 7 years after leaving this teaching situation. Eventually I gave into the frustrations and anxieties of teaching in a situation where I felt less than successful and obtained a position in another county. My subsequent years in the field looked extremely different. I taught in a situation that mirrored my own life experiences. It was easy for me to relate to the parents and children; they were predominately White and middle class, and for the most part came from families much like my own, who had fathers who went off to work at one stable job and mothers who helped them with their homework in the
afternoons. I was a successful teacher there and feel relatively few pangs of guilt for not meeting my students’ needs or providing them with the best education I could. Instead, it is the African- American children whom I taught during those first 2 years that I focus on and whom I return to over and over again in my thoughts. I worry about them, both personally and academically. I consider my role as an educator in their lives and feel that although I tried my best with what I knew then, I let them down in many ways. I wonder how my students fared through the years, some of them already beginning to experience the lure of gangs even as early as age 8 and 9 years. It is these children I worry about most, and it is these children who have driven my interests in delinquency. I wonder how many of that first group I had will graduate from high school this year on schedule. Who will receive scholarships and honors? Does the little ballerina I saw perform in the *Ballethnic Dance Company’s* version of the *Nutcracker* still dance? Has the anger from certain children subsided or has it been displayed in the violent ways that often define their neighborhood? Did they continually meet White teachers in their educational career who were as unprepared for cultural differences as I was?

I have always been interested in why school does not seem to “work” for certain children and how these children cope with this situation. For many years, they have to endure a system that has already proven to them to be non-beneficial. Often, as in the case with some of my students, I saw them seek alternative ways of dealing with school such as fighting, disrupting or skipping class altogether, or becoming involved in gang activities. It is these children to whom I am particularly drawn, and I often speculate as to the motives for their actions and their tolerance for consequences.
My interests, worries, and questions have all come together to formulate this research. This research focuses on a particular group of students for whom traditional school does not seem to be “working,” and who have resorted to delinquent activities. In order to investigate the experiences and perceptions of students who are at-risk for delinquency, I conducted a qualitative study in an alternative school, a school that serves students who have been expelled or suspended from traditional schools. These students are young adolescents who are at-risk for delinquency, as they have recently become involved (or gotten caught) in status, criminal, or school disciplinary offenses (refer to definition of terms). The majority of my data consists of observations I conducted in the school setting, and student interviews in which participants described their traditional and alternative school experiences. As four out of five juvenile delinquents are male (Jennings, 1999), I have focused solely on males in this study. I talked with both African-American and White males so that I could compare and contrast their experiences, particularly examining how school factors have positively and negatively influenced their delinquent tendencies. A pilot study I conducted in the Spring of 2000 with four male students informed the design of this study, and will be discussed in detail in chapter 3.

It is after years of reflecting on my first 2 years of teaching, and only recently through my graduate studies that I feel I have a better understanding of the situation from the students’ and parents’ perspectives. I am finally able to dismantle my own insecurities and defenses and critically analyze how and why I so miserably failed the students in my classroom. So, perhaps for me this study has not only components of intellectual value but also of retribution for the children and families of that small suburb in Atlanta.
My interests focus on the exploration of the gap that exists between teachers and students. Many people question why I am so interested in learning from students who are so far removed from my own perspective: male, African-American and White students who are at-risk for delinquency. My reasoning is rather straightforward. The reality is that an overwhelming proportion of teachers are White females (Sleeter, 1996). Four out of five juvenile delinquents are male (Jennings, 1999), and African-Americans are disproportionately represented in this group (Butts, 1996). If this gap between teachers and students can be bridged, then perhaps school can become a more positive place for those students who have traditionally disliked school and have met with little success there. If students who are showing tendencies toward delinquency can share what they think should be done to improve their schooling situation, then perhaps these students’ needs can better be met in schools and subsequently the frequency of delinquent activities will decrease. Thus, the purpose of this study was to honor the voices of young adolescents who are headed down the delinquency path. By reading about their experiences, their successes and failures as students, teachers and teacher educators will be able to use this information to make school a better place. As research indicates, when schools and teachers establish strong bonds with students, delinquency rates decrease (Hirschi, 1969; Jensen, Erickson, & Gibbs, 1978). Therefore, this study has potential implications for students, teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, and school administrators. Likewise, the information gained in this study may contribute to the educational and sociological literature pertaining to schools as contributors and deterrents to delinquency.
Research Questions

Gaining a true sense of what students experience was imperative to the study. I believe that students are in a unique position because they are the only ones who can tell us what school is really like for them. The overarching purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of male students placed at an alternative school. In this study, an alternative school was defined as a school that serves chronically disruptive students who have been suspended or expelled from the traditional school. In addressing this question, I was most interested in how young adolescent males perceived their traditional school experiences and their alternative school experiences. I was curious to determine if and how these youth who have engaged in delinquent activities have experienced marginalization in schools, and whether or not they believed this phenomenon contributed to their involvement in criminal activity. Therefore, I explored the connections that students saw between school and their delinquent activities. As part of their experiences, I wanted to explore how these students viewed race as a factor in their successes and failures as students. I believed the best way to do this was to listen to their stories. Table 1 lists all research questions.

Rationale and Theoretical Perspective

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of males placed at an alternative school. My own beliefs about school and the structures of schools inevitably played a decisive role in the way that I designed the study, conducted interviews and observations, and analyzed the data. All of these procedures undoubtedly reflected my theoretical perspective. I approached this study with three different lenses: a critical theory perspective, Critical Race Theory, and a constructionist interpretation.
Table 1

Research Questions

**Primary Research Question:**

What are the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings?

**Secondary Research Questions:**

- How do young adolescent males perceive their traditional school experiences?
- How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences?
- In what ways do young adolescent males make connections between their schooling experiences and their involvement in delinquent activities?
- How do young adolescent males view race as a factor in their successes and failures as students?
Critical Theory

Critical theorists assert that in capitalist societies, one group unconsciously accepts the value system of another privileged, powerful group. Critical theorists look at how power is obtained and maintained (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). My interpretation of critical theory is the most influential in my theoretical orientation to the study. I used critical theory as a lens for viewing society in a way that makes us question its very underpinnings and structures. The reason for conducting this study rests within the possibility for change in our classrooms and schools based on the information that was revealed during the course of the study. I adhere to the basic tenant of critical theory that although society can be exploitative and oppressive, it is also capable of change (Weiler, 1988).

I am interested in exploring issues of power and privilege, concepts that are inherent in critical theory. Many of the juveniles with whom I worked have often found themselves at the bottom of a power hierarchy, oppressed by people who maintain the status quo (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Many students, both White and African-American, have continually faced stereotypes that classify them as lazy and irresponsible, simply because those people in power have projected these beliefs on them, while ignoring their own roles as oppressors. Through the use of a critical theory perspective, I was made aware of ways in which the dominant group might have subordinated those with less power, and how these positions of power may have been played out for my participants. A critical theory lens helped me to begin to understand those things that prevent certain individuals from having autonomous power over their own decisions and lives (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Critical theorists explore issues
of cultural capital and resistance in the quest for emancipation. Because cultural capital, resistance, and emancipation are essential concepts to the study, each will be discussed.

**Cultural capital.** Cultural capital can be defined as “the knowledge base possessed by individuals. It consists of general cultural knowledge, language patterns, manners, and skills” (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990, p. 32). The amount of cultural capital one has, and the more it matches that of the dominant culture, the more power is obtained. The possession of cultural capital, or the lack thereof, was an issue that I considered as I thought about the experiences of my participants. What role has cultural capital played in their schooling experiences? Do African-American and White students talk about issues around cultural capital in different ways? Do students whose cultural capital more closely matches that of the dominant culture engage in delinquent activities for different reasons? For example, do some students see committing certain delinquent acts (such as shoplifting) as a way to gain more cultural capital, while others see delinquency as entertainment? How does the match of cultural capital between students and teachers affect a student’s success and failure in the classroom?

Additionally, I considered whether or not my participants have been asked to sacrifice anything in order to mainstream with the dominant culture. Have their own home values, or cultural norms, or even learning styles been silenced in traditional schools? My initial experience with the alternative school students indicated that they brought a variety of language styles, dress codes, and interaction styles. As a critical theorist, I worked to recognize that students bring different realities to school with them (Hinchey, 1998; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Through this study, I reveal some of these multiple realities, and show, through the words of the participants, how these realities
coincide with or are dismissed by their teachers. Inherent in this discussion, I have relied on reproduction theories to guide my understanding of my participants’ schooling experiences. Reproduction theories question the belief that schools promote democracy and equality (Weiler, 1988), and assert that often they just reproduce the status quo of inequity. Such theories assert, “students are shaped by their experiences in [schools] to internalize or accept a subjectivity and a class position that leads to the reproduction of existing power relationships, and social and economic structures” (Weiler, p. 6). Because schools use the language and values associated with the dominant culture, students from a minority culture are at a disadvantage. Schools sometimes exacerbate the stratification by pushing students of higher status into professional careers and lower class students into vocational careers (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). Critical theorists argue that schools perpetuate social reproduction, and thus the status quo. The participants in this study indicated by their silence on certain issues, they have perhaps internalized concepts of social reproduction. Many participants indicated that they have felt trapped by their delinquent labels, yet other issues such as racial identity, are perhaps so far removed from their consciousness that they do not discuss them.

**Resistance.** Resistance can be seen as an active response to a situation in which a person feels otherwise powerless. Schools offer a very narrow view of what constitutes success. Resistance occurs when students reject this narrow view, and actively decide that maintaining their own identity and integrity is more important than looking, sounding, and acting like the dominant culture (Fine, 1991; Hinchey, 1998). Often those people with power, such as teachers, have difficulty understanding why people with less power, such as students, resist what they are given (Fine; Hinchey). Sometimes, when people of
power adhere to the myth of meritocracy, they are confused by someone’s refusal to participate in what they perceive as the necessary steps to obtain success. Many of the students I observed at the alternative school, including my participants, demonstrated resistance in their schooling experiences. In chapter 5, I discuss in depth ways that students demonstrated resistance in their schooling experiences. Participants and other students at the alternative school indicated through their actions and speech, ways to reject the system and to challenge the values of the dominant group (Fine; Hinchey). Many alternative school students passively disengaged from the system, while others exerted a more active form of resistance by acting out in class or by other externalizations of their resistance. My reliance on critical theory had tremendous implications for recommendations that I make based on the study. An important assumption in critical theory is that our current system simply perpetuates inequity, but that change may occur when we approach it from a broader perspective.

**Emancipation.** I rely heavily on critical theory because I adhere to its purpose of emancipation, that is, empowering oppressed groups with tools to better understand their situation and seek change if they want it (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Perhaps this process of emancipation can begin with the teacher education component of my research. I hope that the information gleaned from the study will be directed back to teachers, teacher educators, and students so that possible inequities in the school setting can be realized and subsequently addressed. Emancipation involves creating change in current structures so that equality can be realized. I believe that through human agency, transformation of society is possible, despite the oppressive forces that exist in society (Bennett deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). As reflected by Hinchey (1998), neutrality is
not possible. Action is a key component to my research. Doing nothing simply perpetuates the status quo and the inequity in an unjust system.

**Critical Race Theory**

While critical theory is applied to my research, I also used Critical Race Theory, or CRT, as a theoretical framework to guide my understanding and interpretation of the data related to my work with African-American participants. This theoretical orientation asserts that the experiences of minorities are far different than those of majority-culture members. It would be inappropriate to apply critical race theory to the majority group. Thus, I attempted to explore the experiences of African-American participants with a somewhat different stance that illuminated the possible roles of racism, inequity, and a cultural discourse in their experiences.

Critical Race Theory essentializes race as the cause for inequity in our society. Reminiscent of critical theory, CRT is embedded in social activist goals, seeking justice, liberation, and economic empowerment for oppressed groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Ladson-Billings (1998) describes CRT as “an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (p. 9). CRT was inspired by American civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, W. E. B. Du Bois, Rosa Parks, and Cesar Chavez, as well as nationalists such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers (Delgado & Stefancic). CRT borrows from several fields (i.e., liberalism, Marxism, critical legal studies, feminism, post-structuralism/postmodernism, and neopragmatism) and examines power
relationships by looking at how capitalism serves to maintain an unjust racial status quo (Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993).

Several basic tenets of CRT informed my study. CRT asserts that *racism is ingrained in American life, and thus appears normal to those within the culture.* With this perspective, I question how people of color have been limited by the traditional ways of our society and examine school as one possible factor in this oppression. Likewise, *CRT questions the neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy of the legal system.* CRT theorists argue that this mindset has damaged the advancement of people of color in that it has only served to silence them and perpetuate inequity. CRT theorists argue that the color-blind approach has meant assimilation for minorities and gives the majority culture somewhat of a clear conscious. My interests rested in how issues of neutrality, objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy have overlapped with educational opportunities and how these race-neutral approaches affected students in classrooms.

Critical race theorists also believe that *racism has contributed to distinct advantages and disadvantages across racial lines in income, imprisonment, health, housing, education, political representation, and military service.* Again, the needs of the dominant group have outweighed the minority group and the interests of the dominant group have been self-serving. This study focused on the educational aspects of these discrepancies, with the realization that most of these factors are intertwined, and can not be easily separated.

The qualitative nature of this study, with an emphasis on storytelling and personal narrative, reflects a basic tenet of CRT, which *emphasizes the importance of the experiences and details of daily life of people of color in analyzing law and society when*
looking critically at racism and its elimination. From a CRT perspective, I strived to be sensitive to the importance of race, class, and gender in the discourse of the participants. Storytelling and personal narrative facilitated a better understanding of the experiences that have shaped the lives and schooling experiences of the participants. It is through storytelling that mindsets can be changed and beliefs can be challenged. Storytelling can serve as a community-builder by establishing a common culture that people can discuss (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Tate, 1997).

The goals of CRT echo that of critical theory. Lawrence et al. (1993) describe CRT as a way to:

. . . respond to the immediate needs of the subordinated and oppressed even as we imagine a different world and offer different values. It is work that involves both action and reflection. It is informed by active struggle and in turn informs that struggle. (p. 3)

Thus, the defining elements of CRT served as the underpinnings of my work at the alternative school. I believe that CRT expands critical theory to dimensions of race that I believe helped me to address the many issues facing the students with whom I worked at the alternative school.

Constructionism

Constructionism served as a foundational epistemology of this study. Closely related to constructivism, this view asserts that meaning is constructed, not discovered, as humans become involved with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism can be distinguished from constructivism in that the former is more concerned with the role that culture plays in shaping the way we see things. In this view,
the culture around us shapes the ways we perceive our world. Meaning is constructed based on something around us, not created independently (Crotty). Conversely, constructivism is primarily concerned with ways that individuals make sense of their worlds, independent from the surrounding culture. Constructivism focuses exclusively on how the individual mind makes meaning (Crotty). For example, with my participants I was more interested in how their cultural memberships as students influenced their perceptions, than in how they connected their individual thought processes to make meaning of a situation.

Both views challenge the perspective of “objective knowledge” and argue that knowledge and truth are merely representative of one perspective (Crotty; Schwandt, 1994). Likewise, they both rely on the belief that it is the meaning assigned to facts, rather than the facts themselves that are important when we talk about knowing something, or knowledge (Crotty; Hinchey, 1998; Schwandt). I also adhere to these views, both of which seek to understand experiences from the point of view of the person living through those experiences. An essential component of these views is that people continually test and modify their belief system. Because fact is often subject to interpretation, how one makes sense of information is of greater concern than the actual information itself (Schwandt). Accordingly, I was most interested in how the participants accounted for their experiences, rather than the actual experiences themselves. I was not as interested in the events per se that they relayed, but rather in how my participants interpreted these events, how they assigned meaning to them, and why and how they chose to relay certain events in their conversations with me. I believe that much of their surrounding culture has influenced their views. Gaining the student perspective was
paramount in seeing school through the participants’ eyes. This perspective is a critical step in working for change so that school can be a positive place for these students.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of a common understanding of the terminology that appears in this proposal, a definition of terms, as they apply to this study, has been included.

**Adjudication**: The legal process by which a judge and court determine that a juvenile has committed a delinquent offense.

**Alternative school**: The public school that serves students who have been suspended or expelled from their traditional schools.

**At-risk for delinquency**: The behavior of a young adolescent that indicates he or she has dabbled in delinquent activity, including status offenses, criminal offenses, and disciplinary infractions. This circumstance implies that the young adolescent is not adjudicated, but that conditions are probable for involvement with the juvenile justice department.

**Base school**: Also called the community, home, or traditional school, it is the school to which the student was originally assigned and the student attended before being placed in the alternative school.

**Chronically disruptive student**: A student who repeatedly exhibits behaviors that interfere with the learning process.

**Community school**: Also called the base, home, or traditional school, it is the school to which the student was originally assigned and the student attended before being placed in the alternative school.
**Criminal offense:** An illegal offense committed by an adult or a juvenile, such as burglary and theft. Both adults and juveniles may be charged with criminal offenses.

**Delinquent offense:** An offense committed by a juvenile that would be illegal if committed by an adult, such as burglary and theft. Adults are not charged with delinquent offenses.

**Disciplinary infraction:** An event such as fighting or disrespectful behavior toward teachers that causes the student to be expelled or suspended from school.

**Home school:** Also called the base, traditional, or community school, it is the school to which the student was originally assigned and the student attended before being placed in the alternative school.

**Incarcerated youth:** A juvenile who has been sentenced by a judge and court for a delinquent or status offense.

**Status offense:** An action that is considered illegal due to the child’s age, but would not be illegal for an adult. Examples include smoking, drinking, truancy, and running away.

**Traditional school:** Also called the base, community, or home school, it is the school to which the student was originally assigned and the student attended before being placed in the alternative school.

**Tribunal:** A hearing set forth by school officials in which the offending student goes before members of the school board who allocate punishment. “Sentencing” for the student may include a court hearing, relocation to the alternative school, or community service hours.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of students who are considered at-risk for delinquent activities and are placed in an alternative school setting. Several areas of research guided this study. In this review, I first examine the present state of delinquency in our country in an attempt to unveil the seriousness of juvenile crime in our country, thereby establishing a need for the study. Next, I briefly discuss two explanations of delinquency offered by sociologists (Structural Strain Theory and Normative Conflict Theory), and finally I examine the effects of institutions on delinquency, namely, communities, families, peers, and schools.

It should be noted that this study offers unique contributions to the fields of education and delinquency. While many studies have asserted the importance of school in relation to delinquency, very few of these have examined these issues from the student perspective, and even fewer using qualitative inquiry. By addressing this gap in the literature, I hope that my study provides teachers and teacher educators important information in how to make school a successful place for students showing delinquent tendencies, thereby decreasing their delinquency involvement.

The Present State of Delinquency in Our Country

Youth delinquency is a complex and serious problem for schools and society at large. Juvenile crime has been on the rise and is expected to climb by 114% over the next decade (Burbach, 1999). Adolescents are at a high risk for crime. Although they constitute only 14% of the population, they endure over 30% of all crimes. Adolescents,
more than any other age group, are victims of crimes committed by their peers. Likewise, adolescents currently commit more crimes than any other age group (Bannister, 1995). Such statistics emphasize the necessity for studies such as mine that attempt to talk to young adolescents about their experiences. Personal conversations have shed some light on why young adolescents have turned to crime.

Delinquent activities, in general, seem to be taking a turn toward serious offenses. In the last several years, offenses have turned from simple property crimes to serious offenses such as rape and murder (Snyder, Sickmund, & Poe-Yamagata, 1996). This condition is especially serious for African-American males aged 15-24, for which group homicide ranks as the leading cause of death (Pryor, Sarri, Bombyk, & Nikolvska, 1999). Some African-American and White participants of this study knew of friends or family members who personalized these statistics. All of these experiences may have influenced their own involvement with delinquency. Crime seems to be rising in frequency and seriousness for youth offenders and victims, thereby establishing the need to study delinquency for the good of all adolescents. Though this is a serious dilemma for all adolescents, delinquency rates have reportedly climbed faster for certain groups than others. In an examination of the present state of delinquency in our country, I now look at gender and race as factors in delinquency, I consider alternative school students as at-risk for delinquency, I examine the problematic use of the delinquency term, and I address labeling theory as a current problem in our schools.

Gender and Race as Factors

The overrepresentation of adolescent males in juvenile crime statistics is particularly alarming. Four out of every five juvenile court cases involve males (Jennings,
1999). African-American males are particularly susceptible for juvenile detentions, as they are severely over-represented in the juvenile system. Butts (1996) reports that although African-American youth account for only 15% of the juvenile population, they account for 26% of all juvenile arrests and 44% of violent offense arrests. Poe-Yamagata (1997) concedes that in 1994, African-American youth accounted for more than two out of five detention cases even though they represented only one out of three of the referrals that year. African-American youth are not only targeted as victims of crime more often than other racial groups, but they typically receive harsher consequences when they are adjudicated for crimes. Disparity among racial groups seems to occur at all levels in the juvenile justice system. These differences appear to accumulate as youth become increasingly involved in the justice system. Data suggest that minority youth are more likely to be housed in secure facilities than are White youth who are more often housed in private facilities or are diverted from the juvenile system altogether (Butts). In 1996, African-American juveniles were referred to juvenile court at a rate more than double that of White juveniles (Butts). Data collected from 1989-1994 indicate that African-American detention grew at a rate five times greater than that of White detention (Poe-Yamagata). Such statistics indicate the need for examining the influences on delinquency across racial lines and using this information to question the role of schools and society in the discrepancies for different ethnic groups. Targeting a group of students who show tendencies toward delinquent behaviors, but are in an alternative school rather than being incarcerated, was a way to obtain valuable information while also decreasing delinquency.
The Consideration of Alternative School Students as At-risk for Delinquency

Chronic juvenile offenders show several characteristics that point to the benefits of studying young adolescents placed at alternative school settings. Serious and chronic offenders typically establish delinquency before the age of 13, are deemed troublesome by their teachers and peers between the ages of 8 and 10, and generally show poor school performance by age 10 (Burbach, 1999). Patterson, Reid, and Dishion (1992) have spent 3 decades studying behavior patterns of youth who are arrested during adolescence. Their findings indicate that the single best predictor of adolescent criminal behavior is an established pattern of early school antisocial behavior. Additionally, they indicate that antisocial boys tend to develop values similar to those of their delinquent peers in the intermediate grades, with 70% of these youth committing their first felony within 2 years. Research conducted by Walker, Colvin, and Ramey (1995) also supports this notion. They found through their study of fifth grade boys, that three measures could predict the arrest record of nearly 80% of their male subjects: teacher ratings of social skills, total negative playground behavior with playmates, and discipline contacts with the principal’s office. Such evidence accentuates the role of early negative schooling experiences as a precursor to delinquency, and highlights the importance of reaching young adolescents, such as those enrolled in alternative schools, early in their delinquent behaviors.

Problematic Use of Delinquency Term

The way that society views children has changed dramatically over the years and is never absolutely static. Even now, little uniformity exists in the way that our 50 states define delinquency (Siegel & Senna, 1997). Generally, delinquency is considered to be a behavior that violates the state’s penal code and is committed by a minor. However,
many factors seem to influence the use of the term. The frequency, seriousness, and duration of deviance seem to be important considerations of the term. Delinquent activities are rather common, yet not all children who engage in them are labeled “delinquent” (Farrington, 1987). Labeling children as delinquent has been cause for concern for quite some time. Whether or not to treat children as criminals, stigmatizing them for life, has been a topic of importance from the beginning of the court (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Labeling effects play a major role in the school lives of my participants.

Distinctions have been made between the types of offenses children commit. It is now common to distinguish between delinquency and status offenses. Delinquency refers to offenses that would be criminal if committed by an adult, such as burglary and theft. The term status offense implies offenses that would not be considered criminal if committed by an adults, such as running away, smoking, and drinking (Empey, Stafford, & Hay, 1999). However, this distinction has become increasingly vague in the courts where the focus has turned to a more punitive and restrictive role (Krisberg, Schwartz, Litsky, & Austin, 1995). Likewise, the definition of adult varies from state to state. Age 18 is the most common cut-off point, but in some states it is as low as age 16. Georgia considers adulthood to begin at the age of 17. Minimum ages for the consideration in delinquency are rarely specified, although in some states (e.g., Massachusetts, New York) a child has to be at least 7 years old to be considered for court action. Often, children below this age are considered to be dependent instead of delinquent (Jensen & Rojek, 1998; Regoli & Hewitt, 1997).

To complicate matters even further, there is also debate as to what age juveniles can be tried in adult court. In Georgia, this age is set at 15. In some states, there is an
added stipulation that a serious felony had to be committed or there was a record of previous offense. In most cases the language is vague and may only state that the child is “not amenable to treatment or rehabilitation” (Jensen & Rojek, 1998, p. 61). The rules for adjudicating youth who commit criminal offenses versus those who commit status offenses can also be different. As established in the *Winship* case, proof beyond a reasonable doubt is required in criminal cases. For status offenses, a lower standard is applied, requiring only “a preponderance of evidence” (Jensen & Rojek, p. 63).

The term delinquent can be vague also in terms of jurisdiction, or who has jurisdiction over juvenile court. In some states, juvenile court shares jurisdiction with the criminal court, giving concurrent jurisdiction. In Georgia, however, concurrent jurisdiction exists only for offenses punishable by death or life imprisonment (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997).

**Labeling Theory**

Many students at the alternative school may be known by teachers, peers, and administrators as the “bad kids.” Perhaps they are referred to as “delinquent” or “trouble-makers.” Such labels may serve to increase their negative status. Labeling theory asserts that once a juvenile is negatively labeled, that youth’s self-definition changes and the youth begins to see “self” as “delinquent”, and subsequently lives up to the expectations of delinquency (Bartol & Bartol, 1998; Siegel & Senna, 1997). Labeling theory assumes that delinquency, though it may have started as pure mischief, is repeated as a result of gaining a formal label (Shoemaker, 1990). Theorists associated with this theory (e.g., Becker, 1963; Braithwaite, 1989; Lemert, 1951; Schur, 1971; Tannenbaum, 1938) believe that human nature is predisposed to both social and antisocial behavior. Labeling
theorists are less concerned with the initial events that lead a child to delinquency and are more concerned with the stigmatizing effects that are produced when children are labeled delinquent by the courts (Shoemaker).

Labeling appears to fall more easily on certain groups than others. Becker (1963) asserts that those people in power determine what constitutes deviance and interpret right from wrong. Those who are disadvantaged, poor, and powerless seem to be more susceptible to labeling (Siegel & Senna, 1997) and accept the label of delinquent more easily (Lemert, 1951). Young, male, inner-city minority groups are particularly at a disadvantage with labeling, because this group is often targeted for stereotypes as delinquent (Matsueda, 1992). This group is also more likely to be discriminated against by police; they are also less likely to receive warnings and instead proceed to juvenile court than those juveniles of the majority group. This situation is unfortunate because those who lack the resources to avoid the labeling phenomenon are those who are most often targeted for it (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). These and similar issues have been addressed with the African-American participants of this study.

Explanations of Delinquency

Sociological literature attempts to explain how delinquency is established with a variety of theories. Two theories that are particularly relevant to my study are structural strain and normative conflict theory. Both of these theories will be reviewed briefly in relation to the study.

**Structural Strain Theory**

Structural strain theory (also referred to as status frustration theory) gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s. Reminiscent of critical theory, this theory focuses on
the cultural emphasis on success and the notion that obtaining success can be limited to
certain groups. It suggests that people strive for certain goals, but realize there is not
equal opportunity to obtain these goals and thus become frustrated (Cloward & Ohlin,
1960; Cohen, 1955; Johnson, 1979; Merton, 1957). Such dissimilitude encourages people
to seek other ways of obtaining what they want. For these reasons, theorists aligned with
this theory (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin; Cohen; Merton) view delinquency as a lower-class
adaptation to social frustration. They argue that crime and delinquency are highest in
areas where there is the most discrepancy between classes. Strain theorists basically agree
that the delinquent is a moral human who has been forced by circumstances to seek
alternative means for gaining the same things that others with better opportunities have
obtained (Cloward & Ohlin; Cohen; Merton). Certainly these circumstances have played
a role in the delinquency of the participants. Even their acting out in class can be viewed
as one externalization of the frustration they are experiencing at school and in their lives
in general. For example, during my pilot study, one alternative school student indicated
his frustration with the lack of time he was able to spend with his father, who worked
long hours and was physically exhausted when he returned home in the evenings.
Participants of this study have echoed similar circumstances.

Normative Conflict Theory

Normative conflict theory (also called differential association theory) suggests
that in certain social arenas, delinquency is expected, required, and approved. Normative
conflict theorists (e.g., Hirschi, 1969; Miller, 1958; Sutherland & Cressey, 1974) believe
that juveniles conform to contracultures of the population and reflect their values, norms,
and beliefs. These contracultures, they argue, hold beliefs that differ from the law and
therefore come into conflict with the law. Thus, children are socialized in an environment that rewards delinquent behavior and so delinquents are no more than conformists to their subcultures (Hirschi; Miller; Sutherland & Cressey). Some of my experiences during my first 2 years of teaching and my experiences in working with adolescents at the Athens Youth Detention Center, in addition to the experiences gained in this study, support this theory. Some participants have come from situations where delinquency is expected or even required. Such participants have very different views and experiences than those participants whose immediate surroundings do not encourage or support delinquent behaviors.

According to normative conflict theory and structural strain theory, looking exclusively at a young adolescent’s schooling experience would discount, for example, the importance of the neighborhood, the family, the peer group, and the role of each of these institutions in society at large. No part of a young adolescent’s life exists in isolation. Therefore, even though this study focuses primarily on the role of schools in delinquency, it is important to consult the literature to better understand how other institutions affect delinquency.

The Effects of Institutions on Delinquency

There are many causes and deterrents of delinquency. Although the literature conflicts as to the exact nature of these many influences, most sociologists agree that the community, family, peer group, and school can all deter and contribute to delinquency. It is important for me, as a researcher, to remember that my participants’ lives have been shaped for many years by each of these institutions, and that their school experiences do not exist in a vacuum. The following sections outline possibilities of ways each
institution may affect my participants’ delinquency. Most of these factors surfaced in some fashion in the experiences of my participants. By examining this literature, I was better prepared to address these contexts as they emerged in the research. As the research progressed, I returned to this literature to provide a more comprehensive examination of the issues that students revealed as important. The following sections briefly outline how each institution may serve as a deterrent and a contributor to delinquency. In this review, I begin with communities and families because children are exposed to these factors even before they reach school age. Next, I examine the role of the peer group since it is highly influential to the young adolescent. My interest in these institutions is based on how they affect school, thus, I conclude with the focus of the study: school as a factor in delinquency.

The Community as a Deterrent and a Contributor to Delinquency

Researchers have called for the establishment of neighborhood organizations as the solution to delinquency (Empey, Stafford, & Hay, 1999; Shaw & McKay, 1969). Packard (1972) has specifically examined the role of transience in neighborhoods, and argues that many Americans feel unconnected to people because of moving from place to place. Packard argued for more stability in neighborhoods and even setting limits on population growth and density so that people’s sense of social interaction and citizenship could be met.

The state of disconnection from the neighborhood, and failure to make bonds, is thought to contribute to delinquency and adds to a sense of withdrawal and isolation for the child within the neighborhood (Wilson, 1975). It is believed by others (e.g., Bursik & Webb, 1982; Shaw & McKay, 1969), however, that delinquency is confined to certain
areas and is not directly related to the transience of the neighborhood. Some research indicates that it does not really matter if the population of an area fluctuates, because it seems that delinquent or non-delinquent values are passed on to children of various areas (Bursik & Webb; Shaw & McKay). Others disagree, finding support for the notion that the stability of a neighborhood is strongly correlated with delinquency rates (Skogan, 1986). Stable neighborhoods seem to posses certain qualities that buffer children from delinquency. For example, in stable neighborhoods, youths are more supervised, people watch over one another’s property, and suspicious people in the neighborhood are challenged. Likewise, even the people living in these neighborhoods enjoy certain characteristics, such as a more relaxed parenting style, because of their surroundings (Skogan).

Physical deterioration of neighborhoods has been linked to delinquency because it makes residents feel helpless and ineffective (Shaw & McKay, 1969). Overgrown vacant lots, littered streets, boarded-up buildings, and neighborhoods cluttered by abandoned cars are all associated with high crime (Kelling, 1987). Certainly the physical description of the school site and the surrounding community will show how the deterioration of the building itself may send negative messages to the students who attend the school. However, it should be noted that these physical characteristics do not cause crime; it is not uni-directional. Crime may also facilitate deterioration of an area (Taub, Taylor, & Dunham, 1984). Other factors within the community are bi-directional as well. For example, the role of the family interacts with the community, and these interactions in turn affect crime.
Families can influence the characteristics of the neighborhood, while the neighborhood in turn affects the security and well-being of the family (Sampson, 1985). Parental supervision is key to delinquency prevention. When parents are in marital conflict or not actively involved in care giving, their abilities to monitor their own children may suffer, not to mention the inability to assist in the supervision of other neighborhood children. Sampson found that supervision relates to delinquency rates, even when the effects of race and poverty are controlled. Conflicted families that are disrupted are generally less able to make connections to their communities through schools, religion, and sports, because their attention is focused on other matters. Likewise, many parents, particularly single parents, must work and leave children at home unsupervised, sometimes for long periods of time (Sampson). Long hours at work mean less time for neighborhood involvement. Parental supervision in the community is but one example of family characteristics that affect delinquency. The lack of supervision of juveniles proved to be an important component in this research. Other family factors that are reported in the literature will now be examined.

The Family as a Deterrent and a Contributor to Delinquency

The family is perhaps the most important institution in society, particularly in determining a child’s personality, attitudes, and behavior (Jensen & Rojek, 1998; Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Siegel & Senna, 1997). The family factor is believed to be one of the most important in the consideration of delinquency because it is within families that children develop most of their intimate relationships (Bartol & Bartol, 1998; Gove & Crutchfield, 1982). Several family factors have been examined in relation to delinquency. Birth order and family size, single-parent homes, the quality of familial relationships,
discipline style, parental crime, and violence in the home have all been shown to affect delinquency.

**Birth Order and Family Size**

Early literature suggests that a child’s ordinal position, or birth order, may affect delinquency (Glueck & Glueck, 1950). Higher delinquency rates have been shown for middle children, particularly boys, with both younger and older siblings (Glueck & Glueck; Lees & Newson, 1954). Perhaps this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that middle children are the most likely to be home when other siblings are also home, producing an economic stress for parents. It has also been suggested (i.e., Glueck & Glueck) that middle children seek out delinquency as a way to gain attention. Family size may be important when considering economic resources. Lower-class, large families, seem to be affected more so than middle-class families (Rutter & Giller, 1984). Such research may be a moot point, because large families are now atypical. The median size of the American family is 3.24, with the average number of births per woman remaining at 2 (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). Because of the change in family size, current research has veered away from this topic with the decline of the size of the American family.

**Single-parent Homes**

Formerly referred to as “broken homes,” single-parent homes simply refer to a family structure that has been broken by divorce, separation, or death. Divorce is thought to be harder on children than even the death of a parent (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Currently, about half of all marriages end in divorce (Jensen & Rojek, 1998; Regoli & Hewitt). The earlier the break happens in the child’s life, the greater its impact on the child’s delinquency (Wells & Rankin, 1985). Younger children appear to lack the
cognitive and social capabilities to understand why their parents are not together and may blame themselves (Belsky, Lerner, & Spanier, 1984). Increasing divorce rates do seem to align with increasing delinquent rates, though it should not be assumed that divorce is the only factor in this increase (Jensen & Rojek). Certainly, a whole host of factors is at play in the single-parent phenomenon. Early conversations with the students at the alternative school indicated that many of them live with one parent, demonstrating that this was an area I needed to explore in the research. Not surprisingly, many of the participants lived with only one parent, and only one participant lived with both of his biological parents.

The juvenile court system firmly adheres to the notion that juvenile delinquency is a result of single-parent homes, although children of single-parent homes may just be over-represented in the courts (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). Courts often take into account the family structure when deciding whether to place a child in custody, and children of single parents are more likely to experience court action than children of two parents, although self-reports indicate that there may be little difference in actual deviance rates (Chilton & Markle, 1972; Johnson, 1986; Siegel & Senna, 1997). Some data does, however, support a difference in delinquency rates between the two family configurations (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Rosen, 1985; Laub & Sampson, 1988). The risk of delinquency in a single-parent home, particularly in minor offenses and status offenses (Wells & Rankin, 1985), is thought to increase because typically there is less supervision, monitoring, and discipline in these homes (Rankin & Kern, 1994). The findings of the study contribute support for this body of literature.

A child’s perceptions of the parents’ marriage seems to be equally as important as the reality of the relationship. Nye (1958) found these perceptions to be key predictors of
self-reported delinquency. But with the increase of divorce, the effects may be diminishing as divorce becomes more common (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). However, current studies suggest that children of divorced parents typically show lower academic achievement, more behavior problems, lower self-esteem, and poorer social relations than children whose parents are not divorced, even though the differences are not large (Amato, 1993). Children of multiple divorces are more likely to experience anxiety and depression, poorer academic records, and troubled marriages of their own than those who experience one or no divorce (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Regardless of the outcome of the parental relationship, children do seem to be affected by the quality of the relationships within the family.

Quality of Familial Relationships

Much evidence suggests that relationships held within families are more important than family size and configuration, and birth order (Rutter & Giller, 1984). The role of the mother as caregiver has been a topic of discussion for many years. Upon the onset of the “latchkey” child phenomenon, it was believed that the absence of the mother contributed to delinquency (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). Though some researchers have disproved this belief, (e.g., Hayes & Kamerman, 1983), others (e.g., Pepler & Slaby, 1994) have contended that it is merely the lack of supervision that results in delinquency. Steinberg (1986) declares that latchkey children are more susceptible to peer pressure. Additionally, mothers in the workforce typically have less time to spend with their children (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Steinberg contends that when working mothers provide supervision for their children, an increase in delinquency is not found. Some studies (e.g., Hill & Stafford, 1979) indicate that college-educated mothers compensate
for this lack of time with their children by reducing the amount of time they spend sleeping and relaxing. Research suggests that mothers may actually provide a buffer to delinquency when they are relieved of emotional stress associated with child-rearing and provide alternate quality childcare (Rutter & Giller, 1984).

Children who do not feel wanted by their parents are more likely to be involved in delinquency. Family tensions and parental strife contribute to delinquency (Hetherington, 1977; Nye, 1958) and may have more of an impact than an absent parent (Amato & Keith, 1991). It has been shown that more habitual delinquents come from unhappy homes as opposed to single-parent homes (Power, Ash, Schoenerg, & Sirey, 1974). The bond between parents and children is thought to play a big role in delinquency, with weaker bonds indicating increased delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). It has been interesting to note that many of the participants in this study revealed these exact findings in their family relationships and patterns.

**Discipline**

How parents discipline and control their children also shapes delinquency. There is a U-shaped distribution with very strict discipline (Nye, 1958) and very lax discipline (Cernkovich & Giordano, 1987; Laub & Sampson, 1988; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984) being associated with higher rates of delinquency. Snyder and Patterson (1987) term these styles *enmeshed*—they are overly inclusive as to what is problematic behavior and they do not back up their verbal reprimands with consequences. Conversely, lax parents are under-inclusive as to what they consider inappropriate behavior. In addition to lax discipline, erratic discipline is also associated with higher rates of delinquency (Farrington, 1988). Those parents who rule with an indifferent or neglectful
style tend to raise children who are more prone to delinquency and experiment with sex, drugs, and alcohol. Indifferent parents are characterized as somewhat unresponsive to their children and do not devote enough time and energy to meeting the child’s needs. These parents may not know where their children are, or show little interest in the child’s activities such as school and friends. Such families can be described as “parent-centered” because the children may be virtually ignored until they make demands on the parent, which often leads to an antagonistic response (Farrington).

The exhibition of hostility (Conger & Conger, 1994) and the use of physical punishment, such as spanking, may be associated with delinquency (Straus, 1991) as it is thought to increase a child’s aggression in later life. Even the threat of, or inconsistent use of physical punishment may promote delinquency because the child learns that physical punishment is a way to resolve problems (Nye, 1958). Although the research is non-conclusive in this area, it does seem to be widely accepted that erratic and inconsistent use of physical punishment contributes to delinquency (Agnew, 1983; Jensen & Rojek, 1998). Conversely, children who experience a loving environment do not want to lose that so they are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior, especially in middle adolescence (LaGrange & White, 1985). Participants in this study referred often to the discipline strategies that their caretakers apply, and noted extreme styles, both in lax and strict discipline.

**Parental Crime**

Research generally indicates that children of law-breakers are more likely to be delinquents than are children of law-abiding parents (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997; Wooten, 1959). Farrington (1993) found that bullying is especially prone to cyclical behavior
patterns, passing through generations. The cause of this pattern is not yet known. Genetic,
environmental, psychological, and child-rearing influences may all play a role and
perhaps all influence one another. For example, criminal parents are more likely to use
drugs and alcohol which contribute to the use of inconsistent discipline, a factor closely
related to delinquency (Laub & Sampson, 1988; Jaffe, Wolfe, Wilson, & Zak, 1986).
This was a common situation among participants. Many students live with, or have been
separated from parents who also engage in unlawful behaviors.

Violence in the Home

Abuse is a complex and serious issue, carrying innumerable consequences. Abuse
seems to be enmeshed with many other factors. For example, delinquency may be
exacerbated by the fact that parents who abuse have higher rates of drug, alcohol, and
psychiatric problems (Gelles & Cornell, 1985). Abused children also tend to show more
developmental delays and difficulties with intimate relationships than non-abused
children (Goldston, 1975), factors that may also contribute to delinquency. Though abuse
is not economic-specific, it has been noted that the lower class may be more susceptible
to violence because they have fewer coping outlets for stress (Jensen & Rojek, 1998).
Sadly enough, there appears to be little difference between behavioral patterns of children
who witness family violence and those who are victims of violence (Jaff et. al., 1986).
Again, student participants alluded to physically and mentally abusive family situations
throughout this study.

The Peer Group as a Deterrent and a Contributor to Delinquency

For many young adolescents, the peer group is of utmost importance because it is
with their peers that they seek acceptance, status, identity, and meaning (Regoli &
For some, it is the peer group, not the family, with whom they spend more time and are closest to emotionally. Coleman (1980) proposes that teenagers develop their own subcultures and use language, symbols, and values that are markedly different from those of adults. Covington (1982) extends this concept to delinquency, noting that teens develop their own set of norms, values, and expectations during this transitional time. Parents create conflict for teens when they do not agree on these conditions. Typically parents want their children to mirror their own standards, which may incite more conflict. Teens then turn to peers even more for acceptance, and sometimes this search for acceptance may include delinquent activity, particularly when there is a lack of parental supervision (Covington).

However, not everyone agrees. It has been argued that adults and teens are not as different as society makes them out to be (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). Adults and their teen-aged children often share the same values and interests, particularly regarding cars, sports, and romance. Coleman (1980) asserts that when parents and teens argue, it is usually over trivial matters, not grand issues such as morality or ideology. It has also been noted that parents really do have a tremendous influence over their teens’ lives. Cohen (1980) describes the teenage years as a normal period of discovery, a period in which youth move away from their parents but later, upon maturity, drift back toward the parents. Delinquency reflects this process of growth to adulthood to a certain degree. Juveniles typically engage in behavior that is acceptable for adults, but not juveniles (such as drinking alcohol) because they are embracing adult society, not because they are rejecting it (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). Contrary to popular belief, then, delinquency may be a way for juveniles to emulate their parents, instead of rebelling against them.
It seems that friends are the most influential factor in determining delinquent behavior, but gaining delinquent friends is a product of parental and school bonds (Marcos, Bahr, & Johnson, 1986). This behavior can take on a cyclical pattern. When students have weak parent and school bonds they may seek delinquent friends, which in turn causes more rejection from parents and teachers and continues the cycle (Liska & Reed, 1985). Likewise, bonds between teachers and students, and students and parents may be strengthened when these adults approve of the peer group. Certainly, young adolescents such as the ones participating in this study may be highly influenced by their peers. Young adolescents spend a great deal of their time with friends, and engage in a variety of activities when they are together. Therefore, I now examine delinquency as a peer activity and delinquency as a gang activity, as these activities reflect some of the experiences of my participants.

**Delinquency as Peer Activity**

Much attention has been given to the nature of delinquent activity. Is it typically a group activity or individual offense? Klein (1995) suggests that most delinquent activity, even within a gang, is conducted in pairs or triads of youth. Committing acts of delinquency in groups is referred to as co-offending (Reiss, 1988). Warr (1996) notes that these delinquency groups tend to be small and changeable, with children often belonging to more than one group. According to Short and Strodtbeck (1965), this occurs because youth seek out similar youth, not because one coerces the other into delinquency. Most delinquency occurs spontaneously in peer groups, rather than being the premeditated aim of the group (Gold, 1970). Research conducted by Hindelang (1976) suggests that certain delinquent activities are more likely to be conducted in groups rather than
individually, such as using marijuana and alcohol. Other crimes, such as carrying a weapon, are associated more with individuals.

**Delinquency as Gang Activity**

The term “gang” has a myriad of definitions that often vary from one police department to the next. The dynamics of gang life are variable. Some gangs engage in illegal activities such as drugs and drive-by shootings, although most do not. Gangs may or may not be concerned with territorial lines. Some gangs are highly organized and have definite leadership hierarchy, while others do not (Spergel, 1995). Gangs are dispersed throughout all parts of the United States, but seem to especially flourish in inner cities where lower-class youths have limited opportunities for economic and social success (Spergel).

Much debate has ensued over whether or not gang membership can offer any positive rewards for members. Although this notion is not generally accepted, research by Fagan (1989) and Vigil (1988) indicates that most youth gangs are not seriously involved in illegal activities, but rather offer social opportunities for gang members. Specifically, some researchers (e.g., Baccaglini, 1993; Brown, 1978; Vigil & Long, 1990) have argued that gangs provide close relationships, status, and a sense of identity for people that need it. Gangs members may also provide protection from other gangs (Baccaglini; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). On a less positive note, some research suggests that gang membership increases delinquent and drug activity, even when those gang members did not have higher rates prior to gang membership (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993). I now examine the role that drugs and violence play in gangs, before turning to gang member characteristics and the research on gang prevalence.
Drugs. Research by Spergel (1995) indicates that profits from illegal drug sales have lured many youth into gangs. Drug sales have replaced former notions of protecting turfs, and now gang members protect turfs as a way to protect drug sale territory. Crack is one of the most popular drugs in much of gang life. The high profit margin that it entails allows gang members to buy weapons, communication devices such as beepers and cellular phones, and expensive clothes and jewelry (Spergel). Huff (1998) denotes in a publication by the National Institute of Justice that gang members report that it would require average wages of $15-$17 an hour to get them to stop selling drugs. Many students at the alternative school indicated that they have been involved with the possession and distribution of drugs, particularly marijuana, indicating that this information is particularly relevant to the study at hand.

Violence. Violence is also a part of some gang life, although gang members may be predisposed to violence before joining a gang. Some researchers (e.g., Winfree, Mays, & Vigil-Backstrom, 1994) suggest that youth with pro-gang attitudes prone to violence may be a better indication of delinquency than gang membership per se. Studies by Winfree and associates indicate no difference between gang members and non-gang members in theft crimes, property crimes, and drug crimes. Differences were noted, however, in violent offenses, with gang members exhibiting higher rates than non-gang members.

Gang member characteristics. Many youth become involved in gangs at a very early age. Huff (1998) indicates that youth first join gangs as “wannabes” (p. 7) around age 13, officially join gangs about 6 months later, and are typically arrested within 6 months of joining the gang. He emphasizes the need to divert adolescents before the
“wannabe” stage, and calls for “. . . intervention initiatives directed at preteens, especially those prone to delinquent and violent behavior” (p.7). The age of the participants of this study reflects what he considers to be the “window of opportunity” (p.7).

Spergel (1995) indicates that the average age of gang members is increasing. However, while the ages of gang members are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, the racial composition of gangs remains rather homogeneous. Most gangs seem to be composed primarily of one race, and when inter-gang dispute breaks out, it is usually between groups of the same ethnic background (Klein, 1995). Because the participants of this study are African-American and White, research on the characteristics of these gangs is examined briefly before looking at some of the literature on the prevalence of gang activity.

African-American gang members, especially Los Angeles- based members, often identify themselves with nicknames that describe a behavioral trait. For instance, the nickname “Little .45” might be a nickname given to a gangster who prefers using a .45 handgun. Tattooing is popular, as is distinctive hairstyles such as cornrows and shavings. Graffiti is also a common form of communication (Siegel & Senna, 1997). The two most widespread African-American gangs are the Bloods and the Crips, originating in West Los Angeles in the early 1970s. These two gangs, collectively including over 25,000 members (Jensen & Rojek, 1998), typically organize around neighborhoods, with subsets including around 20-30 members (Regoli & Hewitt, 1997). It is estimated that about 35% of these gang members are juveniles, while most of the hard-core gangsters range in age from 16-22 (Jensen & Rojek). These two gangs have very little formal structure, although
they are both known as very violent gangs. Violence often erupts over turf competition, or for offenses as simple as wearing a color associated with a gang or flashing the wrong hand signal in the wrong place. Both gangs appear to be involved in the drug trade, which often affords members money to buy high-powered militaristic weapons. These weapons bring a source of status as well as self-protection to gang members, even though they have also contributed to escalating homicide rates (Spergel, 1995). Branches of the Bloods and Crips can be found all across the country, from urban cities to rural neighborhoods (Personal communication, County Gang Task Force, Sept. 1998), and are certainly influential in the areas surrounding the alternative school of this study.

White gangs, or Skinheads, seem to be populated by lower and middle-class members who use intimidation and perhaps more violence than any other group. Skinhead gangs currently account for less than 10% of gangs (Klein, 1995). Members of these groups generally adhere to neo-Nazi and Ku Klux Klan principles, showing hatred toward homosexuals, Jews, African-Americans, Asians, and other minority groups. They adhere to a white supremacist notion, believing that the increase of minority groups has contributed to the decline of American society (Hamm, 1993; Moore, 1991).

**Gang prevalence.** Gangs have spread from the larger cities to virtually every region in the country, causing many cities to seek intervention programs (Spergel, 1995). There are many speculations as to the cause of this spread. Some researchers (e.g., Moore, 1991) point to the break-down of the American family, with the gang serving as the substitute family to provide support and security. Zevitz and Takata (1992) argue that newly transplanted teens find that gangs are a way to quickly establish identity and friendships while others point to gangs as an organizational unit for adolescents living in
increasing poverty. Other researchers (e.g., Campbell, 1989) suggest that poverty and unemployment promote gang organization, particularly when jobs are not readily available to youth and economic stress becomes a factor (Jackson, 1991).

The School as a Deterrent and a Contributor to Delinquency

Schools play a significant role in a child’s formative years because so much time is spent there and almost all children attend school (Siegel & Sienna, 1997). Some research indicates that school affects delinquency even more than peers or family (Elliot & Voss, 1974). Although this research is not conclusive, almost all criminologists agree that the educational system bears at least some of the responsibility for delinquency (see for example, Kelly, 1980; Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk, 1972; Wilson & Hernstein, 1985). Delinquency trends do seem to reflect school schedules, with research showing that delinquent activity declines after 17 years old, on weekends, and during the summer months (Elliot & Voss). School factors that proved important to this study are academic achievement, social class distinctions, tracking, school attachment, and school dropout.

Academic Achievement

Many researchers (e.g., Jensen, 1976; Johnson, 1979) contend that school failure is a stronger predictor of delinquency than socioeconomic status or race. There seems to be a relationship between underachievement in school and delinquency, particularly with chronic offenders (Empy, Stafford, & Hay, 1999). Research consistently reports that academic achievement acts as a barrier to delinquency (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). When students are not academically successful, they may leave school early and then become involved with delinquency (Jerse & Fakouri, 1978). It is difficult to say whether school failure causes delinquency or whether students who engage in delinquent activities have
certain characteristics that contribute to their school failure. For example, low self-esteem has been linked to both delinquency and school failure (Gold, 1978), so it may be that one influences the other. Low IQs have also been associated with delinquency, and help explain school failure (Wilson & Hernstein, 1985), as do low self-control and impulsivity, (Godfredson & Hirschi, 1990) as well as a troubled home life (Farrington, 1993).

Social Class Distinctions

Cohen began the social class discussion in the 1950s and said that delinquency was primarily a working-class phenomenon, because these children could not measure up to middle-class expectations. Currently, the working class does experience greater rates of grade retention and school dropout (Siegel & Sienna, 1997). However, delinquency is not contained to the lower class. Boys from affluent families who do poorly in school may be affected even more by school failure and become more at-risk for delinquency (Kelly & Balch, 1971). In a classic study, Stinchcombe (1964) found that boys who rebelled the most were the ones who wanted to get ahead, but lacked the grades to do so. Perhaps this can be linked to the differences in the perceived importance of college with affluent children being encouraged more to attend a higher level of education (Astone & McLanahan, 1991).

Tracking

Dividing students into groups by ability and achievement levels, or tracking, is thought to contribute to delinquency. For example, those students on non-college tracks experience more school failure, participate in fewer extra-curricular activities, and are more likely to drop-out and engage in delinquent activities than those students on
college-tracks (Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk, 1972). Similarly, those on non-college tracks are more than twice as likely to have a juvenile delinquent record than those on college-tracks (Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk). This group often becomes marginalized in school.

Researchers point to several reasons that tracking may have such effects for those in the lower tracks. Kelly (1977) found that the primary reason for being placed in a lower track was whether or not the student had previously been involved with a remedial program. Teachers relied on this stereotyping to guide their placement decisions. Students in lower tracks seem to be unable to recover from these placements and tend to show signs of low self-esteem. Reminiscent of labeling theory, labeling children in tracks may create self-fulfilling prophecies in which everyone expects the students to do poorly, so they do. Students in these situations eventually live up to unspoken assumptions and low expectations that are placed upon them. Likewise, they suffer from stigmatizing effects in which their placement in lower tracks perpetuates low self-esteem, which in turn leads to more academic failure and disruptive behavior (Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk, 1972). Researchers (e.g., Kelly; Oakes, 1985; Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk) suggest that students in lower tracks, to counteract these effects, create a subculture where misbehavior and school failure are rewarded. Such students typically do not see the value of future rewards. They do not see the harm in accumulating a record of deviance or low achievement because they do not see it as harmful to their future (Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk). This phenomenon was demonstrated by at least two of the alternative school students in my pilot study who seemed unable to relate their current schooling situations to the future. For example, one student reported that he would like to be a doctor, but did not see the importance of academic achievement or returning to traditional school to
attain this goal. Such circumstances were also evident in the current research project. I will discuss how academic difficulties may have contributed to delinquency in the participants’ lives.

Tracking also seems to influence grading policies. Low-track students can become subject to low teacher expectations. Teachers may think that these students do not need good grades to get into college. This mindset carries over to teacher preparation as well. Many teachers of lower-track students exhibit less effective teaching strategies than teachers of higher-track students (Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk, 1972).

Repeated failure in school may encourage labeling such as “slow” and “special needs,” leading to dropout and delinquency (Oakes, 1985). Research indicates that track position is rarely changeable, particularly when moving to a higher track where there are often prerequisite classes that have to be met (Gamoran, 1992). Schaefer, Olexa, and Polk (1972) found that only 7% of students are able to switch between college and non-college tracks. Typically those in lower tracks also experience more behavior problems as well (Kelly, 1976).

Research suggests that students are targeted across racial lines for lower tracks. For example, African-Americans are about twice as likely as whites to be tracked into the low divisions. Kelly (1976) found that delinquency is more closely associated with track position than with gender and social class. Lower-track students are more likely to be involved with gang fights, smoking, and expulsion from school. Oakes (1985) found that low-tracked students exhibit lower self-esteem and career aspirations and noted that tracking encourages racial and economic segregation. Gamoran (1992) agrees, urging that if tracking has to be used, it should be done so that placement is flexible and children can
move easily between tracks. Many of the participants of this study have experienced tracking in their traditional schools, and because of disciplinary actions such as placement in In-School-Suspension, have missed educational opportunities to excel. This has certainly affected their perceptions of school and as learners.

Attachment to School

Students who report alienation from school, that is, they say they do not like school or their teachers, show higher rates of delinquency (Hirschi, 1969). Students who do not develop strong emotional ties or a sense of attachment to school are more likely to report delinquency (Hirschi; Jensen, Erickson, & Gibbs, 1978). Attachment to school seems to result in fewer delinquent peer associates (Johnson, 1979). Disruptive students are more likely to experience trouble with the law in subsequent years (Spivak & Cianci, 1987). Conversely, students who feel their school is warm and meaningful to their lives tend to show less delinquent behaviors (Jensen & Rojek, 1998). Furthermore, students who enjoy school and are involved with their schools report lower levels of delinquency (Wiatrowski, Griswold & Roberts, 1981). Perceptions of school relevance may also play a role. Some research indicates that those students who do not see school as relevant to their lives often view school as a failure, and thus turn to delinquency as a way to satisfy more immediate pay offs (Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk, 1972). Such research reminds me of conversations with students who expressed a desire to do well in school but say that it requires “too much work.” Some students seemed to feel that the benefits of achievement were not worth the required effort.

Other dynamics also seem to influence a student’s attachment to school. Even the physical size of the building and the student body seem to affect student perceptions of
school attachment. Large schools have been linked to students’ feelings of alienation and isolation. Though larger schools are easier to construct, they often foster an impersonal climate and discourage student participation and interaction. This sense of alienation from school can lead to increased violence and vandalism (Siegel & Senna, 1997) and ultimately, school dropout (Elliot & Voss, 1974; Jarjoura, 1993; Yung & Hammond, 1994).

All too often, school problems coupled with weak attachment to school can lead to dropout, pushout, or withdrawal from school (Fine, 1991). Fine argues that because of institutionalized silencing, educators and individuals see the decision to leave school as a choice, and often relate this decision to students’ inadequacies. However, when school policies and practices are considered, particularly through a critical perspective, it is plausible that schools play a role in the pushing out of certain students. The role of schools in dropout is considered in more detail later in this section. Minorities seem particularly prone to the dropout and pushout phenomenon. It is estimated that 70% of Native Americans, 29% of Latin Americans, and 14% of African-Americans drop out, while only 8% of Whites drop out (Yung & Hammon, 1994). Of course there are many reasons why students withdraw from school, but the reasons that students provide can predict important information about future law violations (Jarjoura, 1993). Students who report that they drop out because of home problems, financial reasons, or poor grades are less likely to engage in violent activities. Those who leave school because they were expelled are more likely to engage in theft and drug abuse, but not violent activity. Students having a long history of misconduct in school seem to continue their antisocial activity after dropping out (Jarjoura). Such findings heighten the need for studies such as
this one, although it cannot be determined from this research that dropout, or pushout, causes delinquency. It could be that those students who show delinquent tendencies are the same ones who also drop out (Elliot & Voss, 1974). Delinquency and dropout have been linked to socio-economic status; boys from the lower-class who eventual drop out of school have higher delinquency rates than those lower-class students who stay in school (Elliot & Voss). This research has been supported by more recent studies, finding that in general, dropouts do have a higher crime rate than those that stay in school, although it was higher before they dropped out (Toby, 1989). Toby points to grades 9-12 as a key period in which those who stay in school experience an increase in delinquent activity. Such findings accentuate the need for understanding young adolescents’ experiences as soon as possible, so that delinquency can be minimized or avoided. School withdrawal carries other consequences beyond education. Dropping out is also associated with other problems such as low-paying jobs and high unemployment, factors that may lead to deviant activity (Elliot & Voss, 1974).

Unfortunately, some researchers (e.g., Elliot & Voss, 1974; Schaefer, Olexa, & Polk, 1972) suggest that schools can sometimes promote dropout. They suggest that through various factors (e.g., irrelevant instruction, tracking practices, inferior teachers and facilities in low-income areas, and racial and economic segregation) the school system sets the stage for the disadvantaged child by cultivating failure and reinforcing it with labels. In this way, a downward spiral begins and the student feels frustrated, and so begins acting out, continuing a pattern of non-success in school. Such theories have caused many policy makers to question compulsory education. Some people argue that we should allow students to be productive in the workforce instead of staying at school in
a stressful and negative situation (Elliot & Voss; Toby, 1989). Some adolescents feel restricted in the school environment. During this time in their lives they are experiencing more and more freedom outside of the classroom, but are severely limited in school. At school, students are told what they can wear, what hairstyles are appropriate, when they can go to the bathroom, etc. This phenomenon is closely examined in the findings section of this study. Some students, particularly those who do not earn good grades, feel this situation to be oppressive and intolerable (Bartol & Bartol, 1998). They find school frustrating and may get into trouble because of their opposition to the rules and structures that are imposed upon them. The mandates cause them to lash out at teachers or school property, causing even more trouble and resistance. Rules can create hostility between teachers and students especially when they are heavily enforced and perceived to be inflexible (Pepler & Slaby, 1994). These power issues are certainly reflected in this study and will be examined in greater depth.

Being aware of the present state of delinquency in this country, sociologists’ possible explanations of delinquency, and the effects that institutions can have on delinquency, provided a better context for understanding the experiences of my participants. These contexts suggested avenues that can be explored to better address the schooling needs of juveniles who are at-risk for delinquency. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology that I found most appropriate for discovering the experiences of students who are at-risk for delinquency.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore young adolescent male alternative school students’ experiences. I conducted an ethnographic case study to record alternative school students’ experiences at this setting. This chapter describes my research design, the research setting, a pilot study that I conducted prior to this research, participant selection, and data collection and data analysis procedures.

Research Design

I conducted an ethnographic case study in order to explore the experiences of alternative school students. Using methods associated with ethnography, I was able to examine the lives of students at-risk for delinquency, using the seventh grade at the alternative school as a case. Spradley (1979) agrees that ethnography “seeks to build a systematic understanding of all human cultures from the perspective of those who have learned them” (p. 9). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) suggest that ethnography refers primarily to a set of methods, and “in its most characteristic form it involves the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions--in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research” (p. 1). Because I did want to immerse myself in the schooling experiences of my participants, I realized that I would not be able to fully and completely examine the culture of all students at the alternative school who are beginning to engage in delinquent activities. Thus I employed the techniques of the case study approach, and
focused on the seventh grade. Specifically examining the seventh grade allowed me to "fence in" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27) what I wanted to study, and allowed me to create some boundaries for my research. Boundaries ensured focused research, while the ethnographic approach added a multidimensional richness to the study.

Research Setting

The study was conducted during the 2000-2001 school year in an alternative school located near my university. This public school serves middle and high school students who are no longer afforded services from their traditional schools because they are chronically disruptive in schools. Most students have been expelled or suspended from their home-based school. This research involved students enrolled in the seventh grade. I chose to work with middle school students because they have been in traditional schools for approximately 8-9 years. Such time allowed them the maturity to have reflected upon their experiences more than students in the younger grades, and they were also able to better articulate these experiences than younger students. Also, because my own teaching experience is in the elementary grades, I was most interest in obtaining student perceptions of their Kindergarten-Grade 8 experiences. Middle school students were more likely to recall these experiences than high school students. Additionally, I wanted to work with middle school students who remain in the public schools as opposed to juvenile facilities, as the students in public school represent a continuum of emergent to serious offenders. I considered public middle-school students to appear "savable" because they have not yet committed their lives to crime, finding themselves detained in juvenile facilities until their adult years. The large majority of the students placed at the alternative school will return to traditional school settings where their attendance will be
required until their sixteenth birthday. Deterring young adolescent students from delinquency seems to be a more promising alternative than waiting until adolescents are more fully entrenched in a lifestyle that is more difficult to change.

This research site was chosen for several reasons. First, the students at this school represented a population of young adolescents who had a history of disciplinary infractions with school or the legal system. The majority of these students committed status offenses or criminal offenses (Refer to Definition of Terms for clarification), yet their juvenile justice records were not such that they were placed and educated at juvenile correctional facilities. Despite their placement at the alternative school, these students typically returned to public schools. The students were able to remember their experiences at their traditional schools, and were able to compare and contrast these experiences to those in the alternative school.

Second, even at the onset of the study I had established a rapport with some of the students, teachers, and administrators of the school, a factor that increased the comfort level and probably increased the amount and quality of information that the students were willing to divulge. Part of this can be attributed to how I obtained entry to the site. I served as a volunteer tutor in the school for over a year before conducting this research in order to become more familiar with alternative school settings. During this time, I worked to establish trust and rapport with the teachers, administrators, and students, so that my research would be better informed. By the time I began research, both teachers and students were accustomed to seeing me and working with me, and likewise, I was comfortable with them. We established trusting relationships that can only develop over time. Third, most students seemed to view working with me as a positive activity, and
often asked for the opportunity to work with me individually. I believe the positive atmosphere that was created prior to the study benefited the research and increased my accessibility.

**Pilot Study**

I conducted a pilot study at this site in the Spring of 2000. I individually interviewed four male participants to obtain some of their general perceptions of school, family, and friends. The results of this pilot study guided the current research study by better informing my data collection, analysis, and representation. In thinking about my development as a researcher, I have identified several areas in which the pilot study improved my research practices.

Most importantly, as a result of the pilot study, I changed the way that I structured interview questions. In the pilot study, I was concerned about getting through a list of questions about school and teachers that probably appeared rather abstract to students. During the interview process of the current study, I was mindful to ask students to recall specific instances that served as defining events. I asked them to tell me stories about their school experiences to elicit concrete, rich data. As will be discussed later, I used structured, open-ended questions in an attempt to illuminate specific past experiences. Additionally, conducting the pilot study helped me to further consider the use of small group interviews to engage participants more readily in conversation. Some students who participated in the individual interviews in the pilot study appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable in sharing their experiences in this type of setting. Perhaps this feeling of discomfort could also be attributed to the fact that I was rather unfamiliar to some of the newer students at that time.
Although many changes were necessary for the current study, the pilot study did reveal certain themes that continued to resurface in the current study. I wanted to remain mindful of the themes that emerged from this pilot study so that I could explore these issues in depth: friendships, peer interactions, power issues, teacher characteristics, school conflicts, home support, and a sense of belongingness. In order to provide a brief overview of some of my findings from the original pilot study, I have included a poem that I wrote based on the compiled data of the participants from that study. The poem mentions situations and idiosyncrasies that the participants themselves addressed as important. I constructed this poem using the words and perspectives of the participants; I have merely reformulated and combined their words to present a common, focused voice. The poem integrates the aforementioned themes.

Don’t look at me funny just because I’m dressed in Black, my dyed dark hair in my face, my fingernails painted black, my skeleton necklace on.  
I’m mostly just a normal kid like you. I want the same things. I need the same things. 
I play video games and hang out with friends. 
Sometimes they understand me. Sometimes they don’t. 
I go to school just like you. Sometimes I hate it there, like you. 
My body cringes when the teacher yells. It makes me want to slip into the floor cracks and never return. 
I want to stay there in my dark hole while the teacher is talking, talking, always talking. 
Does she think we care? She sounds like she is about to fall asleep, so why shouldn’t I? 
I try and talk to my friend nearby to ease the incessant boredom. 
She sees and hears and then she strikes. 
Detention, again. But I don’t care. I learned long ago that caring gets me nowhere. 
Who has time to care anyway? 
Mom is too busy just living. Dad is too tired when he comes home. But that’s okay. 
It gives me more freedom. I need no one and blame no one. 
Everyone is always so serious. 
Can’t they stop for a while? Slow down, and realize what is important to them. 
Like me?
Maybe if I make them proud of me they will take notice. But here I am. Causing trouble. Time is running out. I’m trying, I’m trying. Please believe me. It is so hard when you do it all alone. It was so easy when I was young. Remember when I made that clay face in art and you kept it in the kitchen? You loved it. You told me so. What happened? Now you are never satisfied whatever I do. The rules are always changing; different houses, different people. I had to stop trying. I had to find acceptance. You know I need that. People call me weird but they don’t know me. Schools and families can be so harsh. So confusing. Shelter me. Protect me. Is that too much to ask? I just need some attention. You know I will get it one way or another. But for now I’m tired of the fight, so I’ll just keep on going--anyway, whichever way I can.

Participant Selection

Participants were selected based on a purposeful sampling method, combining a criteria sampling approach and a typical case sampling approach (Patton, 1990). I established several criteria for purposeful selection. The first set of criteria was set forth by Morse’s (1994) definition of a good informant as “. . . one who has the knowledge and experience the researcher requires, has the ability to reflect, is articulate, has the time to be interviewed, and is willing to participate in the study” (p. 228). In addition, I selected participants who were identified by the administrators as expected to remain at the alternative school for the duration of the study. In addition to these criteria, I used “typical case sampling” (Patton, p. 173) as the participants represented “typical” students at the alternative school, to the extent that a “typical student” could be identified. My definition of a typical student pertained primarily to the age of the student and the reason for placement at the alternative school. That is, participants were between the ages of 12 and 14, and were enrolled at the alternative school because they had been expelled or
suspended from their traditional school. Choosing students who met Morse’s criteria of good informants, remained at the school for the duration of the study, and were considered to be “typical students” at the alternative school were adequate factors for participant selection. Because enrollment can be unpredictable and very low at times, I did not want to hinder my opportunities to obtain participants by imposing too many stipulations on participant selection.

Enrollment at the alternative school fluctuates considerably. Typically, in each of the two sections of seventh grade, there are about 5 - 8 male students (Personal Communication, Mrs. Yarborough, Academic Advisor). I conducted interviews with nine male students, all of whom fit my criteria. Of these nine students, four students were African-American and five were White. At the time of this study, no other ethnicities were represented in the 7th grade. Each of the participants is introduced at the conclusion of chapter 4.

I began conducting the first round of interviews with students as soon as the permission forms were returned to me. Therefore, participants were identified in staggering time increments, one participant one day, and another the next day, until I was satisfied with the number and quality of participants. Permission forms were still being returned as the project progressed, although I concentrated on a core group of students who had attended the school since the beginning of my study, and who returned their forms in a timely fashion.

Talking in-depth to a range of students over a period of several months created a rich perspective of what students at the alternative school experienced. Additionally, the student interviews led me to other sources for interviews, thus creating a snowball, or
chain sampling phenomenon (Patton, 1990). For example, I conducted interviews with the administrators of the alternative school, some parents and guardians of the children, teachers of the students, the police (resource) officers who were assigned to the alternative school, and eventually, administrators at the county office.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

A cross-case sampling approach with the participants drove my data collection, as I looked across participants for commonalities and discrepancies. I focused on student experiences within the context of one school as a case. Despite the seemingly simplistic nature of a single case, Miles and Huberman (1994) describe the complexities within such an approach. They articulate the sampling decisions that occur around choosing which activities, processes, events, times, and locations on which to focus within this approach. Additionally they point to the “rolling” (p. 29) quality that defines the within-case sampling approach, with interactions with informants, observations, and new documents continually pointing the researcher in new directions. I carefully considered these decisions of sampling as they influenced the analytic and theoretical quality of my work. With the involvement of several participants, I was able to compare and contrast their situations which all revolved around the alternative school as an anchor of common experiences.

Data were analyzed using ethnographic analyses. This analytic process relies heavily on description, with description becoming apparent in many phases of analysis. Because of this emphasis, I chose to dedicate chapter 4 to a description of the research site. Wolcott (1994) addresses the “fuzziness” of the research phases, saying that there are no clear distinctions between “where description ends and analysis begins, or where
analysis becomes interpretation” (p. 11). He believes strongly that descriptive data should speak for themselves, and analysis of that data should stay very close to the recorded data. Throughout this research, I remained committed to adhering to these procedures in the analysis and representation, and have let the participant voices speak largely for themselves. I have attempted to preserve the dignity of the participants’ voices, as I feel that previous researchers have often glossed over and overlooked student perceptions. This study honors young adolescents who are at-risk for delinquency, and for once, lets them serve as the experts in a complex context.

During the data collection process, I relied on Bogdan and Biklen’s (1992) approach of discovery and coding. During the discovery phase, I read and reread the data, internalizing the information. During this phase I recorded categories, themes, hunches, and theoretical connections around emerging patterns. At this time I kept an ongoing chart listing the themes that I felt were evident in the data. I continually worked from this chart, adding and reworking themes that I discovered. Once I had a working chart, I also organized these themes by how I saw them linking to my research questions. Keeping a bulleted list of these links to my research questions allowed me to see the holes in my data collection. I was able to use this information to probe deeper into issues and themes that called for further examination. I also referred back to the body of literature that informs the study, and thought about how my own findings contribute and relate to this body of literature. During the coding step, I developed categories into which all relevant data were sorted, while I also addressed discrepant data that did not fit neatly into categories. Coding data into categories provided a means to generate concepts from the data. Coding allowed me to think beyond the data, ask questions of the data,
reconceptualize the data, and then move toward interpretation by considering theoretical implications (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Qualitative researchers (e.g., Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Merriam 1998; Patton, 1990; Wolcott, 1995) generally agree that data analysis should occur simultaneously with data collection. During the course of the study, I continually moved from one process to another, continually enabling the data analysis to better inform my data collection and vice versa. As I began to organize and reconceptualize the data, I was led to ask other questions and search more deeply for issues that I had not explored as thoroughly as I desired. In the early stages of analysis, while I was collecting data, I began making charts and lists to assist my organization. As one strategy, I kept an on-going list of questions that I was asking of the data to help me look at what was represented, go beyond the surface implications of the data, and help me think on a more theoretical level. For example, it was with this list that I realized that an effective way to answer some of my lingering questions would be to ask participants to describe what they did yesterday from the time they left school until the next morning when they arrived back at school. Writing early and often helped to inform my data collection and resulted in a recursive pattern of data collection and analysis. Additionally, I engaged in data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as a way to simplify and transform data. Using graphic organizers to reduce the data helped me make connections among the data and forced me to stay close to the data in the analysis and interpretation phases of the research. A common strategy I used for data reduction was to select a theme or idea that I noticed emerging continually from the data, for example, the idea that alternative school is a “second chance.” Then I sorted through the data and listed the participants’ name and recorded all quotes that
addressed this issue. After I organized these “data chunk charts,” as I referred to them, I identified how these issues fit into larger themes and issues and thought about how they specifically addressed my research questions.

Ethnographic data analysis allowed me to assign meaning to data that may otherwise have remained complex and overwhelming. It was quite useful in managing and organizing a vast array of information into meaningful chunks. Certainly, ethnographic data analysis was the most appropriate form of analysis for the purposes of this research. In the following sections I provide a description of the data sources and a data collection timeline, as well as descriptions of my subjectivities and biases, my role as a researcher, the role of reflexivity, and how I ensured validity.

**Data Sources**

As previously indicated, interviews and participant observations provided the primary data sources, and served as the tools for creating a portrait of the students at the research setting. Observations of the students in many situations helped me to better understand the overall context of school, and for some participants, often led to more information than what was given in interviews. Interviews were conducted with students, parents and guardians, and administrators of the alternative school and the county office. They were audio taped with permission and later transcribed. A small quantity of documents provided an additional source of data and offered additional contextual information to describe the experiences students had at the alternative school. Each data source, participant observation data, interview data, and documentary data, is described in more detail below.
Participant Observation Data

Patton (1990) says that “to understand fully the complexities of many situations, direct participation in and observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method” (p. 25). Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) contend that conducting ethnographic field research offers two distinct advantages: “first-hand participation in some initially unfamiliar social world and the production of written accounts of that world by drawing upon such participation” (p. 1). They extend this participation to mean a deep engagement with another world. They explain, “with immersion, the field researcher sees from the inside how people lead their lives, how they carry out their daily rounds of activities, what they find meaningful, and how they do so” (p. 2). My role was that of participant observer. I was fully engaged in the activities of the alternative school and tried to make sense of them through my own personal experiences and observations (Patton). I believe that I met my objective as a participant observer to develop an insider’s view of the students who attend the alternative school.

I recorded field notes that consisted of empirical observational evidence as well as theoretical implications. I organized field notes into three columns: description of the setting, actual field notes, and researcher memos. More often than not, I recorded memos in the evening following the day’s field notes, after I had a chance to review the observational notes. During my field notes, I tried to remain close to Spradley’s (1980) “language identification principle” (p. 66), “verbatim principle” (p. 67) and “concrete principle” (p. 68). Spradley, in his book Participant Observation, asserts the language identification principle means the observer should indicate the type of language or language source recorded in field notes. For example, when taking field notes, I
developed a method to indicate quotes versus my own words and interpretations. I indicated the speaker by using colons before the actual quote (for example, Student: Quote) and often used codes such as T for teacher and S for student after the speaker was identified in that section of the field notes. I also adhered to the verbatim principle by recording actual conversations and verbatim records of statements. During my observations, I attempted to record exact conversations and actions in classroom situations. In addition, I adhered to the concrete principal by describing observations using concrete language, and noting specific names, actions, and details to record the scenes that transpired around me. Such observations led me to a better understanding of the setting, while they also directed me to seek additional information through interview questions. Analyzing field notes allowed me to discern recurring themes (Wolcott, 1999) and contribute a richness to the interview data. Often times, the observational data helped me to think about concepts that arose during the interviews in a different way. Being present in the school also added to the students’ comfort level by providing them an opportunity to see and talk with me on a regular basis. We interacted informally when the students were given free time in their classes and we exchanged conversation as classes were transitioning. I believe the students were more apt to speak openly and honestly with me because they routinely saw me over the course of several months, and I became immersed in their daily school activities.

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with students, their parents, teachers, and administrators in order to compile a history of participants’ school experiences. The information given in these interviews related the experiences of the students who were
enrolled at the alternative school. They detailed how students came to be placed at the alternative school, and what school had been like for the participant to that point.

In addition to the interviews that are described below, I made use of informal interviews, a common technique in ethnographic research. These interviews were conversations in which I took the opportunity to ask questions, clarify observations, and elicit more data. During informal interviews, I casually conversed with students, teachers, and administrators without the use of notes or a tape recorder. After informal interviews, I documented them as quickly and as accurately as possible. The following sections provide information about the student interviews and adult interviews.

**Student interviews.** I conducted interviews with the student participants of this study. Not only did the interviews with students reveal much about their experiences, but the patterns with which they relayed information proved to be an important finding of this study, as will be discussed in chapter 5 of the dissertation. I conducted two or three interviews with each student participant, depending on time constraints. Longer interviews were often conducted twice, while shorter interviews called for three interviews to be conducted. Refer to Appendix A for student interview protocols. Student interviews allowed me to construct a history of the participants’ school experiences and gave me a clearer sense of what school had meant for them. Looking across the experiences of all of the participants provided me a sense of what school had been like for the participants at the alternative school.

Interviews were conducted in both small groups of two students and in individual settings. Before conducting the interviews, I asked students which method they would prefer. Three participants (Bradley, Darius, and Martin) preferred individual interviews.
All other participants preferred pair interviews and participated in interviews with their good friends. Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) report that the group dimension generates several advantages over individual interviews. Primarily, the support of peers may have decreased the social desirability to impress the researcher, or provide the “desired” answers. The group format may have facilitated increased participation as well as evoked a range of opinions. For example, a monologue by one participant often helped the other participant feel comfortable expressing similar views. Small groups of only two participants helped some participants feel comfortable while maintaining an intimate atmosphere. With only two participants, each was able to discuss his experiences in-depth. At the suggestion of Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub, the interviews, which were conducted with children between the ages of 10 and 14, lasted no more than 60 minutes. Most, however, lasted between 45-60 minutes as we worked within the confines of class schedules.

One of the challenges of interviewing young adolescents is getting them to talk at length about their perceptions. Research (e.g., Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) suggests that they can be made more comfortable in interviewing settings if they are occupied by “some sort of enjoyable and easily mastered activity” (p. 138). In order to make participants more comfortable and facilitate productive storytelling, I engaged them in an art activity to direct their attention away from the interview process. I provided sketch paper and colored pencils and magic markers. I selected these materials because not only did they seem popular with the students, but they were easily cleaned up and were portable. These materials were also easily transported in my “researcher bag.” The researcher bag also included the tape recorder and microphone, cassette tapes, batteries,
folder with consent and assent forms, and extra paper and writing utensils. Through the art activity, participants were able to focus on the art task while at the same time talking to me and sharing their experiences in a conversational manner. I made these materials available at every interview, although participants did not always choose to use them.

Student interviews were conducted in a variety of settings around the school. Most often they were conducted in the media center, which offered a fairly private forum for discussion. One interview was conducted in the cafeteria in the afternoon because it offered more privacy. Another interview was conducted in an empty classroom, where a student had been sent to “cool off” for the hour that remained of class. Two interviews were conducted outside of the school building on the sidewalk. Participants did not miss any instructional time due to the interviewing. I interviewed students during their “free time” if they so volunteered, or after they had completed their assigned work for the day. Teachers granted permission for the students to leave with me prior to each session.

Student interviews revealed very interesting differences in conversations with African-American and White participants. Conversations with White participants revealed narratives and produced story-like qualities. However, my interviews with African-American participants seemed to take on very different characteristics. Students did not reveal much personal information, but instead merely answered my questions with as little response as possible, while also meeting the criteria. At first, I became very frustrated with my inability to elicit narratives from the African-American participants, and I felt as if I was failing in my interview attempts. I found it difficult to gain stories from the participants in a narrative style. My usual line of questioning such as “tell me more about. . .” or “tell me the story of when. . .” did not seem to produce the narrative
style of interaction that it had with White participants. It became increasingly obvious to me that I was asking African-American students to engage in a type of interaction that was either uncomfortable or unnatural to them. Through my interviewing techniques, I was asking them to step out of their traditional verbal interaction style, and into my style of interaction, which looked very different. I found that in general, African-American participants were less talkative and less story-oriented than White participants. In chapter 5, I consider how issues of trust and rapport could have surfaced in these situations. Undoubtedly, my own apprehensions about my relationships with African-American participants and my ability to effectively relate to their lives, came into play as well, and directly affected the research. I address these issues more fully in chapter 5, as well.

Particularly in my first set of interviews with African-American participants, I became frustrated with the limited information I felt I had obtained. I was perplexed as to how I could provide a voice for this group of participants when I felt unable to draw this out of them. Consider these two examples, the first interview with Addarian, an African-American participant.

Carol: Tell me more about that. He used to call you. . . .

Addarian: Call me stupid and stuff. [Silence].

Carol: Tell me about a time that happened.

Addarian: It happened every time there was a class. [Silence].

Carol: So how did you get in trouble for that?

Addarian: By saying he was stupid. [Silence].

Granted, while all African-American participants represented variations along this continuum of interaction style, I found that most White participants more frequently used
elements of story-telling, with a distinguishable beginning, middle, and end. Consider for comparison, this selection from my first interview with Billy, a White participant.

Carol: Think about a time you got in trouble in school. You can start with why you came to the alternative school. . . .

Billy: Like, the reason I’m over here is because of my mom. She thought that it would be the best but a lot of stuff I’d done, I’d be coming over here anyway. Like, the first time I got in trouble at school was I was feeling real bad and sick and I put my head down and I like, slept through the whole day until we had to go to exploratory and the second time I got in trouble I cussed out a teacher and Mr. Watson was saying how he was going to send me over here and I didn’t really want to come because I didn’t really know what it was like.

Carol: Can you think back specifically to the time you cussed the teacher and give me a picture of what that looked like?

Billy: Well, I remember sitting down and I put my head down and she told me to put my head up and then I got my head up and then I was just sitting there and she told me to stand up and I asked her “Why?” and she said, “Because I told you to” and then I just snapped and I just cussed her out. Then like, that was all the trouble I got into in their classes, but Mr. Kell, nobody likes him, he always yells at us for no reason so I used to like cuss him and call him gay and stuff. He used to sit like a girl and talk real low and all that. So he’s the main reason I’m over here right now.

With these two examples of excerpts, you can easily see the differences in interaction style. As I continued interviews with African-American participants, I realized that I had
been asking them to engage in my style of interaction. What I had at first attributed to a poor working relationship and their distrust of me, a White researcher, I eventually began to also see as differences in interaction styles. As I began to think about these differences in interaction styles, I began to examine student interactions with their peers more closely. What I found was that White participants often switched their interaction style when talking with me, becoming more vocal and story-oriented, but African-American participants more often retained interaction patterns more closely associated with their peers. Thus, I realized that observing interactions between peers would be equally, if not more valuable than interviewing participants. Ironically, I found that as the bonds between the African-American participants and me strengthened, the peer style of interaction became even more embedded in the interviews. As the African-American participants became increasingly comfortable with me and me with them, the interviews began to take on more and more elements of performance, a key characteristic of peer interactions that will be discussed in detail in the data presentation chapter of this dissertation.

As my relationship with the participants grew, the students not only became more talkative, but they also allowed me to see more of their personalities. As participants continually saw me as someone to whom they could speak frankly, without judgment on my part, they increasingly let me into their world and acted more naturally around me. They guarded their speech and actions less, and involved me in their interactions more. I partially attribute the participants’ increasing sense of comfort with me to the fact that I always remained a researcher; I never assumed the role of disciplinarian or teacher. Likewise, I engaged in activities with participants such as playing basketball, talking at
lunch, and “hanging out” in the office when they had been sent there to “cool off.” I also tried to contribute to a two-way relationship with the students by answering their questions, when appropriate, in regard to my personal life. Additionally, the fact that I was physically present so much of the time, sitting in their classes and working with their peers, also probably contributed to their comfort level. All of these things helped to build our relationships, which certainly became apparent in our interviews.

Two African-American participants, in fact, became so comfortable in showing their personalities and engaging in performance-type speech with me, that in one interview, they took the tape recorder and started interviewing each other in a very comical and silly rendition of “interview voice” and “interviewee voice,” providing absurd questions and answers with which to entertain me and themselves. At this point, they undoubtedly trusted me enough that they knew I would not be angered or flustered by their display. They looked forward to our interview sessions (noted by their frequent questions such as, “When are you going to talk to us again?” or “Do you need me today?”) and would likely not jeopardize those sessions by displaying actions that I deemed inappropriate. Our relationships grew stronger over time. Participants began to initiate conversations with me and they increasingly asked me to participate in their activities such as playing cards or drawing during classroom free time. Several students also increasingly talked with me after having been dismissed from the classroom because of discipline problems. I noticed in informal interactions with participants during the school day, that as our relationships grew stronger, they involved me more in their interactions that were typically reserved for peers. I even became the target of some of their banter as well. For example, one student jokingly commented on my ankle-length
pants by asking me where the flood was. Another student commented on my lack of a wedding ring by telling a friend, “No, she don’t have no husband. She can’t even get no boyfriend.” Instead of being offended by their comments, I appreciated it as a sign that they saw me more as “one of them” and they felt comfortable enough to include me in their interaction. They did not engage in such bantering with teachers that they reportedly did not respect or like. Of course interactions with me never fully assumed the characteristics of peer interaction, as every “stab” that was directed at me was followed by the comment “just kidding,” which had no place in their own interaction with each other. As the research continued, I, too, became somewhat more comfortable engaging in the peer-like interaction. I found myself making jokes and being verbally playful with African-American participants as we grew more comfortable with each other. Engaging in peer-like interactions served to further build our relationships with one another.

Although the conversational style moved further and further away from what I had originally expected from the interviews, I gained a whole new perspective about the linguistic patterns of the students, which I developed into a major theme of this research.

**Adult interviews.** Although this study focused primarily on the perceptions of students, I also conducted additional interviews. Interviews with adults proved to offer vital information about the school. As previously mentioned, interviews with students led me to other sources of information. For example, I found it helpful to talk to administrators of the alternative school and of the county school system, a few parents of the students, teachers of the students, as well as police (resource) officers who were assigned to the alternative school. These people provided additional perspectives about the students’ experiences. These interviews were comprised of a structured, open-ended
interview format, and an informal conversational interview format that “typically . . . occurs as part of the ongoing participant observation fieldwork” (Patton, 1990, p. 280). Please refer to Appendix B for adult interview protocols.

Each administrator of the school who was affiliated with the alternative school was interviewed as part of this research. The principal, assistant principal, academic advisor, counselor/media specialist, and resource officer each met with me. The interviews were conducted during and after the school day, as deemed most convenient by the administrator. Additional interviews were conducted with administrators at the county office during the school day. Each of these interviews transpired in the respective administrator’s office.

In order to contact parents, I obtained telephone numbers from participants who said they were willing for me to talk with the adult with whom they lived. In fact, all participants shared their parent/guardian home or work telephone numbers with me. Of the nine participants, two of these telephone numbers had been disconnected. Four participants’ families did not return my telephone call, or I failed to make contact after 5-10 attempts. One guardian (an uncle who was not legally responsible for the student) cancelled two interview appointments before he moved out of the state. Parents and/or grandparents of three participants eagerly agreed to meet and talk with me. These three interviews were conducted in various locations. One evening I met a participant’s grandmother and mother at the grandmother’s home located about 15 minutes from the alternative school. On another occasion a participant’s mother drove to the school and had me follow her to her house, where we conducted the interview. One participant’s
grandfather drove to the school during the school day and met with me in the media center.

**Documentary Data**

Merriam (1998) asserts that data found in documents can “furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypotheses, advance new categories and hypotheses, offer historical understanding, track change and development, and so on” (p. 126). Documents help ground the investigation in the context and add a richness to the data (Merriam). In addition to the information that was available, I also made note of the information that was not available. I collected and analyzed documentation that was both relevant to the study and was relatively non-problematic to obtain. Such documents included, but were not limited to, school policies and procedures, discipline referral forms, assembly programs, and pictures that participants drew during interviews. I consciously decided that obtaining report cards and test scores, and anecdotal notes about student behavior and academic performance was less important to me, as I did not want to contribute to possible labeling effects that these might incite for me, and consequently the students. Several students voluntarily showed me their report cards, but as the study progressed, I did not feel that these types of records would contribute positively to the study. Student academic histories became quite evident, and obtaining these documents proved unnecessary, as students were willing to share this information without the use of a document. I found it less intrusive and more effective to simply ask participants and their families about their academic histories. Police records for juveniles are not available to the public, and interview data revealed adequate information about involvement in the juvenile justice system.
Observations, interviews with students, parents, and school personnel, and documentary analysis served as data sources for this research. Table 2 summarizes and illustrates the relationship between the data sources and the research questions.

**Data Collection Timeline**

A timeline of the data collection schedule to which I adhered is provided in Table 3. Table 3 also provides information regarding data collection and procedures. It should be noted that although procedures are outlined by months, data collection, analysis, and representation assumed a recursive process, as each research process informed the next. In other words, I collected data, analyzed that data, and began writing about that data, so that I would in turn know what holes were in the data. In response to these findings, I collected additional data that addressed those needs.

**Subjectivity and Biases**

My own experiences as an educator assuredly affected my perspectives as a researcher. I brought my own ideas as an educator about how a classroom should run and what are appropriate expectations for students, academically and behaviorally. I also brought ideas about how chronically disruptive students such as these typically act. For example, I occasionally found myself surprised when students were polite, helpful, and thoughtful. I continually had to confront my prejudices in this area and examine the ways in which I possibly acted upon my own biases. Having spent a year in this setting as a volunteer, I embarked on the study with preconceived notions. Most importantly, I developed preconceptions concerning student learning. My preconceptions indicated that student learning in this alternative school differs greatly from that of traditional schools. It was important that I address this bias before beginning my research, so that I could
Table 2

Relationship of Data Sources to Research Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research questions</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What are the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings? | • Student interviews, parent interviews, school personnel interviews  
• Participant observation  
• Documentary data |
| How do young adolescent males view race as a factor in their success or failure as students? | • Student interviews  
• Participant observation |
| In what ways do young adolescent males make connections between their schooling experiences and their involvement in delinquent activities? | • Student interviews  
• Participant observation |
| How do young adolescent males perceive their traditional school experiences? | • Student interviews  
• Participant observation |
| How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences? | • Student interviews  
• Participant observation |
## Table 3

### Timeline of Data Collection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>November- December</th>
<th>December - March</th>
<th>March- May</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Visited school site at least twice weekly.</td>
<td>• Visited school site about 4 times weekly.</td>
<td>• Visited school site about once weekly to have lunch with the students and obtain additional data as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interacted informally with students.</td>
<td>• Continued participant observation.</td>
<td>• Conducted interviews with county office officials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engaged in participant observation; began collecting and analyzing field notes.</td>
<td>• Reassessed semester enrollment for participants/ Obtained participants.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Began researching demographic records and documents pertaining to school site.</td>
<td>• Conducted student interviews.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• As part of on-going process, analyzed data from field notes, and documents.</td>
<td>• Conducted adult interviews.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Continued collecting artifact data.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• As part of on-going process, analyzed data from interviews, field notes, and documents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
continually try to be open-minded about my observations there, while being careful not to build additional perspectives around this preconceived notion. Although I did find the academic program to be less than desirable at this school, noting these preconceptions helped me to always clearly examine the evidence that pointed to this belief. Likewise, it has helped me to consider my prejudices that define an effective, successful teacher. Additionally, this initial bias has helped me to be mindful in considering ethical implications of representing data. I knew that I might face challenges in writing up the data, as I have worked with teachers and administrators in this setting for almost two years now, and have developed bonds that could certainly be jeopardized with the exposure of non-flattering results. However, I knew I had to remain true to the purposes and results of the study, regardless of the challenging outcomes that confronted me in the representation phase.

Ironically, the very purpose of conducting this study, set forth as my desire to bridge a gap between teacher and student, may also be one that impeded its validity. In approaching this study from a White, middle-class female perspective, gender and racial differences have indeed posed difficulties. Students may have found it difficult to trust me and communicate honestly with me. Furthermore, the way in which I interpreted conversations, interactions, and observations were certainly affected by my own positioning. In order to minimize these effects, I continually sought input from not only the participants themselves in the form of member checks, but also from people who look like my participants. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Bailey for his continued input on my concerns and his willingness to visit the research site. Additionally, a young African-American male substitute teacher at the school proved to be an invaluable sounding
board. Having grown up in the school community, he offered an “insider’s perspective” without actually being part of the study itself. Obtaining feedback, reflections, and contributions from these individuals regarding my study, assisted in this area.

**My Role as a Researcher**

In reflecting on myself as a researcher, I determined two distinct perspectives as influential in this role: the way others viewed me, and the way I viewed myself. The way in which others probably saw me as a researcher became very different from my own self-imposed expectations. The following sections address how I presented myself externally as the researcher at this school, and the internal struggle I had in determining my role as a researcher.

**The External Presentation of Myself as a Researcher**

My role as a researcher in the alternative school remained somewhat consistent, as I was rarely asked to perform duties other than that of a researcher. From the beginning of the study, I carefully situated myself with the students. During assemblies, I sat in the “student” section instead of the “teacher” section. At lunchtime I ate what students were served, and I ate with the students, not the teachers. I purposefully sat with many students during the 30-minute lunch break. Most often there was a “Black section” and a “White section” of the cafeteria. Each day I alternated where I began the lunch break, and moved to the other section after 15 minutes or so. During students’ free time, I often played card games with them. I played basketball during P.E. On one occasion I completed a worksheet with them (a word-find) during which time, I too, relied on other students to help me find the hidden words. In order for students to more fully identify with me, I dressed casually, often wearing jeans and clothes that were more typical of
students than adults in this school context. On more than one occasion I was mistaken for a student, which I believed affirmed by positioning with them. During one of these incidents, I narrowly avoided reprimand from the resource officer who thought I had attempted to leave the school grounds before dismissal. All of these instances helped solidify the notion that I wanted to be treated and viewed more as a peer than as an authority figure. I made it clear that I was not comfortable serving as a disciplinarian, as I left that to teachers as I overlooked behaviors that I would not normally do so in a “teacher role.” I tried to distance myself from these authoritative roles as much as possible. I believe that assuming authoritative roles could have compromised the quality of conversations I had with the students, many of who have traditionally not responded positively to authority. For the sake of the research I felt it was important for students to view me less as a teacher and authority figure and more as a confidant or at the least, a neutral party with whom they could speak openly and honestly. Students quickly took to my role and often introduced me to new students as “Ms. Pearson” or “Carol” followed by “she’s not a teacher,” which assured students who guarded their speech by saying things like, “You can say whatever you want in front of her. You won’t get in trouble.” Despite my attempts to disengage from a teacher role, some students probably still viewed me as just another authority figure, based solely on my age and appearance, and my freedom to leave the school when I chose.

My Internal Struggle with the Researcher Role

In some ways, my own ideas about my role as a researcher, and what it meant to be a researcher, became much more clouded than I ever expected. While I was confident in the role I assumed in the school, at one point in the research process, I became much
less sure of how my role fit into the lives of my participants. Their personal stories evoked quite an emotional response from me and I became unsure how to handle the information that I received from the students. I felt like I wanted to do so much more for my participants than I was able to do, and I quickly became frustrated with my inability to truly make what I considered to be a difference in their lives. In the privacy of my own thoughts, I found myself wanting to “fix” things for the students instead of concentrating on my role as a researcher and a scholar to disseminate the information to others in a way that would promote change. As I heard the participants’ stories and shared in their daily lives, I found myself almost paralyzed by their experiences. What they spoke so matter-of-factly about was so far removed from my own experiences, and probably from most other middle-class White teachers. As my relationships with the participants grew stronger, it became increasingly difficult to separate my personal and professional perspectives. However, I knew that eventually this separation was essential if I was going to be able to make theoretical interpretations about my work. One way that I began to work out my emotional connections to my work was simply to write about them, particularly my frustrations. Writing about my inability to “change things” eventually helped me to define my role as a researcher. This portion of a research journal entry illustrates the high degree of emotion that I felt at one particularly low point as I questioned my own contributions as a researcher.

As I am sitting here writing this, I am bawling, crying. I have felt like lately I am in the biggest funk--a writing block. Not really wanting to write much, and just wanting to hang out with the kids, never finding or making enough time to reflect. And now I know why. It is absolutely painful to realize what is going on with
these kids. My silly little research project isn’t going to mean anything to these kids who still have to go home to people who don’t care about them, who can’t care about them, are too high on drugs to notice they are even there, and who get their kids to find them alcohol straight out of rehab! They are still going to have to come to this school where all some of their teachers do is make them abide by silly little rules that don’t have anything to do with real life. I can’t believe how naïve I was in the beginning to think that I could actually help these kids and somehow make a difference in their lives. So what if they get to tell their stories? I can’t fix ANYTHING for them!!! I’m just going to end up disappointing them, too, like everyone else in their lives. I, too, will be moving out of their lives.

When you look at things from their perspective, it IS a bunch of crap. Why is everything so much harder for them than it is for everyone else who has support, money, and the know-how to shut their mouth when it’s going to get them into trouble? Why do we continually punish kids who come from the worst situations and need help the most? It doesn’t make any sense to me. Everyone keeps telling them they aren’t bad kids. So then why are they constantly treated that way? I keep wanting to FIX it. But I can’t. I can’t make it better. I can’t possibly express to these kids how much they really do mean to me because they can’t even absorb all of that.

So that’s where I am right now. It’s a hard place to get out of. I feel so drained and confused and all I want to do is forget about it for a while. This is so much harder than I thought it was going to be. How silly of me to think that I wasn’t going to get completely wrapped up into the emotional aspect of these kids’ lives. I don’t know what
else to do besides let it wash over me for a while and realize that I’m going to have to keep reflecting and feeling, even though it hurts. I’ll have to keep moving in and out of waves of emotion and objectivity. How can any researcher ever pretend to be objective? I can’t imagine having to pretend that I am. (February 26, 2001)

As indicated in the journal entry, because of the intense emotional involvement on my part, I found it very difficult to reflect on, and intellectualize the stories of the participants, as I was involved in the process of interviewing. When I did force myself to journal my reflections during this period, often times I ended up crying at my computer as an emotional release. I never imagined that the participants’ stories, although I expected them to be powerful, would incite such a reaction from me that it would actually affect the research process, and temporarily, my ability to write and reflect about my thoughts.

As is typically the case, time became my healer. The more I was able to distance myself physically from the participants, as I began tapering off observations, the better I became at intellectualizing my emotions. As my interviews and observations became less frequent, I spent considerable time redefining what I thought my role should be as a researcher, and worked to concentrate on the efforts over which I had control, instead of the overwhelming factors over which I had none. Committee members, colleagues, and my own journal writing helped me gain the necessary distance needed for writing about such an emotionally laden topic. The following journal entry describes part of my struggle and my eventual coming to peace with my role as a researcher. In this entry I describe an informal conversation that I had in passing with Dr. Hart, which proved to be a turning point for me in the research process.
I just got back from the office and ran into Dr. Hart. We had a really nice conversation. I shared with her some feelings about what’s going on with the research project and told her how I’m feeling very discouraged as far as how I am not going to bring about great change, and like it or not, these kids are going to find themselves in the same situations over and over again, and schools seem to be perpetuating the problems, not alleviating them. I told her that my biggest hurdle has been addressing my own fears of contributing to some of the very things that perpetuate the problems, like the issue of transience in their lives.

Her advice, like Dr. deMarrais’s was great and it’s time for me to concentrate my efforts. Dr. Hart told me that I have to clearly define my role as a researcher, set out to do that, and make sure that I do not try to do everything. Accept responsibility for what I can do, and don’t take on everybody else’s responsibilities as well. I think that may be part of my problem. I get entirely overwhelmed thinking about what needs to change, and it obviously can’t happen quickly, quickly enough to really benefit these kids, so I tend to shut down. In other words, if I can’t fix it all, I have a hard time looking at any of it. However, I have to remember that “fixing it” is not my responsibility. I am there to show what I see and offer my interpretations as to how things could be done differently. My job is to focus on a smaller scale. I can’t change these participants’ schooling experiences, nor can I change their home lives, but I can think about future students and the good that may come by better informing teacher educators. (March 19, 2001)

Although I continually struggled with the need to intellectualize my work, I found that the more I stepped back from the research and from the personal and emotional aspects of my participants, I was able to better engage in the research on a different and more
intellectual level. I finally reached a place in which I could focus on the positive aspects of this research, without dwelling on the negatives so much that it paralyzed my work by creating a writing block. While a personal and emotional component will probably always drive this line of research for me, I finally shifted the emotional viewpoint to the background and let my intellectual perspective reside at the forefront of the research. I hope this work represents a healthy combination of both intellect and emotion, as I feel both are an essential component to this research.

**Reflexivity**

It was neither possible nor desirable to be objective in this research. I, as the researcher, was apparent in the investigation at every turn. Realizing and reporting my biases were important elements of the study. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) say that reflexivity... implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them. What this represents is a rejection of the idea that social research is, or can be, carried out in some autonomous realm that is insulated from the wider society and from the particular biography of the researcher, in such a way that its findings can be unaffected by social processes and personal characteristics. (p. 16)

Every step of the research reflected my own personal subjectivities and biases. As a researcher I continually made choices about the data that I collected (or did not collect), the ways that I went about doing so, and the final data analysis. Certainly my subjectivities were apparent on a less conscious level as well, as everything filtered through my own experiences and beliefs, perhaps sometimes to the point that I was not even aware of it.
However, despite the interplay of subjectivities and biases in my work, there are steps that I followed to strengthen the credibility of the study. For example, during data collection, I adhered to Wolcott’s (1990) advice to talk little and listen more. I recorded interactions accurately and immediately, staying close to the words and actions of the participants. As I mentioned previously, I began writing early so that I could discover holes in the data that I filled with subsequent data collection. I shared portions of my writing with students, and administrators were given the opportunity to provide me with feedback from their perspectives.

Validity

Throughout the research process, I made efforts to ensure that my results are reliable, dependable, and consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Merriam (1998) suggests several techniques to ensure dependable results: the investigator’s position and biases, long-term observation, triangulation, and an audit trail. In this dissertation, I have addressed my position as a researcher by articulating my theoretical perspective, assumptions, and biases, and my relationship to the students at the alternative school. I conducted observations at the alternative school over a four-month period, which allowed me to repeatedly view students and teachers in the school setting. In this amount of time I was able to become familiar with the daily routines of the students and see them repeatedly in many classroom contexts. The time frame also allowed time for trusting relationships with participants to develop. In the representation of the research, I also described how my own positionality changed throughout the research process as I struggled to deal with unexpected aspects of the study. Triangulation involves using multiple methods of data collection. By using participant observation, multiple interview
sources, and documentary data, I strengthened the reliability and internal validity of the study. These methods provided a sense of credibility to the data provided. Other students, teachers, administrators, and family members often confirmed participants’ experiences and often provided multiple perspectives on a given situation that added a richness to the data. At no time in this research did I discover that misinformation had been given. This fact is not surprising to me because students had no incentive to misrepresent themselves. Many of their delinquent activities were common knowledge and most students reveled in the opportunity to speak openly with someone like myself who posed no threat to their academic or legal well-being. Also, I continually engaged in member checks to ensure that the information I obtained truly reflected what participants expressed. Finally, I have described in detail how data were collected and how I arrived at categories and themes within the data. I carefully looked for competing themes and explanations that did not necessarily support the categories and themes that I have established (Lincoln & Guba; Patton, 1990), and have attempted to report those instances within the data presentation. By examining alternative explanations, I believe the credibility of the research has been enhanced. Another important responsibility to the research was documenting all of the research decisions I made so that readers may draw their own conclusions concerning researcher trustworthiness and credibility.

External validity, or transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was also addressed in this study, although it should be noted that true generalization of results was not the aim of this qualitative study. Rather, my intent was to study the experiences of students within this alternative school in depth. Stake (1978) argues that knowledge of the particular can help people look for patterns and explanations in new and unfamiliar contexts. I hope this
study has provided readers with a better understanding of the experiences of students who are at-risk for delinquency, so that teachers may better address their needs in school. The findings of this study should guide, though not predict, the practices of teachers who interact with students at-risk for delinquency. As Merriam (1998) notes, it was my responsibility to provide adequate descriptions of the research context in order for readers to make informed decisions about how my research aligns with their own situations. In order to do so, I strived to provide rich, thick descriptions of the context and documented, whenever possible, how my own views are imposed upon the research. Using these techniques helped promote my trustworthiness as a researcher. Throughout the research process, I remained committed to being reflective and honest so that I could identify, to the extent that is possible, how I shaped the research, and how the research in turn shaped me.
CHAPTER 4

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH SITE

Harry Wolcott (1994) contends that description is “at the heart of qualitative inquiry” (p. 55). He further explains that, “Firsthand description is not the only basis on which provocative analysis and interpretation may be founded, but whenever it is the basis we claim, it is worthy of our painstakingly thorough and adequately comprehensive efforts to try to get things right, in spite of the impossibility of ever fully succeeding” (p. 56). As Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) emphasize, description is an essential component in representing ethnographic studies. The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the research site in order to set the context for the findings of the study. It is my hope that this chapter will enrich the next, by providing a context of the research site.

I conducted research in an alternative school, serving public school students, located about 35 miles from my university. The school, designated here as Bridges School, is situated in a community I call Montreat (all names and places are pseudonyms). In this chapter, I describe the research site, and do so by assuming the organization of a funnel, moving from the general to the specific. I begin by describing the overall context of the alternative school within the county, and give a general overview of the alternative program. Then, more specifically, I provide a physical description of the school, and look particularly at the members of the alternative school community: the families, students, and administrators of Bridges School. Finally, I focus on the unit of analysis for this research: the seventh grade. Here I describe the seventh
grade curriculum, the seventh grade teachers, and most importantly, the nine individual seventh grade participants of this study.

Context of the Alternative School within the County

Bridges School serves students in grades 6-12 throughout the entire county who have committed infractions at their traditional school and have been asked to leave or have requested to leave in order to avoid mandatory placement at the alternative school.

One county official described the alternative school as a place of transition: “Alternative school is a place where they can get guidance and try to get a transition back to their school and understand what they did wrong.” This county administrator went on to define the goals of the school as follows:

Naturally the goal of any school system is to provide the best education they can for the students of that county. In order for any kid to learn, they have to be in a learning facility. So, therefore, if kids are impeding the progress of other kids then they will be removed for a while. While they are removed, then they also need to do what they need to do as students, and they know what is acceptable and not acceptable and try to help point them toward goals for themselves. (May 18, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Thurman’s office.)

Mr. Thurman of the county finance department described the school as a very expensive one to operate, in particular due to the small class sizes and the operating costs of the facilities such as the cafeteria, media center, and school health clinic. He indicated that the entire building and grounds cost around $2.4 million to operate each year. “You don’t think that when you look at it,” he added. Mr. Thurman, who said his job is to “find
the most cost effective way to run the school,” would like to see the alternative school in a different role in the county. He explained,

   My viewpoint would be to put them [students] in trailers. Take the Montreat School kids out of the Montreat area to get them out of their normalcy. Take those kids and put them in trailers and put them behind Louisburg School and take the Louisburg School kids and put them behind Montreat School or some classrooms or something. I would have teachers coming in and out. That way they could still use the shared cafeteria and share Media centers and cut down on the overhead cost. (May 18, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Thurman’s office.)

When a grant for the alternative education concept in this county was first written in 1994, the state provided more funding than it currently does. Mr. Thurman said, “There was additional funding thrown right up front. They really got you to buy into the program and now it’s like they are cutting back again.” Like all of the public schools in the county, Bridges receives support through local tax dollars.

   General Overview of the Alternative Program

As described by one of the most experienced administrators at the county level, Bridges School first opened its doors as an alternative school six years ago after an administrator in the county “wrote a grant to serve the at-risk children, particularly those who were going to be expelled or needed to be expelled from their regular school.” Bridges School, as Mrs. Yarborough the Academic Advisor of the school said, now serves “what we call chronically disruptive children, who don’t fit into a regular school and need extra help.” Upon its inception, the alternative school housed its first cohort of 20-30 students in an old high school that had been abandoned. Mrs. Yarborough, the only
staff member who has remained at the school since its origin, recalled that first year with a chuckle:

I had an umbrella in my office to protect my computer that I actually had to swipe from the high school because we didn’t have any computers here. We had floods in the building, we had birds in the building and it was boarded up . . . .

Originally we didn’t even have a cafeteria. They shipped lunches over here from other schools. It was awful. Those kids had to survive on a sandwich a day, and that was worse than prison. (May 18, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Yarborough’s office.)

Bridges School houses two programs within the county system. Due to funding from the state lottery creation of Pre-kindergarten classes, one wing of Bridges School is dedicated to this program and houses several classrooms of 4-year-old kindergartners. Although the administrators and support staff serve the whole school, the schools operate as separate entities under one roof. The alternative program is the other program housed at Bridges School. The purpose of this school is to serve students who are no longer afforded services by the regular schools of the county. Students who attend the alternative program have either been suspended or expelled from their regular schools, or have experienced enough problems at school that either of these consequences is likely in the near future. Students can be sent to this school in a number of ways: they may be mandated by the Tribunal Council (a panel of school officials who operate like a judge and jury), they may be mandated by the court system, or parents may send their children there voluntarily.

Many parents try to avoid a mandated sentence by requesting that their child go to
alternative school. In requested placements, students are not mandated to remain at the alternative school for a designated term.

Students can return to the regular school when they pass a review by both an alternative school administrator and a home, or traditional school, administrator. Return to the home school depends upon the discipline record the student maintains at the alternative school.

Physical Description of the School

To better situate the alternative school in its context, I provide a description of the area surrounding Bridges School and a description of the school buildings, which together compose Bridges School.

The Area Surrounding the School

The area surrounding the school is of a low-socio-economic status. Many of the homes and buildings look rather dilapidated and are not well maintained. Immediately surrounding the school there is a Church’s Fried Chicken, two gas stations/convenience stores, and a First-African Baptist Church, as well as many small homes, most of which are in a state of disrepair. It is common to see activity in and around the neighborhood, no matter what time of day. The gas stations/convenience stores seem to attract loiterers. One day I counted 11 African-American men standing outside of one of the gas station/convenience stores at around 10:00 am. Within a short walking distance from the school is the community’s downtown area that falls along one main street. Stores, a country-cooking restaurant, and banks line the main street.

Because Bridges serves students all across the county, few students actually live within this community. Subsequently, I will not go into depth about the community. The
“student community,” however, actually stretches across the county, which presents other challenges, particularly in the area of transportation. Some students rely solely on the transportation provided by the alternative school. Alternative school students are bussed to their home school, and then picked up by another bus that travels to each home school and then to the alternative school. Consequently, some alternative school students spend 2 hours on the bus before arriving at school for their first period, which begins at 8:00. Other students rely on family members to transport them to and from school.

The School Buildings

Looking at the school makes one think that this is a long-forgotten building. Although most of the antiquated building systems operate properly, the buildings are not particularly aesthetically pleasing. Please refer to Appendix C for an exterior map of the school buildings. The school consists of the main school building, which houses both the alternative school and Pre-Kindergarten site, a gym across the street from the main school building, and a storage facility. The storage facility sits to the right side of the main school building and is much smaller in size. Janitorial supplies and equipment and unwanted furniture are kept here. The storage area is directly behind the school’s dumpster, which sits in the parking lot. Parking at the school is often a problem. There are not enough spaces, so cars are often parked three rows deep in the middle of the parking lot. Getting your vehicle out of such spaces can be a challenge. Often parked outside is a DARE (Drug Awareness Resistance Education) vehicle, driven by the school’s resource officer. In front of the school is a sign that reads “Bridges.” It is surrounded by bushes that have been trimmed to the twig. The grass is mowed, but there are few other landscaping efforts.
The main school building. Appendix D presents an interior view of the main school building. To enter the main school building through the main entrance, you must first walk under a covered walkway that extends from the sidewalk to the right side of the main school building. The cover structure is badly rusted on the white beams that support it. There is another covered walkway to the left of the main entrance that leads to the other end of the main school building where the Pre-K department is housed. The building is a one story brick structure that sits on a flat piece of land. It is only a short walk (about 100 steps) from the road. The floor plan of the main school building assumes a rectangular shape. The following discussion describes the school as if walking around this rectangular floor plan.

Upon entering the building from the covered walkway on the right, the main office is to the left. The main office houses the resource officer’s office and the principal’s office, both surrounded by dark wood paneling. The secretary has a desk directly behind the cubical structure that has been erected to position a shelf for the sign-in sheets for visitors, subs, parents, and tardies. The intercom equipment is also located behind the cubical structure. Leaving the office and turning down the hallway, you pass a bulletin board on the right, which at the time of this writing, read “Happy Birthday, Dr. Seuss” and had a picture of the Cat in the Hat. The cafeteria is located on the right and is decorated on this late March day with store-bought posters of Easter Eggs that hang on the walls. On the back cafeteria wall, Pre-K student displays of paper snowmen hand under die-cut letters composing the title, “Snowmen.”

As you leave the cafeteria, you are on one of the alternative school’s hallways. There is a small square bulletin board to the left, which read on this March day:
“Valentine Hearts.” There is a border of a fall collage with squirrels, acorns, and leaves. The sign on top of the valentine hearts reflects the school’s emphasis on discipline:

“Student of the month is voted on by the faculty. Qualifications for the month include: No unexcused absences, no teacher detentions, no discipline referrals.” There is a large freestanding black sign with white letters directly across from this bulletin board. It simply says, “Welcome to Bridges.” Radiators line the hallway until you reach the cafeteria. Students decoratively painted most of the ceiling rafter tiles as an art project several years ago. They add a nice bit of color to an otherwise drab appearance.

Classrooms serving grades 9-12 line the hallway. There is a big, open trashcan on the right side of the hallway, in the small hallway that leads to an outdoor exit. Down on the right is a classroom that has been converted to the “Family Connections” room. Family Connections is a county program that serves community members in family education issues. This program is not related to the alternative program of the school, barring the fact that they share a common hallway in the main school building. I never actually saw anyone in the Family Connections room, but there are several offices in the back that do house members of the Family Connections staff. The room is lined with two long rows of tables and folding chairs. A black and white-striped tablecloth covers each set of tables. In the back of the room are several children’s toys and a baby stroller. There is also a microwave here and a refrigerator.

Upon reaching the end of this hallway, a quick turn to the right takes you outside. The exit doors are very dirty and are in need of painting. A fire alarm hangs on the wall to the right as you exit. There is a red box and some sort of orange hook that appears to be damaged and is hanging from the wall and dangling on the floor. Turning to the left at
the end of the hallway takes you around the backside of the rectangle. There are about five empty classrooms on this hallway that are not being used as classrooms. Windows to the left wall open up into a big courtyard, which houses the satellite dish for the school. The courtyard is a grassy area that is not used, to the best of my knowledge. The back hallway is also lined with lockers, though they are not accessible to the students. Only about one third of the ceiling tiles in this hallway are artistically painted by students; the rest remain their original white color. About 10 tiles are missing from the ceiling above, exposing the duct work above. A section of the floor measuring approximately 12 feet is severely damaged, with pieces of the flooring uprooted, leaving brown and black discolored pieces of the floor. There is one area of the wall that is covered with brown stains from the ceiling.

Turning to the left at the end of this hallway is another hallway where two of the alternative classes meet. This hallway looks very much like the other ones, although Pre-K student work is displayed in the hallway. Right before getting to that end of the hallway is a computer-generated sign that reads, “No alternative school students are allowed beyond this point.” Alternative school students have been directed to walk around the other end of the hallway in order to avoid, as much as possible, contact with the Pre-K students. They are not allowed to walk along the majority of the Pre-K classrooms in order to get to the media center or the bathrooms, which are on opposite sides of the school.

This hallway contains the computer lab, which is always locked, and is to be used by faculty only. In addition, there is an indoor play area for the Pre-K students for use during inclement weather. This hallway leads to the last hallway in the rectangle where
the media center is located. The media center is sectioned into two parts, divided by a wall. In the first section there is the main desk for circulation. Students are allowed to check out books, but I have never seen students doing so. I have only seen them at the computers that have games--there are about six computers configured in a circle at the back wall of the library. The library also houses another room for the copy machine and has another office space occupied by the media specialist/counselor. The other room has several tables and chairs that are not often used by students. The exterior wall of the media center side is comprised of windows that look out into the street. Farther down the hallway from the media center, on the left, is another office where the offices of the assistant principal and academic advisor are located. Both of their offices are on the right hand side of the room. There is another secretary here as well. An old, striped, comfortable couch rests on the opposite wall from the offices, and a chair of matching color is there. Students often sit in these areas when they wait for their parents to pick them up or when they are told they need to leave class due to their behavior. There is a friendly atmosphere in this office. The secretary keeps two bottles of Victoria Secret lotion on her desk that students often use while they are there.

Directly across from this office are the nurse’s office and the faculty ladies’ restroom. The nurse is there most days, sitting at the desk in this room. There is a small cot for the Pre-K students that folds out when a sick child needs to rest. Further down the hallway, on the right, is the vending room with two machines. One is a snack machine for food; it is an antiquated machine made of aluminum and painted white. The other is a Pepsi drink machine with carbonated beverages. It is much newer looking than the other machine. The men’s faculty rest room is also located off of this room. Additionally, there
is a room in the back that has served as a storage area, but there has been talk about turning it into a faculty lounge area since there is no lounge available at this time. Walking farther down the hallway brings you back to the main office on the right, and, when you turn right out of the doors to the outside, leads you to the gym. Walking down the covered walkway and toward the street we pass the dented mailbox on the right, which is leaning on its side.

The gym. The gym is across the street from the main building. This street is not terribly busy, but does have a slow and steady stream of traffic. The gym is a rather unsightly fixture. It is painted a maroon color that appears weathered and the windows have all been boarded up. A paved area of black tar (sometimes called a blacktop) lines the ground to the right side of the gym. Basketball goals once hung here but all that remains now are the rusted posts on which they stood. Several bits of trash can usually be found around the yard. Leading into the gym are three sets of double doors. The sets on the right and left have handles, but are usually kept locked. The third set, in the middle, has no door handle, and is secured by a padlock. The doors open by pulling on the small slit that folds over the lock. The doors are severely rusted and I often find myself pulling my sleeves down over my hands when I have to open the doors. Inside the gym there are bleachers on both sides. It looks as if many objects have been dropped from these bleachers--papers, cards, books, and balls are found on the floor beneath the bleachers. A picture of a wildcat, perhaps a forgotten mascot dating to the school’s earlier days as a traditional high school, is painted at one end of the gym. A set of parallel bars, a saw horse, and a rope that hangs from the ceiling for swinging are found in the far corner of the gym.
Members of the School Community

Students, along with their families, are an integral part of the school community. Likewise, administrators help to define a school community. Each of these members of the school community is addressed below.

Students and Families of Bridges

At the time of this study, the academic advisor of the school reported a middle school enrollment of 51 students. This enrollment included 9 African-American females, 5 White females, 16 African-American males, and 21 White males. As a whole, the students are of lower to lower-middle class socio-economic standing. As in most schools, student families are diverse and represent almost every configuration of families including blended families, stay-at-home mothers, non-related guardians serving as parents, and extended families. Within the families of participants, a high degree of inconsistency was noted. Several of the participants did not consistently live with the same adults. For example, one participant indicated,

I live with my uncle. I just move out with my daddy. Me and him used to fuss a lot. [Living with my uncle] going alright. He don’t come home until about 3 [a.m.] or something. I beat him home usually. I get there before he get there.

(February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

However, when his uncle took another job in a different city, he spent time at both his dad’s house and his aunt’s house. Grandparents of another participant recently assumed custody of him because of his parents’ drug and alcohol dependencies, also echoing this “floating” lifestyle. He indicated,
During the weekdays, probably Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, I’ll stay at my grandparents’ house and then on the other days I’ll stay with someone else. And Monday, they might want to go out to eat so they’ll ask somebody if I can stay the night with them. I’ll stay the night with them and they might have something planned, or I get home too late, or something. Just whatever. . . . so, that’s pretty much where I stay. Oh yea, my best friend’s house. But that’s kind of crazy. When me and my little brother are there, there are 9 kids. Two adults. And other times we just stay at my old next-door neighbor’s house. . . . My home life is good. I’m never in the same place. Never get tired of anyone except my brother. . . . My little sister stays with my mom’s aunt until my mom gets straightened back up because she’s in rehab. And me and my little brother we stay together and my big brother, he works everyday, and he’s got his own house and got his own stuff. . . . Well, my grandfather owns a trailer park and he owns lots of land around there--and everywhere, but he’s got a camper down there and some nights they’ll all get drunk and my grandmother will run us off. Not meaning to, just drinking and drugs and stuff. She’ll run us off and we’ll go to the camper and stay, or we’ll go to a friend’s house, or whatever, you know. On the weekends, most of the time, we’ll go up to my dad’s house, which my dad’s mom and dad are living there because they are old, plus my dad’s in jail.

(February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Other participants experienced disruptions in their living situations as they tried living with one parent and then the next, moved in and out of blended households. One
participant also recently experienced the sudden death of his father, which had an enormous influence on his family dynamics.

The Administrators

The administrators, like the students of Bridges, represented various backgrounds, races, genders, and socio-economic statuses. Each administrator of the school is described as they all had duties and responsibilities directly related to the alternative program of the school.

Mr. Richards. Mr. Richards was in his first complete year as the school’s principal. Hired during the last months of school the previous year, he is a middle-aged White man nearing retirement. Often found wearing khaki pants and a golf or button-down shirt, Mr. Richards has dark hair and glasses, and a medium build. He is from the southern part of the state and speaks with a slight dialect reminiscent of that area. He was a very visible figure in the school, often in the halls or in the cafeteria. He seemed to be comfortable sharing the decision-making responsibilities of the school with his co-workers. Mr. Richards described how he obtained the position as principal of Bridges:

I interviewed for a Superintendent’s job over in East Georgia. And that didn’t work out, and then the only other interview I had, you know, was up here. And that’s how I got hired, and you know, I think probably I really don’t think that the superintendent interviewed anybody else. I think probably based on the experience that I had, ‘cause I’d been a high school principal and then I was working in the alternative education, so . . . I would think that she would probably assume that there wouldn’t be a lot of people standing in line for this job. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)
Mr. Richards described the Alternative School as one that is not truly “alternative,” but rather as a school that merely “accepts problem students.” Despite his newly acquired position as the principal, he did not foresee a long career at the school, because, as he said, “he is tired of fighting with kids.” He explained, “My friends hear the horror stories and all the Mickey Mouse junk we do all the time. But until you’ve walked there...” Mr. Richards described his primary role as principal by saying, “I feel like these students need a great deal of supervision.” Mr. Richards described himself as someone who is rule-oriented and responsible and he believed this to be the way students perceive him as well. Here he related an instance in which he had an opportunity to reflect on how he relates to students:

We had a situation that happened yesterday. I observed in a classroom and one of the activities they were doing was to write a mission statement or a quote for their life. This one young lady was struggling with hers and the teacher was helping several students and I was just about through with the observation, so I said to the student, “You ever heard the saying, ‘I really don’t care how much you know until I know how much you care?’ ” And she had a puzzled look on her face so I explained to her what I thought that meant. I said, “You know you come across to me as a person who cares about other people and who’s a people person and I believe you’d be the kind of person who’d want to help someone if they were having difficulty.” And the girl began to rub her eyes because she was crying and she said, “That’s the only nice thing you’ve ever said to me.” And that embarrassed me and I quickly said, “Well, I’m certainly glad that I said it.”

Probably the students perceive me as being very rule oriented, very hard, you
know straight up and down the line. You know you can only be who you are and honest to goodness, if there was a way to get the atmosphere around here relaxed and us still get the job done, then I think that I could probably do more of that warm fuzzy stuff because I wouldn’t be like that. I just feel really, really responsible for what goes on around here and if the place goes up then I’m gonna take that personally, that I failed, that I didn’t do what I needed to do. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Mrs. Prince. Mrs. Prince was in her first year as assistant principal and handled most of the discipline problems. She is a middle-aged African-American woman with shoulder length hair. She was often seen sporting a pair of glasses around her neck or on her freckled-spotted face. Always speaking slowly and articulately, Mrs. Prince had a way of bringing calm to a storm. She usually dressed professionally and most often carried her black walkie-talky with her, as did the other administrators.

In the 20 years of her career in education, she gained not only administrative experience, but also served in other districts as an English teacher, Consumer Economics Education teacher, Guidance Counselor, and Assistant Director of Magnet Schools. She moved to the Montreat area to be near to her daughter who was living nearby. She described how she obtained her position at the alternative school:

I was working retail and I wasn’t really fulfilled in my career and I turned my name into an agency and one day I got a call from Montreat Schools. They needed a counselor. At that point I was living in another area, I didn’t even know where Montreat was, but they told me. I came over, had an interview, and I got a call back. I’ve been working in Montreat for two years as a counselor, this position for
assistant principal came up, I interviewed for it, and I started working here this current school year. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Prince’s office after school.)

She described her role in this position at the school in the following way:

In an alternative setting I think it’s a very challenging position and a fulfilling position because each student who comes in here often brings a lot of baggage with them. And it’s a challenge to try to determine what is causing the negative behavior, and then to try to discipline that child based on whatever the causes are. I see my role as looking at the population, looking at the students on an individual basis, and trying to determine how best to help them in terms of being successful in the school. Many of them will never be successful--many of them are not acclimated to a regular high school degree. And as far as my role here, I just keep at it trying to come up with ways that these students can focus on success in their life. My honest evaluation is that we are not a true Alternative School, and that comes from my experiences elsewhere, but that’s a whole other story. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Prince’s office after school.)

Mrs. Yarborough. A pleasant White woman, probably in her 50s, Mrs. Yarborough was the school’s Academic Advisor. Casually dressed, and approachable to the students, she wore her half-moon eye glasses around her neck, on the tip of her nose, or tucked in her short, blonde hair. Despite her seemingly easy-going nature, it was easy to see that this friendly loveable character also meant business. My original contact at Bridges, she was involved in numerous activities to address the needs of the students, whether it be conducting entrance interviews, designing and implementing Learn and
Serve grant opportunities, or walking new students to their classes. Mrs. Yarborough was a strong hand, but preferred to work, as she said, “behind the scenes.”

Mrs. Yarborough demonstrated a firm commitment to the students and families of Bridges. Having been at the school upon its inception, Mrs. Yarborough related the challenges of teaching in such a school:

It’s hard; it’s very, very tough to teach in an alternative setting. But it’s the most rewarding challenge you’ll ever have, I promise you, because you see immediate results and you get immediate feedback and you know you have reached somebody, and boy do you feel good about it. Because you know deep inside that something you’ve done has had impact--you really know it. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Yarborough’s office.)

Mrs. Yarborough, though not a teacher, did manage to establish personal relationships with the students of Bridges. She called almost all students by name when she saw them around the school. Here she described at length one such interaction that she described as a “turning point” for one of the students. This selection indicates the strong personal ties that Mrs. Yarborough feels to her students and illustrates her dedication to working individually with students whom she feels need extra attention.

Kyle tries my patience. Mr. Squirrelly. He thinks I’m prejudiced. I stay on him all the time because I want him to do it just right. I want him to look right; I want him to stand up straight. I want him to comb his hair. Either have it braided or you know, if he’s gonna have an afro, get it fro’d good. Instead, it’s just--he hasn’t got his act together. So I’m being the mamma to him. I know his daddy very well--I talk to his daddy all the time--he understands what I’m trying to do with Kyle.
Kyle has been here for 3 years. We sent him back to his old school and it didn’t take 2 weeks before he turned around and came back. They couldn’t handle it. Kyle just flipped around. It took until this year to get him back to where we had him to begin with before we sent him. I was not being successful with Kyle and he was fighting me every step of the way until the students decided they wanted to have a party for Judge Hicks to thank him for all of the nice things that he does for our school. I told Kyle I thought he ought to make a speech. Kyle always wants to be the center of attention. He wants to be the president of everything, but he doesn’t want to do any of the work to do it. He likes to help, he really does. Well, he wrote a speech. He got it cleaned up. He really worked on it. It took him a couple of days to get it done and then I brought him into the library and had him stand up in front and say the speech to me. It was the worst thing you’ve ever heard in your life. He was distracted, he was looking at the ceiling, he was watching everyone while he was talking, and I thought, “Oh, my gosh, what have I done? He’s going to be in public. The newspaper is going to be there. And Kyle is going to be acting awful. Oh my gosh--Kyle is going to embarrass himself.” And I kept working with him and he KEPT at it. And I thought, “Kyle’s trying.” And then I got him back there and we did radio reading. Because he wasn’t pronouncing the words correctly and so I had him repeat it after me. And we did the radio reading, I don’t know if they still call it that, but back in the 1970s when I was doing reading education, that’s what we called it. I would say it and he would repeat it and we went over it several times that way so that he could get the FLOW of the words. He wasn’t getting the flow. And the phrasing. Finally he got
back up there and he ignored all the distractions. He got about half way through his speech and I started crying. I don’t mean just little tears. I mean buckets. Buckets were coming out. I realized that Kyle, for the first time, it didn’t take 10 minutes, but for the first time since I’ve seen him, I actually saw him go from pitiful to almost perfect and give it a really strong, concerted “I’m going to be the best I can be” effort, right in front of me. It just blew me away. Kyle got through the speech at that moment, but as soon as he was finished, he ran back to the media specialist’s office and brought it straight to me. Brought it back, saying, “It’s okay, Mrs. Yarborough.” And I was trying to explain to him, I said, “Kyle, Kyle, you were so good. You were so good.” He didn’t cry. Kyle, I think, made a turning point. When it got time for the program and he had to do the speech in front of everybody, I don’t know if anyone realized how hard Kyle had worked on it. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Yarborough’s office.)

Because of her many responsibilities and her heavy involvement with the students, catching Ms. Yarborough long enough for a conversation was indeed challenging at times.

**Officer Bo.** Officer Bo was the school’s resource officer. He is White, about 5 feet 5 inches tall, has a stocky build, and speaks with a southern accent. He wore eyeglasses, a brown uniform, and a gun to school everyday. He took his supervisory role seriously, often correcting students on their dress and actions. Officer Bo came to this position after he had “been on the streets for about 9½ years working with adults. I decided that I’d give working with kids a try.” In the beginning stages of my data collection, Officer Bo invited me to accompany him and some students on a school field
trip to a state penitentiary. During this tour, the prison official unknowingly led us past the cell of the adolescent boy who shot Officer Bo in the street one night some years earlier, leaving him wounded and hospitalized.

Officer Bo assumed the job at Bridges after completing a special training course for resource officers. He described this training:

The Georgia Public Safety Training Center, they do a course, a school resource officer course. You gotta go down there and take the course, complete it, and then you get to come home and do this. It involves a lot of in-house investigations. We don’t call in an outside investigator unless it’s really severe. So we have to learn how to be an investigator, and how to talk to people, and deal with kids instead of adults. Juvenile law is completely different than adult law, so we have to take juvenile law courses and figure our all of those juvenile rights. We start over pretty much. (January 22, 2001; Interview conducted in Officer Bo’s office after lunch.)

Despite the intensive training that it requires, Officer Bo reported his satisfaction with his position. “I’ve had a good time working with these kids. I really enjoy it.” He described his position at the Alternative School as more favorable than that of the regular school:

Now that I’m here I wouldn’t go to a regular school, I mean, I like the alternative school better than I do a regular school. Over here you got a diverse group. You got spoiled little rich kids who just get in trouble. You got the ones who grow up with trouble. So you get to work with everybody and you feel better because you see how these people are doing it just for attention, and the ones who are brought up in it and they kind of can’t help it. So you get to work with all of them. I like it
here because there is no campus per se, outside parking, the lockers, they don’t have none of that stuff so it’s kind of easier to work, yet it’s more difficult because of the students. (January 22, 2001; Interview conducted in Officer Bo’s office after lunch.)

Officer Bo described his duties as multi-faceted, serving the needs of both the school and the surrounding community. He not only worked within the school, but also within the community as a law enforcer and served at community functions such as parades and festivals. He elaborated on his duties:

Well, we’re considered school resource officers. The middle word being resource. If they need something and they don’t know where to turn to get it, then they come to us. And we can help them, whether it’s for the entire family, or just for them, if they need someone to talk to. That’s a major part of our role . . . . They can come in and talk to me and they don’t have to worry about, well, he’s a policeman, we can’t say nothing to him. That goes better over here then when you’re talking about a school with 1500 kids and you don’t know half of them. (January 22, 2001; Interview conducted in Officer Bo’s office after lunch.)

Officer Bo also described one of his major roles as that as a supervisor. He did so by “walking the halls” and making himself accessible to teachers who may need his assistance. He explained, “If teachers have any problems with students, they’ll see us walking and they can just grab us and talk to them.” Officer Bo also served as a liaison to the Department of Juvenile Justice. He was responsible for forwarding juvenile complaints to the court when students committed severe infractions or when students
exceeded the two-warning limit for minor infractions. He described this process and the communication between the resource officers and the court officials:

They [students] go to court after they get the complaint filled out and we send them in and they do go to court, if they’ve never been on probation or in trouble. Then they do what they call informal adjustment. They have 90 days. No problems, no trouble at the end of 90 days, and they are off. If they have any problems between them 90 days, they fail that informal adjustment and then they get on probation, which starts at about 2 years. They have to report to a probation officer. . . . There is communication between the resource officer and the probation department of juveniles. We can call them anytime we want to and tell them what is going on. Or they will call us sometimes and want to know if their students are here. Or their probationers- are they at school, yes or no? They want to come see them. (January 22, 2001; Interview conducted in Officer Bo’s office after lunch.)

Officer Bo, despite his favorable impressions of his job at the alternative school, left the school before the completion of his first year in order to assume a position in the county as a juvenile detective.

Dr. Ely served as the school’s media specialist. This past year, he also assumed the role of school counselor. He described the two roles in which he served:

I see my role here to try to help the students help themselves in a constructive manner by counseling them in groups, individual, career, vocational counseling, academic counseling, as well as personal counseling. And then I also my role here as a media specialist. There I order the best books that I feel will meet the needs
of students. Twenty different magazines, we have all kinds of audiovisual aides that they can use in the classrooms, whatever we feel we can. Being a media specialist, we try to do that to help the students help themselves. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in Dr. Ely’s office.)

The students themselves initiated most of the counseling sessions. Dr. Ely described how this might transpire on a daily basis:

Tell the truth [they come] just about every day. They say, “I need to talk to you” about different matters--drugs, in the hall. It was really sad on one occasion. A young lady came and said she just wanted to talk because a fella who was on drugs came into the house and shot her brother and all of his intestines and things were on the floor. And she just wanted to talk, you know. It happened some months ago but it just came to her and she just wanted to talk, and we did. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in Dr. Ely’s office.)

He continued,

Sometimes children come in, their mom, dad is not home. Sometimes they don’t have any place to stay some nights. They don’t have food to eat, believe it or not. Some days they get pregnant and they don’t know how to tell their parents about it. Those are some of the cases. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in Dr. Ely’s office.)

Dr. Ely has enjoyed a long career in education, previously having served in the county as an assistant principal, school counselor, and In-School-Suspension Program Coordinator. He is an African-American man with a commanding appearance who most often could be found wearing double-breasted business suits. His slow and deliberate
speech is reminiscent of a sermon delivery. Dr. Ely grew up in the Montreat community and knows many of the families in the area, even though Bridges is no longer a community-based school. Dr. Ely is a prominent figure in the community and has lived and worked in the community for his entire career. He described this as an advantage:

Now there are times when we do get involved with the families and go to the homes and talk with the family and work with them. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I’ve been in this county all of my days. I just went to college and came back home so really, you know about all of the families. If not the younger ones, the older ones. So really, when you have to go to the home and talk to the families, you feel kind of comfortable. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in Dr. Ely’s office.)

Dr. Ely described how working in the alternative school environment has been different than working in other schools in the area, as he communicated his expectations for the students of Bridges School.

When I was a counselor at New High, I was at the high school, and 9 out of 10 of those students are concerned about their academic performance. They are concerned about college, vocational schools. Not too many over here are concerned about academic matters like that. That doesn’t bother them. . . . The main concern of students here is to, I should hope, to get their GED. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in Dr. Ely’s office.)

Dr. Ely assumed a parental-type role. He reiterated that his job as a counselor in the school was to “help students help themselves.” He felt that he provided a place for students to unload their worries:
I feel that they need someone to listen to them. They need someone to try to give them the right way to go. They will have to make their own decisions. What I really feel is that so many of our children don’t live with their mom, neither their dad. Some live with their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and some just live with a friend, so I really feel that they want you to tell them right from wrong. How to try to live and be successful in their lives. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in Dr. Ely’s office.)

Description of the Seventh Grade: A Case Study

As described in chapter 3 of this study, the unit of analysis for this project was the seventh grade at Bridges School. At the time of this study, the seventh grade was divided into two cohorts. Each cohort comprised approximately 10 students, although this number fluctuated considerably as students moved back to their home schools or to the Youth Detention Center, and new students arrived. Students traveled with their cohorts to four 90-minute class periods each day. The classes were Language Arts, Social Studies (World Civilizations), Mathematics, and Exploratory. Science had been taught the previous semester, in place of Social Studies. Exploratory classes rotated every 9 weeks and included Physical Education and Art as well as special topics classes. All participants were enrolled in Physical Education as their exploratory class at the time of the study. This section continues with a description of the seventh grade curriculum, the seventh grade teachers, and the student participants of this study.

The Curriculum

The school adhered to the Georgia Quality Core Curriculum, a curriculum that was designed at the state level and is theoretically implemented in every public school
across the state. However, as Mr. Richards, the principal, noted, academic learning at Bridges is not the only goal of the school. As he said, “I really think you have to find a balance over here, between the academics. Because if that’s all you attempt to do, they’re gonna turn you off quickly.” Mrs. Prince echoed this same notion and emphasized the need for teachers at Bridges to go beyond the stated curriculum. She said,

Of course, we are mandated by the state of Georgia to follow the QCC’s, the Quality Core Curriculum, and that’s all well and good but I think that the teachers here have to utilize that curriculum but they also, in an instructional situation, have to take every teachable moment that they possibly can. Because for one thing, if something is going on in a child’s life, they could care less about an Algebraic equation, so if something comes up in the classroom and it disrupts the class, why not take that as a teachable moment if it is something that you can involve the entire class. These kids are teenagers, they are troubled teens, they are at-risk youth, they are concerned about short-term goals, they are not concerned about a diploma that could take 3 to 4 years. They are concerned about who they are going to take skating on Saturday. . . . So when you talk about instruction, do the Quality Core Curriculum, teach ‘em how to read, teach ‘em how to write, but also teach them in addition to that, social skills, how to get along with your peers, but one of the basic things is teach them how to make decisions. . . . Decision making because they have no clue and what they need to understand is in addition to everything else that we’re trying to teach them is that they have to be responsible when they make decisions. They have to be responsible for the
consequences for their behavior. And that’s what they don’t understand.

(February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Prince’s office.)

In this regard, the administration seemed to encourage teaching from the QCC, but expressed this as a very different expectation than in many other schools, where teachers feel tremendous pressure with an increased emphasis on standardized test scores and issues of accountability.

The Seventh Grade Teachers

In this section I describe each of the seventh grade teachers of Bridges School. In particular, I provide a brief physical description of the teachers as well as insight into their individual teaching styles and methods, which were drawn from my observations of and interviews with them.

Mr. Fisher. Mr. Fisher served as the Social Studies teacher to both cohorts of seventh graders. Standing over 6 feet tall, he looks to be in his 40s, has graying hair and a mustache, and often wore jeans or corduroy pants to school, accompanied by a comfortable shirt. One student noted that Mr. Fisher probably has “no trouble with the ladies because of that leather jacket” that he wore to school.

Mr. Fisher is in his first year of teaching at Bridges and came from a nearby metro-area county that he described as having,

gone to hell in a hand basket. Teachers were being treated like doormats. Which I guess they are being treated like doormats in more places than one. But they were really doormat city over there. Even the parents blamed you for things, the administration blamed you for things, the whole county blamed--everybody blamed the teachers. I thought I would come down here and try this. So this is a
completely different world. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

Despite his discontentment with his prior situation, he said that he found that teaching situation more favorable, as he prefers “teaching real gang members instead of these wanna-bes.”

Mr. Fisher was not quite sure how the students of Bridges perceived him. He explained,

I have no idea. I know a lot of them perceive me as a cool dude because I talk about drugs and sex. I usually wear a black leather jacket and I always wear these big boots and I don’t dress up and I don’t wear a tie because I can get away with wearing clothes like this. I can’t wear a tee-shirt. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

He continued, describing the school population in this way,

Some of the cool kids don’t really belong here. Maybe they got caught with pot or meth[anol] or something stupid like that. A country boy they just locked up. Now the little trouble makers, they do belong here. I don’t know, this one girl I thought really liked me told me in one of our conversations that she wanted to kill me. I never even suspected it, so I don’t understand. I think some of them think I’m cool. Some of them probably think I am the biggest jerk ever born. I really don’t care what they think of me, I just want to do my job, which I am not being allowed to do . . . being allowed to use my style of teaching. I can be your best friend, your worst enemy, the choice is yours. It all comes down on your head. You are responsible, not me. I am just here to teach. You can take it anyway you
like, but you are going to take it. If you don’t like it, then you can transfer to
another room, another country, or another planet, I don’t care. This is my room
and I am in charge here and I am the boss. You do what I say or forget it. I found
it very effective for me, maybe because of my size. (February 14, 2001; Interview
conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

Mr. Fisher referred to not being able to use his style of teaching because he had
recently had conversations with the administrators of Bridges in which they told him he
needed to curb his sarcasm and harsher discipline techniques. Mr. Fisher often conducted
class from a student desk when he addressed the class. When students worked on their
assignments, he usually sat at his teacher’s desk in the back of the room, sometimes with
his feet propped up on the desk. He typically gave the students their workload for the
week on Monday, by providing them with a list of the required assignments. An example
from the field notes describes this process:

Mr. Fisher sits in a student desk on the side of the room and faces the class.

“Everybody stop what you’re doing and get out a sheet of paper so I can give out
the list of what to do. Put chapter 16 at the top.” Bradley walks over to pass out
the textbooks. Mr. Fisher begins, “#1. Look up words to know, p. 419, p. 423, p. 428. Billy, you got a piece of paper to write this on?”

#3: The Economy and the People.

Morris asks, “Is that going to be one essay?”

Fisher answers, “Yes sir.” He continues, “#4, 1-3 on page 418.”

Billy hits his elbow and makes a yelping noise.
Fisher says, “Life is tough; let’s move on.”

He continues, “#5, p. 421, do 2-6. #6, p. 422, do 1-2. #7, p. 423, essay, *The Land* and I know you say we already have that but it’s a different country. Then do #8, *The Economy* and *The People*- 1 1/2 pages and that starts on page 424. #9, do p. 426, 2-6. #10. These are all very short. Page 427, 1-2.

Billy interrupts, “You’re going too fast.”

Mr. Fisher continues, “#11, essay, p. 428 on *Syria*, ¾ of a page.”

Bradley interrupts, “What’s that? Like half?”

Mr. Fisher responds, “Is ¾ a half? You’re in seventh grade and you don’t know what ¾ is?”

Addarian pipes in with actions and words to explain, “Man, it’s about to right here. It’s a little more than half.” [He points to the paper to demonstrate.]

Mr. Fisher continues on, “#12, *Lebanon*, p. 429. 1 page. #13, *Jordan*, p. 430, ½ page. #14, Page 430, ½ page. #14, Page 430, 2-5.” (February 19, 2001; Field Notes).

After the list of work was given, Mr. Fisher presented an overview of the chapter and any formal instruction that was given, was done at this point. The following segment illustrated this instruction. Fisher began the discussion:

“Everybody stop for a moment and turn to page 418. That would be everybody, turn to page 418. And put your pencils down for a second. Notice there is a map here of Southwest Asia. We call this area--do you have a problem, Bradley? We call this area, other than Afghanistan, we call it the Middle East. See that tiny country of Israel? Who are they fighting with? Where you always see them
throwing rocks. [A few seconds pass.] Nobody watches the news?” Addarian raises his hand that he watches the news. “Turn to page 426. It’s right there if you read underneath. He’s the leader of the Palestines.”

Billy asks, “What page?”

Mr. Fisher continues, “We’re back on page 418 now on the map. Pencils are down. What’s the biggest country?”

Bradley answers, “Saudi Arabia.”

Mr. Fisher says, “What’s below it?”

Everyone calls out, “Yemen.”

Mr. Fisher says, “What has suddenly made these people king of the world? Why are they so rich now? If you’ve got a question, you’ve got an arm.”

Billy says, “Mercedes Benz.”

Mr. Fisher responds, “That’s Germany.”

Morris tries, “The iron-ore.”

Billy picks up and adds, “Oil.”

Mr. Fisher continues, “That’s why we’re always over there. Two hundred years ago they were herding goats. Now they own the world. What do you think would be the major religion over there? Don’t you remember, we just studied Africa and they all bow down at the same time.”

Morris says, “Muslim.”

Mr. Fisher says, “Thank goodness someone was paying attention. That’s the area there. Pencils down, I’m still talking.”

Bradley continues to write.
Mr. Fisher says to Bradley, “Why are you getting on my nerves today? You are usually the perfect student. [In a yell] If you’ve got an answer you’ve got a what?”

All students answer, “Arm!”

Mr. Fisher then points out the picture of the Jewish flag and they discuss it. Then he adds, “Then you’ll move on to . . . We just bombed them. Why did we bomb them? There were UN people over there because they were making more bombs and chemical warfare.”

Darius becomes annoyed and says, “Can we just do our work?”

Mr. Fisher flips through the book and says, “We’re not going to go on to the Arabian peninsula, but if you’ll look on page 431, you’ll see. Earth to Morris, please, page 431.”

Darius, now interested, adds, “Look at that thing right here. It’d take up most of Montreat.”

Mr. Fisher concludes, “Now you can pick up your pencil and go back to work.”

(February 19, 2001; Field Notes).

And with that, the students began work and had limited contact with Mr. Fisher for the rest of the week, barring any disciplinary actions or small talk that they elicited during the week.

Mrs. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson is an African-American woman, probably in her late 20s or early 30s, who taught Mathematics and Physical Education. Despite her short stature, she was rather intimidating with her voice when she so chose. She came to the
school as a first-year teacher and has been at the alternative school since its second year of operation. She explained,

Right after graduation in December, my track coach when I was in high school was the director here and he was the only one here along with Mrs. Yarborough, and of course, I needed a job. And he asked if I was interested in the job and I was like, “Sure!” I had no other offers. But actually my major was P. E., but I ended up teaching all of the subjects to middle school. I had them all day then. But it was because of him [the coach] that I was here. (February 1, 2001; Interview in Family Connections room.)

She believes strongly in rewarding students’ good behavior and typically reserved the last 20 minutes of the 90-minute mathematics class time for free time. During the 90-minute class, Ms. Johnson often quickly reviewed a concept, gave a product or assignment of some sort, and then allowed students to have free time for the last 20 minutes, during which time they played cards, slept, or talked with friends. She explained how she sees giving free time as a motivator for students:

With me I don’t send them out [if they don’t do their work]. I just give them the zero, because if I send them out, they’re gonna go to the office, they’re gonna be sent back. Probably nothing is gonna be done, but I just give them a zero, and maybe they’ll realize they need to do that. But one thing I try to do is I give them small amounts of work and once they’ve done that work and it’s checked, it’s corrected, and after that they get free time. So that’s one way I can get them to do their work, is to give them the rewards as far as UNO [a card game] or if we watch movies or whatever. So that’s one way that I can get them to do that and
also we may make trips to the gym. No work, you sit down on the bleachers and
watch everybody else play. So that’s it basically, rewards. (February 1, 2001;
Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mrs. Johnson typically addressed one concept at a time and allowed for
considerable, sometimes repetitive, practice on that concept. Mrs. Johnson sometimes
used a variety of tools in the classroom, including card decks, newspapers, imitation
checkbooks, and magazines, although much of the independent work involved
worksheets. During the approximately 3 months that I observed at the school, Mrs.
Johnson’s mathematics class covered integers. She addressed the following concepts:

- Words associated with positive and negative numbers, such as deposit, add, over,
  plus, withdraw, deduct, minus, and subtract.

- The value of positive numbers and negative numbers on a number line.

- Adding and subtracting positive and negative numbers.

To address these concepts, Mrs. Johnson typically focused on a product (like a
worksheet) that emphasized drilling skills. Students who had not mastered the objective
were not able to generate a product. Mrs. Johnson also occasionally used games to
practice skills. In one such game, she called two students to the front the class to pick two
cards, and the first student who correctly added the numbers was awarded candy. Most of
the products and games in her classroom relied on students using lower-level thinking
skills.

Most of Mrs. Johnson’s instruction occurred in a whole-group setting
(approximately 10 students), when students either read aloud from a worksheet, or
individually, when a student had trouble completing the activity for the day. This
example of field notes shows how Mrs. Johnson individually helped a student who had
trouble adding positive and negative integers. She said,

“What do I do with the signs here? Are your signs different? What are you going
to do?”

Student: “Add.”

Teacher walks over to another student and looks at her work, finding a mistake.
She says, “Look at the board. How many signs do you have? How are you
supposed to rewrite the problems?”

She walks to the board and refers to an earlier example she did with the class. “If
there is one sign, you change it how?”

Student answers correctly, “You turn it into a positive.”

Teacher adds, “What do we write down first? This is what we change: the sign in
the middle.” (January 21, 2001; Field Notes)

With a class size of around only 10 students, individual discussions that were audible to
other students may have helped other students who also experienced problems.

Mrs. Johnson also taught the Physical Education classes at Bridges. Students
usually played basketball or wall ball, or sat on the bleachers. Two times during my
observations, students completed alternate activities before playing basketball. On one
occasion they completed a bowling score sheet, and on another day they completed a
word find that contained words associated with golf. Most often, Mrs. Johnson was
accessible as she usually sat at a student-sized desk at the end of the gym. She
occasionally joined the students in a game of wall ball. Typically, she most often engaged
with the students when she needed to step in as a disciplinarian or when the students initiated conversation with her.

Mrs. Moore. Mrs. Moore taught one section of seventh grade Language Arts and also served as the school’s Fine Arts teacher. Adorning a large-stoned ring on almost every finger, she wore her straight and thick, long, blonde hair down past her shoulders. One day she teased about her ease of selecting an outfit each morning, explaining, “Everything in my closet is black. How hard can it be?” Her voice easily projected across the room. Her classroom was decorated with art work hanging from the ceiling and colorful displays on the walls. Mrs. Moore has taught for 21 years and has been at Bridges School for 5 of those years. She explained how she came to work at Bridges School:

I came here from another county because I wasn’t satisfied there. I was teaching just straight language arts there in a middle school and I just didn’t like it there. And so I had a good friend, who is the County Teacher of the Year, and he said there was an opening over here and I put my resume in and I got the job and I was real excited about it because they said you could try alternative things here. You could try different things. We want somebody who is going to try different things because the old ways do not work. The textbooks, they do not work here, for the most part. So they wanted somebody that was going to do something different. So I wanted to integrate the discipline based arts education (DBAE) into the curriculum as much as possible. So that’s how I got here. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)
Mrs. Moore believes very strongly in student choice. She presented students with several options and they were then allowed to pick which assignments they would complete. Mrs. Moore explained her rationale for providing students with choices:

It works for some of them. Just to give them a choice, even when you are not integrating the arts in it, it’s better than saying, “Okay, let’s do page 19-99 today.” That doesn’t work, so if you can give them a choice it’s much better. And then if you can give them a choice where art is involved, then it’s pretty well usually accepted. But here again, it doesn’t work with all of them. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)

Mrs. Moore listed the assignment choices on the board as a visual reminder to students.

For example, on the board one day she listed these choices for an assignment:

1. Draw 10 action verbs.
2. Make an action verb collage. Get pictures of action verbs from magazines and write the action verb next to the picture.
3. Make two pictures for the action verbs you write in a sentence. (January 31, 2001; Field Notes)

While she believes strongly in the integration of the arts into teaching, Mrs. Moore’s style of teaching was heavily product-oriented, often focusing on the assignments, not the concept that was addressed in the assignment. At no point in my observations did I see her explain the actual content before the product was expected. Rather, it appeared that she believed that going over the product was the essence of the learning experience. For example, students received a worksheet about verbs and the class had a brief discussion about what information had to be mastered in order to complete the worksheet, instead of
Mrs. Moore presenting a larger amount of information about verbs, and then using the worksheet to check for understanding. In this way, the class was product oriented. Most academic learning in her classroom occurred by way of “mini-lessons” that addressed completion of the product, not necessarily understanding of the concept. For example, while students completed a worksheet about antonyms, synonyms, and homonyms, Bradley asked, “What’s a homonym?” Mrs. Moore asks the class, “What’s a homonym, y’all?” Nobody in the class answered. Mrs. Moore says, “A homonym for herd is what? You know, like you saw a h-e-r-d of cattle, but you h-e-a-r-d the speaker yesterday. It sounds the same but it means something different. She continues, “Okay, let’s start on this context handout. I’m going to start at the bottom of the roll [for an oral grade].” (January 21, 2001; Field Notes)

At the conclusion of Mrs. Moore’s class, students often received an oral grade of “100” or “0.” If they provided the definition to the words that they looked up in the dictionary, or they correctly supplied the worksheet answer, she gave them a “100.” If they failed to do so, they were given a “0.” Answers given by individuals in whole-group settings provided the basis for discussion about the content when questions arose from students. Moore typically provided closure to the lesson by wrapping up the important concepts that the assignment addressed. For example, in this lesson, she reviewed:

Any questions about the context handout that we went over? Any questions about the project that is due today? You have 15 minutes to finish. Antonyms--opposite; synonyms--words that mean the same; homonyms--words that are written differently but mean the same. (January 21, 2001; Field Notes)
Mrs. Moore typically ended her class by signing all of the students’ agendas, or homework notebooks, on the way out of class. This was a school-wide procedure in which all of the teachers were supposed to initial the homework/no homework section, and the parents were supposed to initial it in the evening. Mrs. Moore was the only teacher whom I observed following this procedure. Perhaps this procedure addressed Mrs. Moore’s belief that part of her role as a teacher was to maintain structure for her students. She also described her role as that of a facilitator, as one who helps students to accomplish their goals:

Well, anywhere, a teacher’s role would be to do my job to help kids. That’s why I’m here. I’m here for success. Even if it’s just a small success. I’m here for you to at least accomplish something. And I’m going to do the best to my ability to see that you accomplish it, whether you want to or not. Because I know that the best teachers I had, I didn’t always like at the time. But then later on, thank God, they did what they did to make me get what I got. And so I have to look at it like that. I’m here to be a role model for these kids. I’m here to teach these kids and that’s what I’m trying to do. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)

Mrs. Moore believed that part of her role as teacher may make her unpopular, but she was willing to sacrifice that in order to give the students what they need from her. She elaborated:

They need consistency. They need for me to be here everyday. They need to know that when I say that we are going to have homework, we’re gonna have homework. They need consistent rules. And they need rules and they need to be
reminded of the rules. They want to be reminded of them, even though they say they don’t. The teachers that are slack, I know exactly who they are, and I know why they are slack. And the kids don’t want that. Like I said, they may not like you, but I’m not here to be their friend. I’m their teacher so they are going to have to move along with the program. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)

Mrs. Moore believed that she reached some of her students despite some of the difficulties they experienced in their home situations and their involvement in the juvenile justice system. However, she did not equate reaching students to them liking her. She explained:

A lot of them hate me. A lot of them don’t like me. A lot of them think I’m mean. I’m strict. I give too much work. Well, today, Keem in first period, I don’t know if you were in here or not, but anyway, he was like, “Do we gotta do all this work?” I said, “No, you don’t got to do anything. But that’s what school is for, that’s why you’re here.” He’s frustrated with the system and I happened to be the one that is standing there trying to get him to do the work and so at the present time it’s me. But that’s my job. That’s what I’m supposed to do, so it’s okay if they hate me. That’s okay. If I have to be the target, that’s okay, because at least I’m getting something done, or I’m trying to get something done. Because I mean, you’re probably not going to save them all. But you’re going to try and save one or two or three or how many ever you can. And at least you’re trying, and I can sleep at night. And I feel that I’m pretty fair. And I think they think I’m pretty fair. Like I say, I know they think I give too much work, and that’s okay, because
that's my job, and I probably do give too much work, but at least it's not little enough so that they are going to be sitting in here for over 10 minutes at a time with nothing to do, because that’s when the problems start. And as long as you keep the work coming, and you keep a handle on it, you pretty much don’t have time for problems. That’s the way I see it. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)

Mr. Morton. Mr. Morton also taught one section of seventh grade Language Arts. He is a White male, probably in his 50s, and has returned to teaching after extended careers in the ministry and counseling. This was his first year of teaching since the 1970s and he brought much experience in working with incarcerated and troubled youth. He began working at Bridges as a full-time substitute teacher in January as an “economic necessity” after he relocated to the state in order to marry his second wife. Mr. Morton, labeled by some of the students as “the penguin,” believed that the students view him as “a hard-ass, an SOB right now. I’m very intolerant, they think. . . .” Still getting into the swing of school at the time of this study, he believed that by the end of the year the students would describe him as:

. . . somebody who is rough, you don’t want to mess with me--don’t try and cut his class, because he’ll figure it out and turn you in. And he was rough in the beginning; man, we thought he was going to be nasty, but you know, as we look back, we learned something from him. And we had fun in there, but he made us work hard. He makes us work harder than any other teacher. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)
Mr. Morton is a highly professional teacher who presented new ideas and perspectives to the school’s faculty, which were often embedded within his backgrounds of counseling and ministry. From these perspectives, he often looked at the education of the child in a holistic fashion. For example, he explained,

There is a social-emotional development that many of our kids without fathers in the home, with abusive situation, economic depravity, that these kids have never learned. So at a recent faculty meeting when we talked about the kinds of kids that we are serving, I brought up the issue of EQ (Emotional Quotient) education and was given the responsibility to run with it and gather data and I’m in contact right now with an organization that does public school education on EQ--emotional/social education to help the kids handle delayed gratification. . . . things that everybody needs to make it in the world. . . . And while I’m teaching U.S. History, and the Algebra teacher is teaching Algebraic equations, some of these kids could care less, but they want to know how to cry, how to have a friend, how to trust a male if they are a female who has been abused, how do I get over this stuff? How am I going to get up in the morning and get myself to a job at 6:30 when there is no alarm clock and nobody cares? (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mr. Morton indicated that effective instruction is like “a good teaching sermon, or a good message. It takes content and it opens the heart and the mind of a person . . . .” Mr. Morton also believed strongly that he, like other teachers, brought certain gifts that are to be shared with the students of his classroom. He said,
Another thing I can do individually, just a personal calling I have, is to love people where they are. Love is a much-misused word. Love is, according to Carl Rogers, unconditional warmth and empathy. And when I get even one of the troublesome kids that in a classroom I would just as soon throw up against the brick wall and bust the brick and not care about the head, when there is all this synergism happening in the classroom, but when I can get them individually, or in small groups, let me care. And let them know that I am safe. One young girl gave me her journal 2 days ago, which is full of hurt, and I asked permission to share it with my fiancée. And I always do that with female clients, or with kids, so that they know there is a female involved in reading it and there is no danger in misappropriation of boundaries on the kids’ part. But I haven’t written back and she asked me yesterday if I’d read it and she saw a tear in my eye. I said, “Yea, I did, but I haven’t been able to write back. Just be patient.” But I can show that kid that there is a man around who cares, who has very good boundaries, is going to be safe, and it only takes one relationship like that in a kid’s life, maybe, to make a change for them. So I see a lot, both in terms of the curriculum, and being able to help kids develop not only intellectually, but every other way. Personally, what I can do with kids. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

However, in the classroom students often challenged Mr. Morton to establish an atmosphere in which learning could occur. There were often interruptions as students expressed disinterest and disengagement from the subject matter. Behavior management remained the focus of many lessons. The following example of a lesson on sentence
fragments is taken from field notes as an example of a typical lesson. We begin as Mr. Morton was correcting student behavior:

One of the things we did with the pretest was to see how well you can write a sentence. If you can’t write correctly, you probably won’t be able to fill out a job application. You will find that to get ahead in high school and to get into college, (lots of mumbling) Charlie, be quiet. Don’t interrupt me.”

Morton goes back to talking. “What did the students have to do to even be considered for the awards earlier this week?” [He is referring to the school’s annual awards ceremony.]

Susan volunteers the answer of “write an essay.”

Mr. Morton agrees, “They had to write an essay. Don’t talk back to students, Susan. Don’t interrupt each other. I am trying to do some things that will help you get back into the regular school and get to high school so you can take a test to graduate.”

Charlie: “None of us are in high school”

Mr. Morton: “But you are getting close.”

If you can learn how to write in here then you will be more successful in regular school.”

Looking at a page in book he says, “this will help you learn how to write more clearly. Doesn’t string together too many words at once--sentence fragments, what does that mean?” Two students raise their hand.

Charlie: “I forgot.”

Peter: “What page are we on?”
Sean comes back in and is denied entrance to class. He was dismissed earlier because of inappropriate behavior.

Mr. Morton tells him, “You had your chance.”

Susan answers the teacher’s earlier question. “A sentence fragment is like a sentence.”

Mr. Morton asks, “What would make it a true sentence? Three things you can look out for: sentence fragments, run on sentences, and the stringy sentence. There are two things that need to be in a sentence for it to make sense.”

He writes on board “Subject/Predicate (verb)”

Campbell asks Morton, “Can I get the book back please?”

Mr. Morton, “Are you going to use it appropriately?”

Campbell nods his head yes, so Morton returns book.

“Charlie, stop. Listen. What is a sentence fragment--a part of a sentence? What are you supposed to have? Please don’t speak out until I recognize you. It’s supposed to have both of these. If it has a verb and not a subject, then that is a sentence fragment.”

Mr. Morton steps in to call down a student for continuing to talk, “Charlie.”

Charlie: “He’s talking about my dad.”

Mr. Morton says, “You did not raise your hand and you were not recognized.”

Campbell throws his book on the floor and asks, “Can I go out there with the principal? When there is no response Campbell asks for his book back, but the teacher refuses. Campbell goes and gets another book from the shelf.

Campbell, with the new book in his hand, asks, “What page?” “I can’t hear,
can you speak up?”

Mr. Morton is obviously frustrated at this point and has decided to take a new approach. He gets a clip board from his desk and starts writing. The class gets very quiet. We can even hear the film from the next classroom.

Mr. Richards, the principal, comes in.

Student says, “Mr. Richards, I need to go to the bathroom and he won’t let me.”

Mr. Morton, in defense, says, “I told you to go before class.”

Mr. Richards: “You’ve only been in class for 20 minutes.”

Mr. Richards walks over to Campbell. “You’ll need to stay after school and clean up that desk that you’ve been writing on.”

After a brief discussion with Campbell about writing on the desk, the principal leaves and class resumes.

Mr. Morton asks, “A run on sentence is what? Jeremy, don’t call out.”

Jeremy says, “Well, I’m sorry, I gotta go to the bathroom.”

Mr. Morton reads a sentence and asks, “Is that a sentence or a sentence fragment?” He reads the next example: “Look at the size of that rock. In this case it is a sentence, because it has a subject and predicate.” Mr. Morton talks about implied subjects.

Charlie and Peter are looking at each other not sure of where the class is in the textbook. Jeremy has his head on a desk. Another student raises his hand.

Mr. Morton goes on, “In this case, the subject is she.” That is a complete sentence. They say different things but they are complete sentences. Charlie
you need to sit in your seat. [Charlie has moved up front.]

Charlie says, “He’s bothering me.”

Mr. Morton responds, “You mean if I let you sit there you will actually do what you are supposed to?”

Charlie reassures him, “Actually, yes.”

Mr. Morton goes on reading the examples. “Don’t make those sounds.” [A student is making duck calls.]

Mr. Morton asks for student participation and Susan answers the two example questions. He asks the class, “Do you think if I gave you a worksheet on that, that you could do it?” (January 19, 2001; Field Notes)

Curriculum, in this classroom, often seemed to take a backseat to discipline. Mr. Morton often spent the majority of the class period attempting to gain the attention of the students so that he could proceed with the lesson.

All of the seventh grade teachers allowed students to watch a movie most Fridays. Although this was described as a “reward,” I did not observe teachers denying students the opportunity to watch the movie unless their behavior during the movie was such that they were sent out of the room. While students enjoyed the opportunity to not have to complete work, they also expressed that it gets “boring” to watch movies all day on movie day. For example, one day in Mr. Morton’s class, the students expressed their desire to do something different with their perceived “free time.” It was the fourth period of the day, their fourth movie, and they were ready to do something else. Mr. Morton agreed to let them play games. The conversation sounded like this:
Mr. Morton: “I’m observing from your behavior that you want to turn the movie off. Is that true?”

Gregory: “We’d rather play games.”

Mr. Morton: “Then why didn’t you say that?”

Gregory: “I did say that at the beginning of class.”

Mr. Morton: “Is that when everyone was talking at once? We can play games, that’s fine with me. The point of free time is to do something constructive, whether it is watching a movie that you can learn something from, it’s a best selling Tom Clancy book, or playing a game. I’m allowing you to do that. Now, before we start, think about how it makes you feel when someone cheats with you. Remember the coach we talked about with character education? How about fairness?”

The students begin playing checkers and chess while other students sleep.

(February 19, 2001; Field Notes)

The Student Participants

As discussed in chapter 3, participants were selected from the seventh grade class of Bridges. The student participants are the heart of this study. It is for them, and because of them, that this research was made possible. Each participant shared his stories and experiences and brought an entirely new, personalized level to the research. In one journal entry I wrote of the participants,

The students’ faces are with me all the time. Every time I speak with anyone at length about my study, I am overwhelmed with the personal element that comes into play. I see Morris’s baby face and I think about our conversations in the
hallway. He has such an interest in college life, but all I can think of is that he’s seen more in his own living room than I ever saw in college. What is he going to be like in college when he does have total freedom from authority figures from home? Hasn’t he really already experienced that with two drug-addicted parents? I think about how he always asks, “When are you coming back?” I always try to let him know when I will return, and why I won’t be there the next day if I can’t.

When I talk about my research, it’s not “young adolescent males who are at-risk for delinquency” anymore. It’s about Billy, Martin, Jeremy, and Addarian, and all of the other guys who I’ve spent the last few months with here. Now it’s imperative that I find some sort of answers to all of these questions. Just writing a dissertation is no longer the issue. If I don’t help them in some way, I have failed. It is not enough for me to say, “Well, there is always more you can do. You have to stop it somewhere,” even though my head knows that is true. Somehow that does not seem fair to my participants, my friends. When you put faces on those statistics and hear the stories match up to the sterile literature that you’ve read for so long, it becomes a whole other ball game. (March 3, 2001; Research Journal)

With that said, I now introduce each participant of the study. The purpose of the following portraits is to provide a flavor of the students who informed this study. These portraits are not intended, nor is it possible, to capture the students’ many dimensions through such a brief description. However, I hope that these descriptions provide a glimpse of their lives and personalities as I attempt to unfold their varied experiences in the coming chapter.
**Addarian.** Addarian is a large, fit, broad-shouldered African-American male. His hair was shaved fairly close to his head and he often dressed in long-sleeved tee shirts and jeans. He speaks in a Black vernacular and has a rather low tone of voice. Addarian often kept a rhythm on his desk by beating his pencil or fist against the desk. Teachers often commented on this behavior as unacceptable. Addarian got into trouble at school for talking at inappropriate times, like the time he “talked back to a teacher when the teacher called me stupid” and the time that at the alternative school that he, . . . got in trouble ‘cause of a girl. We went on this field trip to the courthouse and she just hit me and ran. I told her I’d punch her on the mouth and she said, “Shut up, you little ugly bastard,” and then I came back to school and the next thing I know, I’m suspended for a day [for making a threat].

(February 12, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Addarian lived with his mother and stepfather. He said of his alternative school placement that “the reason I’m over here is because of my mom.” Because of problems with at least one teacher at his traditional school, Addarian’s mother chose to send him to the alternative school, a common strategy of many parents. Through voluntary placement, students can avoid the tribunal hearing in which the school board decides upon consequences such as a court appearance, community service, and a longer stay at the alternative school. By being placed at the alternative school on a voluntary basis, he will be able to return to the regular school as soon as the alternative school administrators and home school administrators deem it to be appropriate. Addarian was anxious to return to his home school, as he said of the alternative school that “the education ain’t right over here. ‘Cause I need to get the best education you can.”
He is a good-natured, entertaining young man who was quick to kid and joke. I will always remember Addarian as the one who made my heart melt one day as I was leaving the school after a visit near the end of the school year. He asked when I would be returning and then gave me a hug.

Billy. Billy is a pale-skinned White male of medium-build who does not respond well to conformity. His shoulder-length hair was dyed dark black and his fingernails were often painted pink or green, as black fingernail polish was added to the list of dress-code violations. Billy believed that clothes are how “people express themselves” and added, “I don’t think it’s right that we have to wear what they say we have to wear.” Billy wore baggy pants on his hips that he said “are more comfortable.” They flared out at the bottom, and were often accompanied by a tee shirt, perhaps his favorite one a bright orange. His ears have double piercing, though he is thinking about getting more. Billy is a lovable character who immediately sought attention from newcomers. Billy often wanted to be individually recognized, as demonstrated by his constant questioning of my study, “Do we have to use fake names?” “Have you written anything about me yet?” He was not afraid to speak out, ask questions, or let you know how he felt. When done in excess, however, this behavior often got Billy in trouble with his teachers. Despite his seemingly happy-go-lucky nature, Billy took medication for depression, a condition he continued to struggle with at the conclusion of this project. Although Billy only alluded to it in conversation, his friends and teachers reported to me that he attempted suicide several times, and, during this study, he went to the hospital for a drug-overdose. Billy was the only participant who lived with both of his biological parents, and he described his family
life as plagued with problems. He attributed some of his depression to his relationships with his parents, noting,

Sometimes I think about my past and like how my daddy used to beat me up all the time and my mom and dad used to yell at me and be alcoholics and all that. I just think about that and then I get more depressed and then I start thinking about my dad and how he was a real bad drug addict. . . . I’m not sure that my dad’s not a druggie anymore. . . . Like how he messed up my life so bad then and I think there’s just no point anymore. . . . I mean, sometimes I just want to die. Like last night I was like, really going to go off and do something really stupid. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

In a subsequent interview, Billy talked about how he feels he has missed out on having a normal relationship with his father, saying,

Like, when my dad was like really bad hooked on crack, like, I mean, we’d get into these fights and I think he was never a father and I always thought like a father figure was something good. I hated going to school and people would be like, “Oh, man, you’re so lucky you don’t get grounded, you get whatever you want” and stuff like that. And I mean, I might not get grounded, but it sucks because you don’t have a dad, like a real father figure. . . . I mean, if he had just done stuff and took me places and stuff like that. I mean, actually talked to me and stuff like that. The most he ever says to me now is. . . “Turn that shit down!” (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Of his alternative school placement, Billy said, “They said they were sending me here but my mom requested it because I might have to stay longer if they sentenced me.”
He had repeated problems in school, including disruption of a public school because of fighting with students and arguing with teachers, as well as counts of truancy. Although he was never caught, Billy said he also used illegal substances in the school rafters of his traditional school. During this course of this study, he participated in a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program twice weekly. Most of his disciplinary infractions at the alternative school involved smoking cigarettes and violating the dress code. Billy said that his way of coping with things is to “take my problems out on something or somebody else or start abusing myself. But no, I don’t think I should turn to anybody with my problems. I think it’s my problems and I should deal with it myself.” He said,

> Used to, when I’d get mad, I’d like, cut myself and then like, I don’t know.
> Everybody would panic about that, so now I’m going to like eight counselors a week. I make them all mad, though. ‘Cause like they’ll sit there and everybody likes to think that they know what everything is, and you’re just cutting yourself to get attention. That’s so stupid. I hate it when they do that, but I just sit there and be quiet and let them figure out the problem on their own. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Despite his trouble in school and at home, Billy described himself, saying, “I can be a good kid, it’s just that I make bad choices sometimes.”

Bradley. Bradley is an overweight, White, fair-skinned male with light, straight hair cut close to his head. Bradley was often the target of cruel pranks by other students. His grandmother illustrated with an example of bus behavior:

> Well, he had went to sleep on the bus one day and when he woke up they had stuck gum in his hair and all over him. They kind of just tortured him. They
would hit him upside the head when they would get off the bus. They were mean.

(March 14, 2001; Interview conducted at Bradley’s grandmother’s home.)

Throughout his school career, Bradley has had a history of not getting along with his peers. His mother explained,

It just kind-of progressively got worse. He has always had trouble in school. Just really not getting along with the other kids. He never has gotten along with other kids. I mean, he don’t have many friends. He has got one friend, and he is as mean as he is. He can’t keep friends. He can’t get along with them. . . . Even in school Bradley couldn’t play sports. He did, but they kicked him off the team because he couldn’t get along with the team. It was football and he took his helmet off and hurled it at some little boy and knocked him upside the head with it. He got throwed off the team. He just gets mad and he has a real short fuse.

(March 14, 2001; Interview conducted at Bradley’s grandmother’s home.)

Bradley was sent to the alternative school for a year on a sexual harassment charge after he inappropriately “put lotion in his hand” and gestured to a girl, telling her to perform a sexual act on him. In addition to the school assignment, Bradley was sentenced by the juvenile court to serve 2 years of probation, attend anger management classes, see a psychiatrist, and complete community service hours. Bradley experienced additional trouble at the alternative school for failing to get along with his peers and for his expressions of anger. He explained,

I was up in the gym with a kid named Carlton and he got on my nerves and I pushed him off the bleachers. We were like at the bottom of them and he landed
on his feet, but they suspended me for 5 days for that. Then 2 days last semester for pushing Martin. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

After the completion of nearly 1 year at the alternative school, Bradley’s behavior had improved tremendously. Once the class clown, he grew into a responsible student and said that he “don’t never do anything anymore” because “I want to go to school and I don’t want people to think I am bad all my life, because I’m not going to be.” He attributed his new-found success in school to my behavior and my grades, not talking back to the teachers, and not being disrespectful. That is what happened, because I learned it the hard way. Now I know how to do it the easy way. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

One teacher demonstrated how much Bradley changed in the course of the year, and talked about his success:

If you ask all the teachers how Bradley has done since the first day he got here to now, he has changed so much and I even put on his progress report that it’s just like having another teacher in the classroom. I mean, he has changed so much. Bradley, when he first got here, he would whine and it seemed like everything that went on with another student, Bradley was involved. And now he comes in and gets his work done. I can give Bradley papers, even though we’re not supposed to do it, papers to go run off. That is probably the only student that I can send somewhere and know that it’s gonna get done right and expect him to come back on time. When he’s supposed to come back. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)
Bradley relies on Zoloft to assist him with his mood control. He said of the medication, “They said it was for depression. . . . It just makes me feel better.” Bradley feels he is now better able to curb his anger, though he does not see his anger management classes as responsible, noting,

I go to anger management, but that don’t do nothing. They don’t teach anything that I don’t already know. It was a court order. . . . I just keep it to myself. Just forget about it. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Bradley thrived on positive reinforcement, though he made a point to emphasize that he was unaffected by praise, as he continually said after such praise, “I don’t care.” However, he was often found cleaning or running errands for teachers as a way to help out and obtain recognition for his efforts. In our interview sessions, Bradley often neatly wound the cord of the tape recorder and microphone and neatly labeled his audiotape.

Since his father’s death over a year ago, Bradley lives with his mother and older sister and spends considerable time with his grandparents who assist in supervising and taking care of him. His grandfather picked him up from school everyday so that he could avoid the uncomfortable peer interactions on the bus.

Darius. Darius is a large, muscular African-American male who is very dark-skinned. He has a brilliant smile that he often flashes as he tilts back his rather squarely shaped face. Darius is a person of very few words and often preferred sleeping in class to personal interaction. Darius has a narcoleptic sleep condition that is documented in his Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), although some teachers believed that he used this as an excuse to get out of doing his work. One teacher noted,

. . . it started out excellent, he came in and got all of his work done before,
actually in the past probably past 2 weeks he’s tried to do nothing but sleep. So I think we’re gonna have to go back, because I wouldn’t let him sleep at all. And I kind of thought about well, that’s noted in his permanent folder and I said, “Okay, I’ll let you sleep a little.” And I think he’s just taken it too far. So we’re gonna have to go back to the point of not sleeping at all.

(February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in teacher’s classroom.)

Darius, like many of his teenage friends, is particularly interested in female relations, and sees this as a motivator to return to regular school, in addition to the opportunity to play sports. “That’s why I want to go back to my old school--cause there’s a lot of girls. Play basketball and football.”

Darius was placed at the alternative school on more than one occasion. He told of one traditional school experience:

Well, I used to get in trouble, I just sleep in class and don’t do no work, ‘cuss out the teachers, fight all the time. One day on the bus me and this girl had got into it. She socked me. I thought she was playin’ until she had punched my nose and my nose started bleedin’. So I punched her back in the nose and I broke it. So they sent me off [to the Youth Detention Center] and then I came back [to the alternative school]. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

The court later sentenced him to return to the alternative school when he was charged with making terrorist threats. He explained,

I threatened a boy in front of the resource officer. He was all the way across the gym and the deputy was sittin’ there talking to me and I threatened him. I
threatened a boy in front of me. He officer, he wrote me up for it and I went to court for it. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Darius got into trouble both at school and in the community for fighting. At home, he often resorted to violence in order to defend his little brother for whom he says he “would go to jail.” Darius described this instance in which he got involved in a fight because his brother lost a bet about which kind of car would drive down the road next:

I got to fightin’ on the street. I hit a boy’s head with a brick. I was getting beat up and I don’t like to get beat up. He was trying to jump on my little brother. He jumped him and I went to hit him, and my brother, he got out of it and me and him just went one on one. He slammed me on the ground, he was bigger than me, and he slammed me on the ground and started hittin’ me. I saw that brick and I just hit him over the head with it. A lot of blood started coming out then and I got scared. . . . I thought he was going to pass out, all that blood coming out of his head. The police came, but they didn’t give me nothin’ but probation. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Darius had several run-ins with the police, often for fighting. He described one fight that he got into because one of his peers disrespected his father. He explained,

He called my Dad a d-i-c-k sucker and he had stole this man’s mattress off the front porch. I took the mattress from him and took the mattress up to the man’s house. He said, boy, your dad can go suck one. After that we got off the bus the next day and I hit him but I don’t know where. He walked up to a pay phone and called 911. The cops come and said next time you go into a holding cell until 6:00. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)
At the time of the research, Darius had just moved in with his uncle. He said, “I live with my uncle. I just move out with my daddy. Me and him used to fuss a lot.” With his uncle, Darius had a lot of time that was unsupervised as he said that his uncle “don’t come home until about 3 something [a.m.]. I beat him home usually.” Darius said that he knew his family members care about him because “Every time I get in trouble, they want to beat me up. Fuss me out and tell me what’s right.” Upon my first visit following several days away from the field in April, I learned from the other students that Darius had been transferred to the Youth Detention Center because of a probation violation.

Jeremy. Jeremy is a small-framed, lean, White male with dark hair that he parted in the middle. He had high energy and often demonstrated this in class with a lot of movement and interactions with others. Jeremy often had a smile on his face, but had a quick temper when he was challenged. Jeremy explained why he was sent to the alternative school: “I come to alternative school because, with terrorist threat. This boy said he was gonna eat me and I said I’d stab him with a pair of scissors.” Jeremy had a long history of fighting with peers, and described one such event at his traditional school:

I got into a fight with a girl. We was sitting there and we had this little round thing in Science. And we had to run up there and run back, and like, show how the arteries flow and stuff. And we had to write something on the board. And I wasn’t going fast enough so she thought she was gonna holler at me and then she got all up in my face and I pushed her and she pushed me back. And I hit her in the mouth. And then she went to hit me in the face and I turned like that, and she hit me in the shoulder. We got suspended. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)
Jeremy explained that he felt as if he got into trouble mainly when he was provoked, but he did not initiate these instances. For example, he told about another example when he felt as if he were acting in defense:

I threw a milk in the lunchroom. Boy made me mad and I had a milk in my hand. And I was fixing to get my lunch and he said something about my mama. I threw it and hit him in the chest. I did the same thing in third and fourth grade. I smashed it against his chest though. He kept pushing me in the lunch line. I just don’t like people talking about me. If they don’t talk about me, I won’t talk about them. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

This pattern of fighting continued at the alternative school, where he was suspended for fighting, and at home, where he had trouble getting along with siblings and parents. One day during our interview, Jeremy described an argument he had with his mother and brothers earlier that morning:

My mom and I, we get in arguments. [About] my brothers messin’ up my room when I’m not there. And I holler at them ‘cause I have my socks and my brothers, they just don’t care about their socks. They walk outside in them and all kinds of stuff. And they tried to put mine on this morning and I hollered at ‘em. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

Jeremy lives with his mother, step-father, two brothers, two sisters, and his 2-month-old niece. Sometimes these seemingly insignificant arguments with his family members escalated to the point of violence. Jeremy described another argument in which he was charged with unruly conduct:
I got sent to the YDC [Youth Detention Center] for kicking my mama’s coffee table in. I didn’t want to go to school one morning. And so I kicked the coffee table in and then walked to school. I got halfway up there and Teddy Dillard come picked me up, the Resource Officer, I mean the Probation Officer--some kind of officer. He picked me up and took me to the jailhouse. I had to sit in the holding cell. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

Jeremy’s parents were not the only authority figures with which he had difficulty. During one of his Boot Camp assignments, he said the officers,

Got in my face and I called ‘em every name in the book. And I ran. And they told me if I didn’t come back, they was gonna fail me that weekend and I had to go back in front of the Judge. So I did what I was supposed to do and I passed that weekend. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

One of Jeremy’s teachers expressed concern for the amount of anger that he seemed to display. She commented,

I think he has more--I’m not a psychologist or a psychiatrist or anything, but I think he has more of an anger management problem. If there is something said to him that he does not like, he’s gonna let you know whether it’s with curse words or not. If something is done to Jeremy he’s not gonna let it go. If he wants to fight, there’s gonna be a fight. He’s just out there and just angry, just angry. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Keem. A light-skinned African-American male of medium-build, Keem lived with his mother. In peer interactions, he often assumed the role of follower. Keem’s speech was often very difficult for me to understand. He rarely spoke in sentences longer
than four or five words. He rarely initiated conversation, but more often responded to others. Keem said that he was sent to the alternative school for “sleeping in class,” “talking back to teacher,” and “arguing with peoples in my class” and because “I was being bad.” He said that in traditional school he was often sent to ISS [In-school-suspension] where he thinks the teachers there “were mean” to him, making him “do push-ups for no reason.” When asked how he felt about being at the alternative school, Keem responded, “Good. I didn’t like that school.” At the time of this research, Keem was serving probation as part of his sentence because, as he related, “I got to fightin’ with this boy. He be tryin’ to jump on me and my little cousin. Yup. He cut me in the head with a sneaker.” In addition to the fighting episode, Keem was also charged with truancy at the alternative school, although in class when he learned of this charge, he asked what that term meant. He said that if there is one thing in life that he is not good at, it is “passing with good grades.”

Mark. A White male, Mark had short, jet black hair that was parted in the middle and gelled back to stay in place. He appeared to be a strong student both academically and physically, despite his slender and small frame. Because of his stature, he felt the need to defend others who may not be as adept at fending for themselves. He said, If there is someone that they’re gonna be able to beat up, and they’re just bullying on them, I take up for ‘em. That really ticks me off, ‘cause like I’ve been short all my life. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

At the time of this study, Mark was serving his second term at the alternative school. The first term followed his possession of a weapon (a Ninja Star blade) at school. The second
term, which he served at the time of this study, was due to terrorist threats and fighting, in addition to possession of a weapon. Mark described the situation:

We were all in the bathrooms and the bathrooms got really messed up so we were all messing around with it. When we did we all started rippin’ the sink off the wall. And some little sixth grader come in and he’s acting all cool and stuff. So I told him to come over there and I picked him up and threw him down on the sink and he got up and started to leave and I told him to get back here or I’d beat him up pretty seriously. And I threw him on it [the sink] again, and it fell off the wall. And the mirror from up above him fell on him and it cracked his head. So I got in a lot of trouble. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

Mark has a long history of fighting at school, perhaps because he “never walked away from anything” and these actions have earned him negative consequences both at school and with the Juvenile Justice Department. Many of his fights were violent and caused considerable injury. Here Mark described another instance that landed him in jail:

A guy named Trent, he started messing with one of my friends, one of my really good friends, I’ve known all my life. And we were in the hall, walking down the hall at my other school. And I saw him and I went up to him and I punched him one good time as hard as I could. And me and him were fightin’ probably about 30 minutes, because it was between periods and no one knew we were fighting. So nobody was in the hall, and I ended up breaking his arm and he broke one of my fingers, and give me a black eye. I broke his nose, and I give him two black eyes, ‘cause where I hit him right here and it blackened both his eyes. And broke his arm, and I ripped off -part of the bone was here and it ripped the skin. I got put
in jail for it. I was in a holding cell for 3 days. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

Mark also engaged in delinquent acts beyond fighting episodes. Here he described his “fun” around the community:

I would go around the neighborhood looking for fights. Shooting off fireworks. I caught a field on fire behind my house. We were shooting off fireworks and one came down and lit the field on fire. Then, attempting to blow up a car. We took pill bottles, the little orange ones, and fill it up with Draino and put tape on top of them and put them into the gas tank and close it. Eventually, what will happen when they mix together, they will blow up. The things is, the Draino, my mom put water in it and it didn’t work because it wasn’t Draino. We were wondering why it didn’t work. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted outside on school grounds.)

Despite his rather rough and tumble exterior, Mark also showed a softer, sweeter side. For example, during my field observations one day in March, I lost a bracelet and Mark found it. Knowing it was mine, he returned it to me the next day. He seemed very appreciative when I asked if I could call his parents and tell them what a nice gesture he had made. Mark also showed his thoughtfulness by obtaining chairs for people to sit in, holding open the doors for others, and giving away art work that he created.

Since his mother’s death when he was 2 years old, Mark has lived with his father who is now remarried. Mark calls his step-mother “Mom” as he has never truly known his real mother. Mark often shared responsibilities in keeping his parents’ newborn baby. He explained,
Well, right now my mamma, she just had a baby like 3 weeks ago. So, I’m actually doing a lot more stuff and when she ask me, I’ll go ahead and do it instead of really giving her problems. She’s stuck at home all day and she smokes and mainly I have to hold him while she goes to smoke and do stuff. It’s fine for me as long as I come home. I hold the baby for like 15 minutes and when she gets back I can go outside or I come home and clean my room at night, that’s it.

(February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

Mark described his relationship with his father as rather tumultuous, as they frequently engaged in rough physical activity. He reported that when his father is angry,

. . . he gets home, he will call me to my room and pick me up by the shirt and start yelling at me and cussing at me. . . . My mom gets mad when he hits me and stuff but he will still hit me. . . . He will punch me until I punch him back. When he hits me hard enough I hit him back. . . . He will just start yelling at me. If I don’t do anything he will get mad and yell. He will pick me up by the shirt and put me against the wall or he will poke in the side of my cheek where it hurts because my skin is pushing against my teeth. It hurts really bad. So I get mad and I punch him. . . . No, I’ve never had a bruise; only if I get into trouble. . . . (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted outside on school grounds.)

Mark, like Billy, said of his delinquent activities, “I did what I did ‘cause I’m not really that bad person. I just did some stupid crap.”

Martin. Martin is a jovial African-American male with a baby-face that immediately portrays him as likable, yet devilish. His mother said of him, “He gets along with everybody. Everybody tends to fall in love with him at first sight.” He is very active;
he is constantly moving, even when he is seated. Martin can be rather loud at times and was often called down for it. Martin was always fashionably dressed, wearing the latest labels and styles. He is a fairly tall boy with an athletic build. He is quick to demand attention, whether positive or negative. His laughter is contagious, and he probably won’t let a stranger leave the classroom without making himself memorable, or at least noticed. Looking at Martin’s school history makes it questionable that he actually “gets along with everybody,” as his mother said, as he has a long history of school disruption and peer conflict, beginning in kindergarten when he, peed on a boy ‘cause he was in my way of the stall. I told him to move. I got suspended. That was my first suspension ever, in kindergarten--that bad. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

His elementary and middle school years were riddled with suspensions and expulsions due to fighting and peer conflicts, so many, in fact, that Martin was unable to recall them all. “I don’t know why I got suspended, I got suspended so many times.” In fifth grade, Martin tried to avoid getting in trouble at home for a school suspension by going to school anyway.

The first day I hid in the bathroom all day. Nobody catch me. Then it was time to go, so, I had to put my hood on my head and I went to the bus to leave so didn’t nobody notice me. But the second day I got caught. I didn’t show my mom no paperwork. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

At the time of the research, Martin said that he was on probation for “counts of disorderly and unruly. Two years. That just started. I had to pay $150. Fifteen hours of community service. I gotta go to meetings and stuff.”
Martin’s mother placed him at the alternative school to avoid the Tribunal meeting and the mandatory and perhaps lengthy assignment, at the school. She explained, He needs stability. He needs somebody that’s gonna be firm with him. If he sees a weak link, he’s gonna try you. The other teachers, I was getting calls, I was like, “Oh my God, what are you over there for?” The least little thing they call me and they suspending him or they doing something. I just got so fed up with it. Ms. Hanson, she called me in and she said, “Gloria, the best thing for you to do before they send him, you need to request that he leave here” and that’s what I did. When I feel he’s ready to go back then they will accept him back. But I think it’s some sort of evaluation that they have to go through, before he will be able to go back. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted at Martin’s mother’s home.)

Martin lived with his mother, who described herself as a recovering drug addict, and his step-father, whom both Martin and his mother described as “strict.” Martin also visited his father every other weekend during the days, although Martin’s mom described this situation as less than favorable:

See Martin’s daddy’s been through a whole lot of stuff. He’s still going through hard stuff and I don’t want Martin in that environment. Martin knows his daddy and he be with his daddy, but not like he think he should be. Women are in and out of the house and everything goes on at that house and I just don’t want Martin. . . he’s gone through too much already. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted at Martin’s mother’s home.)

Martin, although he had experienced many problems in school, said that he was trying to get “on the right track.” During the second semester, Martin was on the merit list at
school and was working diligently to create fewer discipline problems at school. Martin’s mother said he just “can’t control himself.” During my discussions with Martin’s mother, she indicated that the family was seeking counseling to get Martin back on medication for attention-deficit disorder with hyperactivity because, as he said, “it helped me to calm down a little bit.” Martin also began to realize the seriousness of his actions, as his next court appearance will probably warrant placement at the Youth Detention Center.

A sensitive, more vulnerable side of Martin came through every once in a while. A field trip to the state penitentiary revealed a side of Martin that I had not previously seen. Here his mother described their conversation:

He told me that he never wants to go back there, and his main focus was on this guy that was in the lunchroom and turned into a sissy [homosexual]. That was his main focus. I said, “That’s what a lot of guys do, that’s what you turn into when you go in there. Officer Bo had called me, too, and told me that they had talked with Martin, the detention guys, had talked with Martin. Martin started crying and all this kind of stuff. I said, “I thought you were crying.” He said, “No, I wasn’t crying.” I said, “Yes you were, you were crying.” I think he do take into consideration the trouble he’s in because I remind him, “Okay, this is the last time. You get in any more trouble, you’re gone. There ain’t nothin’ I can do.” I think he knows this, if he do anything and have to go back to court he is gone and I think he try not to do things. And if he do, it is because he really can not help it. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted at Martin’s mother’s home.)

Martin had previously related similar feelings to me, though he added a “tough guy” image to cover up some of his true emotion:
Morris is a tall, thin White male who has smooth olive skin and green eyes. Morris has brown, straight hair that he parted in the middle and shaved in the back. He always wore a thick silver necklace with a charm with the word “Korn,” a popular heavy metal band. Morris can be described as “laid back” as he showed a quiet and unassuming demeanor. He is more likely to blend into a crowd than to seek attention. He has a very genuine character, is reflective, and mature. He takes everything into stride, and said of his coping strategies, “I avoid my feelings as much as possible.” Morris and his two siblings recently came to live with his grandparents, as his father was serving time in jail during this study and his mother had drug and alcohol dependency problems.
and abruptly relocated to another state. Morris described the last time that he saw his mother, some months ago:

She came to a Christmas get together at my grandfather’s house. She got me to buy her a bottle of vodka. We both got drunk, but other than that, she didn’t drink until like 2 weeks ago. Then she took all her money she had been saving up and she took off with her ex-boyfriend. I drank with my mom last time before that. I don’t know, I really didn’t want her to drink, but I know if I hadn’t had something for a long time, I’d want something too. Plus, I got her this bottle of peach schnapps with it [the vodka]. She drank the whole thing herself. And I poured her a drink, and she drank that. . . I really didn’t want her drinking, but you know, I think she wanted it bad. Ten months clean and sober. That was her New Year’s resolution to quit drinking, and it lasted a month and 2 weeks. She rode by my house and my brother and I was out in the yard, and he said she was as drunk as all, and she thought one of my friends was me. So, she didn’t last as long. I knew she was gonna be drinkin’. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Morris described growing up with his parents as a lax atmosphere, citing “They didn’t really set any rules that I had to go by.” Morris’s grandfather described the living conditions, beginning with his daughter, Morris’s mother:

Her hang out is a drug deal. The dad even had the problem of taking them to four or five different drug deals when he bought his drugs. The kids used to tell me this stuff. (April 12, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)
Part of this lifestyle meant that school was not a high priority for Morris and truancy became a major problem. Before living with his grandfather, Morris missed 23 out of 35 days at the beginning of the school year. During one of his days of attendance, Morris brought a weapon and bomb-building instructions to school. He described how this event led to his placement at the alternative school:

I was on the bus one day and I had a knife and I was playing with it. And I stuck it in the seat and somebody came over, and I tried to close it right quick and it cut my finger, and I took my finger and I rubbed it on the back glass and the bus driver saw me. So, this was in the morning time, and that day they called me in the office and searched me. I didn’t know it, but I had bomb instructions in my pocket. I mean, I drew them and all that. I didn’t know they were in my pocket when they searched me. And on my folder I had all this stuff written, like that [he points to his folder], and they got me for bomb instructions, gang graffiti (which I didn’t) and drug graffiti. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Despite his lack of attention to school matters prior to living with his grandparents, one of Morris’s teachers described him as a relatively well-behaved student, and one teacher said that “he has actually calmed down quite a bit. Comes in, gets his work done. Have to keep him separated from the females, but other than that, he is great.” Another teacher described him as an “under-achiever” with two things on his mind, drugs and women.
CHAPTER 5
DATA PRESENTATION

The following chapter presents data from my ethnographic study, which explored the experiences of young adolescent male students who are at-risk for delinquency and are placed at an alternative school setting. All of the sections in this chapter describe the experiences or perceptions of these students. First, I examine the philosophy of the school that was relayed to students and then I examine the culture of transience that existed in the school. Next I describe the inadequacies in the teaching and learning environments and I discuss how discipline played a central role in the school setting. I also describe the pattern of interactions in the school context and I describe ways to resist the school context. Then I examine ways the school deterred and contributed to cycles of delinquency for these students, and lastly, I examine the role of race in the participants’ schooling experiences.

The Philosophy of the School

In the course of conducting observations and interviews, a recurring theme of the philosophy of Bridges School became clear, although it was never formally written. Through classroom conversations, teacher interviews, and school functions, the school personnel similarly defined elements of their philosophy. The common elements that they expressed were as follows: (a) This school is a second, but last chance; (b) student success depends on making wise choices; (c) The goal of this school is to return the
student to the home school. These elements were regularly articulated, and were noted in administrators’ and teachers’ speech.

This School is a Second, but Last Chance

Teachers and administrators at Bridges School continually reminded the students that their placement at the alternative school represented a second, but last chance. They were expected to “pull themselves together” here in order to become better students and better citizens. They knew that if they wanted to return to their home school, they must change their behavior. Teachers and administrators often reminded students that this school was a place to make those positive changes. On January 17, the school held an assembly to honor students receiving the Culpepper Awards. The Culpepper Awards were established by a local probation judge to monetarily reward three students each semester for grade or behavior improvement. The title of this assembly, which was printed on the assembly program, was “Second Chances, New Beginnings.” This theme was mentioned several times during the course of the presentations and became a motto that would be referred to by teachers and administrators in the months that followed.

Below I address specifically how the data addressed the alternative school as a second chance, and the alternative school as a last chance.

“Nobody’s Perfect.”: School as a Second Chance

One administrator of Bridges used this “second chance” motto to introduce an incoming student to the alternative school. During the student’s entrance interview, at which time the student is assigned classes and is informed of the behavioral expectations, Mrs. Yarborough, the academic advisor, said:
We believe in second chances. Second Chances, new beginnings. Forget what happened before. We’re starting all over. Okay? . . . You know you could have passed if you had wanted to, but it’s up to you, sweetheart. It’s up to you to do it here. (February 1, 2001; Entrance Interview.)

Mr. Morton, the seventh grade Language Arts teacher, also reiterated this motto during our interview. Here he used the phrase to instill a sort of hope into the lives of students:

So when a kid is here, it is their second chance, new beginning. . . . It’s a message that everybody needs to hear. I wish there was a way to capture it for this school. These lives are so precious. One child can change the world. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mrs. Moore, another seventh grade Language Arts teacher, also echoed the same message with slightly different language. She, too, identified the school as a place of second chances, saying:

Nobody’s perfect. So, you know, as long as you say that you are sorry, you get a second chance. Because that’s what this school is all about. It’s about second chances. (January 21, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)

Even an administrator at the county office described Bridges as a place for second chances. “It is like a second chance for them in lieu of being on the streets. It is their second chance. Some of them are grateful for it.”

Combined with this rather hopeful notion of Bridges as a place for second chances, students are often reminded if they do not make the most of this second chance, the consequences may be grim. They are told if they do not change their inappropriate behavior, then they may end up in a far worse circumstance than their present situation in
alternative school. For most students, at least those under 17 years old, the step beyond the alternative school is juvenile detainment in a lock-down facility.

“If They’re Not Gonna Make It Here, They’re Not Gonna Make It.”: School as a Last Chance

Students were reminded that although this school may be a second chance, it is also a last chance. If they can not “make it” here, the next stop for them is Boot Camp or the Youth Detention Center (YDC), both of which are considered highly unfavorable placements because they remove the student from the family and the public school system altogether. Mr. Fisher conveyed this message to a new student who asked about the school’s lack of computers in comparison to his traditional school. Mr. Fisher said:

This school is a far cry from [your old] school. This is your last hope before YDC and Boot Camp. I don’t know if you know that or not. (January 17, 2001; Field Notes)

The assistant principal, Mr. Richards, noted similar content in an interview:

Because when they’re here, this is basically a last chance school. If they don’t make it here, they’re either going to go to jail or Boot Camp, or go home, or they’re going to go some place. (February 15, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Likewise, Mrs. Johnson, the mathematics and physical education teacher, emphasized that this experience goes beyond a second chance, but is really their last chance. In an interview she explained,

It’s not a second chance to me, it’s the last chance. Because if they’re not going to make it here, they’re not going to make it. Like I said, they’re either gonna quit or
they’re gonna be in YDC. And it’s just gonna be a cycle. Once they go to YDC they have to come back here. They are either going to do it right again, or they are gonna go back to YDC and it’s just gonna keep going. It’s going to get to the point where they are gonna say that it’s not worth it. They’re gonna quit. So in other words, it’s the last chance. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mrs. Moore also conveyed this message to the students in her classroom. One day as she asked a student if all of his absences were excused, she took the opportunity to reiterate that this school is a last chance.

Are your absences excused? If not, I’ll have to refer you for truancy. I’ve already referred Keem for truancy, because he’s been out for more than 5 days. Just want to make sure you understand that. If you are absent, you must bring a written excuse. The truancy officer has to issue an arrest for your parents. I’m sorry I know the law so well, but I’m not here to play. I mean, if you can’t come to school, what can you do? You know this is your last chance. (February 20, 2001; Field Notes)

**Student Success Depends on Making Wise Choices**

Teachers and administrators continually reminded students that as part of this “second, but last chance” they have choices. They could make good choices or poor choices. This message was reinforced by teachers, administrators, and by several guests who came to visit the school. The probation judge who presented the Culpepper Awards reminded students that they have choices and “this is the time to start making better choices.” This idea was also reinforced by a guest speaker during Black History Month.
A minister from the community delivered an inspirational speech about African-American leaders and challenged the students to see themselves as “leaders, by making good choices now.” Even a visiting professor from my university echoed similar ideas, saying in his presentation that future success depends on wise choices now. Mrs. Yarborough tried to help students realize these choices from the first day they were enrolled at the alternative school. The following conversation is an excerpt from an entrance interview in which Mrs. Yarborough emphasized the importance of making good, individual choices:

Mrs. Yarborough: How was your attendance [at your old school]?

New student: Not too good.

Mrs. Yarborough: Why?

New student: ‘Cause I chose for it to do like that.

Mrs. Yarborough: How are things gonna be different here?

New student: Well, I’m gonna do better for myself.

Mrs. Yarborough: Why? Oh, there’s that word again- I keep asking it, don’t I?

Why?

New student: ‘Cause I need to do right for myself. Need to get an education.

(February 1, 2001; Entrance Interview)

Teachers continually emphasized the importance of good choices in their classrooms. For example, when a student in class complained about doing so much work, Mrs. Moore took the opportunity to speak to the importance of choice.

“You don’t have to do anything here. There are other places you can go. When you miss a day here in this class, you’re going to get behind. There are worse
places you can go.” Morris pipes in with, “--like Boot Camp.” (January 21, 2001; Field Notes)

When a student grumbled about homework, Mrs. Moore illustrated for students the nature of their choices in school. She contrasted the students’ present opportunity for choice with their lack of opportunity in an alternative placement.

She said,

You have a choice. I’m trying to give you a choice. The next step after this, you won’t have a choice. You go to Alto State Prison and you won’t have a choice. There you won’t have to worry about homework. The only thing you have to worry about there is your life. (February 20, 2001; Field Notes)

Mr. Morton agreed that affirming life as a series of choices for students is important. Here he related the use of life decisions to the establishment of trust:

And then very gently, without emotion, implement the consequences that they’ve chosen. I’m not choosing to discipline you- you have chosen and you knew in advance, so get off my back. That gives the kid the freedom to choose and that’s all part of trust. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Through these kinds of comments, students were explicitly reminded of the school’s philosophy. By admission to this school they had been granted a second chance in which they needed to demonstrate the ability to make better choices. However, if these opportunities were not seized and fully realized, they would be given no other chance to get their life back on track. The goal of this second, but last chance was to exhibit good behavior so that the student may return to the traditional school environment.
The Goal of This School is for Students to Return to the Home School

Students, teachers, administrators, and the support staff of Bridges School expressed that the goal of this “second chance” was for students to return to the home school. Because students cannot graduate from Bridges, their high school diploma depended on their ability to be successful at their home school. As Mrs. Prince, the assistant principal said, “the whole purpose of Alternative School is to keep them in school.” The alternative placement provided education for students who would otherwise receive none. Some school personnel saw Bridges as a testing period in which students had to “prove themselves.” Passing this test meant returning to the home school. Officer Bo said of Bridges, “Here it’s a middle ground. If you do well, we’ll send you back to try again.” Failure at the alternative school most likely resulted in placement at a juvenile facility. There was even a structure within the juvenile justice system that addressed this “testing” period. It was a process called informal adjustment, designed to be a trial period at the school, with the goal to return to the home school. Officer Bo described this process:

If they’ve never been on probation or in trouble, then they do what they call informal adjustment. They [students] have 90 days. No problems, no trouble, at the end of 90 days and they are off. If they have any problems between then, they fail that informal adjustment then they get on probation, which starts out at about 2 years. (January 22, 2001; Interview conducted in Officer Bo’s office.)

Dr. Ely also suggested that a “successful” alternative school student could return to the home school. He said, “. . . some of our students have 3 months to be here and if they perform well, they go back to their main school where they’re supposed to be.” In order
for students to return to the home school, they must, according to Mrs. Yarborough, be recommended by the administrators of Bridges School and write a letter to the principal of the home school explaining the changes that they have made in their behavior and/or academics. The principal may then either accept or reject the student’s application for return. I now examine the culture of transience that existed within Bridges and the inadequacies in the teaching and learning environments there.

A Culture of Transience at the School

There was an overwhelming culture of transience in this school community. By the mere nature of the school, the student population was never stable. All students at the school were there on a temporary basis, moving in and out of the school, returning to their home school or going to the Youth Detention Facility. Additionally, the continual movement of staff reinforced the transient culture. In this regard, it was very difficult for the students and faculty of Bridges to build a strong school community, as many students and teachers perhaps saw their time there as temporary. In some cases, high student turnover has been linked to poor academic progress, particularly in reading (Murnane, 1975).

The alternative school reserved the right to suspend and expel students as a means of discipline, which also contributes to an atmosphere of instability. When students were expelled from school, it further isolated them from the school community. Class attendance appeared sporadic at times, as I never knew who to expect to see in class. Not only were certain students suspended from time to time, but they also missed class in order to attend court hearings and visit their probation officers, as well as for the typical absences due to illness and family vacations. During my time at the school, I noticed that
there were very few days on which all students were present, despite the small class sizes of around 10 students.

The influx of new teachers and administrators of Bridges was another contributing factor to transience. The turnover rate at the school was high. Teachers and administrators who have worked at the school for several years may have found it difficult to emotionally or professionally invest in coworkers who were new to the setting, as they have seen faculty members come and go frequently. Perhaps this pattern perpetuated problems for new teachers and encouraged them to seek other opportunities. This aspect of teacher transience also sent the message to kids that teachers were there temporarily, too, perhaps until a better job becomes available. The seventh grade teachers at Bridges addressed the issue of turnover. Both teachers who had worked at the school for several years indicated that they seriously considered applying for other jobs in the county. Mrs. Moore indicated,

I think about going back to a traditional school setting a lot lately because the class sizes are too big here. When I was first hired here, I was told that the class sizes were going to be like 8, 9, 10 . . . no more than 12. My first period I have 16. That’s too many alternative kids in a classroom. I mean, I might as well go and teach 35 regular kids if I’m going to have 15 alternative kids in the classroom . . . and there is a new school opening up, too, with an art position opening up for a teacher . . . so, as much as I like this job, I really have been considering it because there are kids coming in here everyday and there are too many kids here. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)
Mrs. Johnson, in her sixth year of teaching at the alternative school, spoke to the turnover that the teaching staff at the school had undergone since its inception. “Other than Mrs. Yarborough in the office, I’m the only teacher that’s still here.” She, too, had contemplated leaving the school but decided to stay, saying,

I had thought about leaving, but here, not saying we do what we want, but there is more freedom to try more things with our kids rather than going by the book basically. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Of the four seventh grade teachers, both Mr. Morton and Mr. Fisher were in their first year of teaching at the alternative school. Mr. Morton began teaching mid-year after another teacher left the position. Speaking of the teacher who left, the principal said this:

I hired that person because I believe there was no lack of dedication on that person’s part, no lack of enthusiasm, . . . but I believe he had no idea what he was walking into. I don’t think he ever had them [students] where he needed to have them to be in order to try to teach them. (February 15, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mr. Morton assumed the position as the language arts teacher when this teacher left the alternative school. However, Mr. Morton contemplated leaving at the end of the school year to take a job as a teacher in a traditional school. In one of our last informal conversations, he mentioned that he was fairly certain he would be taking another position, if one became available.

Three of the four administrators were also in their first or second year, suggesting that these roles are a rather temporary placement as well. The principal of the school, in his first full school year, did not expect to stay in that position.
I’m looking for another one [job] just as hard as I can right now. I already turned in my paperwork for teacher retirement, too. I already have what I need to retire, and I say that based upon I have enough sick leave days to take up my thirtieth year. . . . the truth of the matter is, I don’t want to work hard anymore. I want to not go home exhausted mentally and physically everyday. I don’t want to fight with kids anymore. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Likewise, the resource officer assigned to the school assumed another position in the county as a juvenile detective during the study, leaving the school with temporary replacement resource officers until a permanent one could be assigned to the school.

In addition to an influx of new teachers and staff at the school once they were hired, it was very difficult to even find teachers for the school. The principal noted that, Really, Carol, people very rarely apply for a job here. . . . When you are trying to hire people to put into classes you can only hire people that are available, who are looking for a job. (February 15, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Therefore, it may be appropriate to say that the school could not compete for the best teachers who were available. Instead, the principal had to recruit from the applicants who applied to the traditional schools in the county or wait for other teachers who approached him, as were the cases of Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Moore. Both teachers, at different times, sought opportunities to leave another nearby county and found work at the alternative school.
All of these factors in combination helped to create a community of transience. Teachers were hard to obtain and retain, suggesting that this was not the most desirable place to work; students were sent to the school for misbehavior, not because they were selected from a competitive pool of applicants but because they were essentially “kicked out” of their home school; and the population of the school was unstable due to its very structure. Many students, and some teachers and administrators, simply bided their time in order to get to another school. This pattern contributed negatively to the school atmosphere by creating a culture of transience where it was difficult to establish a school community. Additionally, inadequacies in teaching and learning environments may have contributed to the high turnover rates.

Inadequacies in the Teaching and Learning Environments

The teaching and learning environments of Bridges appeared to be less than adequate to serve the needs of its students and teachers. Many factors were beyond the administrators’ and teachers’ control. The school seemed to be plagued by a lack of resources, a lack of innovative teaching, and a lack of power among the students as well as the teachers. These inadequacies contributed negatively to the school environment.

Lack of Resources

Probably one of the most obvious ways that the lack of resources was conveyed to students and teachers was by the physical appearance of the school. Dark, drab, and poorly maintained, the building itself indicated a lack of money for upkeep. Such conditions are unfortunate in that physical deterioration of surroundings has been linked to delinquency because it makes people feel helpless and ineffective (Kelling, 1987; Shaw & McKay, 1969). Coming from traditional schools in the area that typically enjoy
better resources, alternative school students may come to feel that they are not valued as much as the students in regular schools, or that their education does not hold the same degree of importance, or even that part of their “punishment” is a second-rate school.

Many of the classrooms were in a state of disrepair. For example, in Mr. Fisher’s and one of Mrs. Johnson’s mathematics classes, there was no bulletin board, although there were unattractive large circular marks where the bulletin boards used to hang. Students were not oblivious to these circumstances. In the middle of Mr. Fisher’s class, Susan asked, “Doesn’t this school have no money?” Mr. Fisher responded, “They don’t give us much. I’m still trying to get blinds and a bulletin board.” The students, though some were able to verbalize this better than others, were well aware of their surroundings. Bradley, in one interview session, said this about the physical appearance of the school:

   It’s a piece of crap. This whole school, it looks like a dumpster in here. The library is the only part of the whole school that looks halfway decent. Someone should build a new one. Somebody should burn it down. It is just ugly. I didn’t mean to say that [someone should burn it down] because if someone burns it down, it ain’t going to be me! (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

As Bradley noted, most of the school did not look as pleasant as the offices and media center, ironically, since students spent very little time here in comparison.

Inadequacy in resources was also conveyed by the fact that the alternative school shares the building with Pre-K students. In an effort to utilize available space, these two programs were housed under one roof and shared the cafeteria, media center, and support staff resources and personnel. However, alternative school students were often reminded
they were not to associate with the preschool students at the school. Alternative school students were told to walk the long way around the hallway in order to avoid contact with the Pre-K students. There was a sign posted in the hallway that housed both Pre-K and alternative student that read: “No alternative school students beyond this point.” Such a rule suggested that these students were not to be trusted to behave around 4-year-olds. This issue was even discussed in the entrance interview when the students and parents spoke with Mrs. Yarborough upon admission to the school. During one such meeting, Mrs. Yarborough informed the new student about this expectation:

You see all those babies out there in the hallway? I have 160 4-year old babies out there. Aren’t they cute? The fastest way you can get yourself in serious trouble is to do something ugly in front of a 4 year old, or their mamma or daddy or their teacher. Okay? You wouldn’t want to do anything ugly in front of a baby would you? You love babies don’t you? I could tell. You understand why it’s important to have perfect behavior in front of a baby don’t you? (February 1, 2001; Entrance Interview)

If alternative students and Pre-K students should not interact, it does not make sense that they would be housed in the same building. These populations have very different needs and would be better served in facilities that specifically address those needs. Inadequate funding, however, forced these two populations into the same building. Interestingly, one county administrator who was responsible for budgeting alluded to the fact that students who have misbehaved do not deserve the amount of money it would take to achieve adequate funding. He said:
The cost of the student over there [the alternative school] is a lot higher than even the Special Ed kids. I guess also as a parent, I look at it as, well, you know, I have a kid who didn’t get in trouble, but yet they are spending so much over there, but that’s just my personal point. (May 18; Interview conducted in administrator’s office.)

There was no evidence that suggested that students and teachers were provided with classroom resources beyond textbooks. Based on my observations, classrooms did not contain manipulatives, paperback books, science equipment, or other classroom supplies.

Similar inadequacies in funding were likewise imposed on teachers, who spoke about a lack of resources for their own use. Teachers at the alternative school did not have access to a faculty room, a phone line that afforded privacy from students and other staff, or technology for their classroom. Mr. Morton, probably the most vocal teacher about the lack of resources, verbalized his feelings by saying:

To not have a faculty room that’s nice- to not have a faculty refrigerator, and good microwave, even a sound-proofed room, or phones for faculty members to use, I don’t know that they are mistreated, I just think some things haven’t developed yet. But as far as buildings- every other place that I’ve subbed had a lounge and an hour and a half off as a teacher, where they can relax a little bit. I feel that this building lacks some of that support. I wish that I had at least one computer in my room that was on the internet. I think there is so much that I could teach my kids. (February 2, 2001: Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mrs. Moore echoed this view of inadequate resources for teachers when an administrator continued to put students into what she considered to be her already crowded classrooms.
With a limited number of teachers and no money to hire additional teachers, administrators had no choice but to accommodate students in existing classrooms. When Mrs. Moore confronted the administrators about this overload, she was told, “Well, there is no policy here on the numbers that we can admit here.” Her reaction to this was, “There is no policy on the number of teachers that will stay here if you keep admitting them either.”

Students and teachers alike could not help but negatively react to these inadequacies in the school teaching and learning environment. It presented a difficult situation in that everyone within the school was severely limited by the lack of funding. Teachers did not have needed resources, classrooms were sometimes overcrowded, and the school’s appearance was less than desirable. To change these conditions would mean lifting budget limitations so that the alternative school had a higher priority within the county. Already considered to be a “costly” school because of its low teacher-student ratio, this is highly unlikely. Meanwhile, the state of the alternative school indicated to students and teachers that this was a second-rate school. Other factors pointed to inadequacies in the teaching that occurred within the school as well.

Lack of Innovative Teaching

Many of the interactions between teachers and students suggested a lack of innovative teaching within the school setting. In this section I address the following factors in the teaching: Poor preparation for the setting, teaching efforts as minimal, low expectations of students, and perceptions of an inadequate academic program.
Poor Preparation for the Setting

Teachers in this alternative school noted in our conversations that that they were prepared in regular teacher education programs. Conversations about their backgrounds indicated that teachers were not specifically trained in Special Education, nor did they receive special training to work with students who were considered to be chronically disruptive and at-risk for delinquency. Master’s degrees were not required for the alternative school teaching position, but were encouraged by a salary increase. Any additional training that a teacher received was basically the result of life choices the teacher made before working at the alternative school. For example, Mr. Morton had a master’s degree in counseling and worked with delinquent youth in a lock-down facility before coming to work at the alternative school. His experience proved valuable in working with the students at Bridges, although it did not focus exclusively on the educational needs of these children. His experience with this population before coming to the school far outweighed that of the other teachers who either began their teaching careers at Bridges (Mrs. Johnson) or transferred from traditional schools (Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Moore). To the best of my knowledge, the school system did not provide additional support for new teachers at Bridges through staff development opportunities. In short, most teachers came to Bridges adequately prepared to teach regular-education students, but found themselves serving students with very different needs from traditional school students. Teachers and administrators at Bridges were paid according to the standard county pay scale and were not provided added incentives to work at the alternative school. As noted earlier, obtaining teachers for the alternative school was challenging and retaining them was even more problematic.
Teaching Efforts as Minimal

Undoubtedly, many of the seventh grade teachers felt overwhelmed by the situation at Bridges. They worked in a run-down building and in a program that suffered from under-funding, and often their classes were less than the ideal teaching situation. Sometimes their classes were overcrowded with challenging students, most often from various schools with differing academic and behavioral needs and levels of motivation. To say the least, teachers at Bridges found themselves in a challenging situation. It was probably challenging even to put forth a minimal amount of effort into their teaching.

However, one of the biggest “missed opportunities” was that of behavior modification and helping students to identify problems, talk about them, and think about solutions for preventing similar problems. Students were often sent to the office by teachers who no longer wanted to, or knew how to, deal with them. Students were often told to leave the classroom because of a particular outburst or irritation, or simply because, as one teacher indicated, “I’ve had it.” While isolation may be an appropriate method for diffusing the situation, there was typically no follow-up to work toward reflections about, or resolution of the problem. When some teachers asked students to leave the room, it was often expressed as an annoyed tone of voice, not necessarily as a way to improve the situation. There was no formal process for sending students to the office, as no other adult was informed of the situation when it occurred, but rather students were simply asked to leave the classroom. Usually students went to one of the offices and sat on the couch, or in a chair for the remainder of the period. There was seldom a follow-up from the teacher with the student about what more appropriate behaviors would have been, or what prompted the inappropriate behavior in the first
place. Undoubtedly, teachers may not have had the time needed to follow through with such conversations. During one school visit, I sat on one of the school couches and observed the workings of this situation from the office perspective. Two students sat in the waiting area of the office, waiting out their class period, and began talking, since there was nothing else to do. Subsequently they ended up “getting in trouble” with the secretary who was annoyed with their presence, as it distracted her from her work. While the strategy of sending the students to the office served to isolate them from the classroom, it seemed to do nothing to help the students better handle similar instances in the future. Additionally, it potentially created problems for other staff members, such as the secretary, who may have been forced into supervisory roles, often for groups of students.

Another indication that teaching efforts could be improved was a reliance on showing movies in the classroom. On most Fridays, and sometimes other days, most classes watched movies instead of “doing work.” On more than one occasion teachers indicated that there were not enough students present to proceed with class, so they resorted to showing a movie instead. As discussed in the previous chapter, these movies did not seem particularly tied to rewards for students or even to educational purposes. Rather, they were meant as time-fillers and entertainment for the students. The content of some of these movies remains questionable, as some movies had ratings of Parental Guidance-13 (PG-13) because of the content. Showing movies often suggested a willingness on the part of the teachers to compromise the academic growth of their students. While some teachers relied on movies more than others, this phenomenon occurred regularly in all classrooms.
One teacher clearly indicated his priorities by sleeping in class. For most students, this violated their notions of how teachers are supposed to conduct themselves at school. One participant described it as “unfair. If we can’t sleep they shouldn’t be able to sleep.”

Billy summed it up nicely when he said,

I don’t like him ‘cause he doesn’t teach us. Like, you’ve been in there, he just gives us work and I don’t think that’s right. For him to just sit back there and sleep while we’re working and him not even teach us. . . . He sits behind the file cabinet and falls asleep while we’re doing work. . . . He’s done it everyday. Like today, he was sitting in the corner and he just sleeps. . . . And we had to get up [in the morning] at the exact same time as them [teachers]. . . . And he doesn’t even teach us. He just tells us what to do and we finally have to do it. He doesn’t even know if we know how to do it or not. He just tells us to do it. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

A teacher sleeping in class is the most extreme example of a lack of innovative teaching efforts and was only noted in one teacher’s classroom.

Many of the teachers I observed, however, did rely on worksheets and textbooks in the classroom. In fact, most classroom work that I observed centered around one or the other. Worksheets and textbooks required little effort on the part of the teacher and also met some teachers’ goal of keeping the students busy. One teacher spoke to this notion in our interview, saying, “As long as you keep the work coming, and you keep a handle on it, you pretty much don’t have time for problems. That’s the way I see it.”

Almost all classroom activities that I observed involved students working independently
on the same activity with few provisions made for students of differing abilities. Most instruction occurred in whole group settings.

Some examples of minimal teaching efforts were suggested in the verbal climate of the classroom. One teacher indicated his minimal effort in teaching to an individual student when he reprimanded her behavior and related it negatively to how it consumed his time to communicate to her parents. Despite the fact that he was given a 90-minute planning period to complete such tasks, he indicated that he felt that parent communication surpassed his duties as a teacher. He said, “Using up my time to make phone calls, like you were in second grade. That’s pitiful.” With this statement, he suggested that even though these students are “chronically disruptive,” he expected their behavior to be good enough that parent contact would not be necessary or useful. Contrarily, when teachers did show that they worked hard and that they had spent time in preparing materials for students, there were often reactions from the students. For example, when one student considered the amount of work it took for Mrs. Johnson to make a word-find for them, she said,

“Did you take the time to fill in all of these letters”

Teacher responds, “yes.”

Susan smiles and says, “She just adores us!” (January 17, 2001; Field Notes)

Such an example shows that students were not oblivious to the amount of time teachers put into preparing for class.

Low Expectations for Students

The effects of low teacher and administrator’s expectations have been well-documented (e.g., Nash, 1976; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Low expectations regularly
lead to low achievement. Barber (1996) indicates that high and consistent expectations of students are essential characteristic of effective schools. By promoting greater achievement, teachers can make a sizable difference in the academic and social development of their students (Stoll, 1996). Several administrators and teachers at this school expressed rather low expectations for student futures. Many of these low expectations were expressed in terms of school dropout or in the obtainment of a General Equivalency Degree (G.E.D.) instead of a high school diploma. School personnel suggested that they expected many students to obtain only a minimal level of education, and that the majority of students would not be successful anyway. The following sections expand upon these expectations.

“The main concern of students here is to, I should hope, to get their G.E.D.”:

Minimal education as sufficient. Many school personnel suggested that the most education their students could hope to obtain would be a high school diploma or a G.E.D. These people spoke generally about their students and did not identify individual students specifically. For example, one administrator communicated such an expectation of the students of Bridges saying that,

Not too many over here are concerned about academic matters like that. That does not bother them. The main concern of students here is to, I should hope, to get their GED. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in administrator’s office.)

Another teacher indicated that she believed some of her older students working on degrees would be better suited for a G.E.D instead of pursuing a traditional high school degree because of their age. She explained:
Basically, they’ve let some students stay here too long. They actually would be 25, 26 when they graduated. When I would think that they would be needed to be redirected to a G.E.D or some type of vocational skills training because you know, college is not for everyone. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in teacher’s classroom.)

Another teacher expressed her ideas about how she saw the students of Bridges performing academically and how her role as a teacher fit into that. She explained:

. . . Most of the kids need the very basic, the very basic math skills. Most of them, will not go on to college, so, I know we have curriculums that we are supposed to go by, but myself, I see them needing the basic life skills. Things they’re gonna use everyday. . . simple addition, multiplication- most of our kids are not gonna use the geometry, the algebra, and stuff like that so I try to get the basic stuff that they need that’s going to help them whether they go right into the workforce or vocational school. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mrs. Yarborough echoed the notion that some students at Bridges are better suited for careers requiring only a high-school diploma. In an entrance interview with one student, perhaps familiar with his academic capabilities, Mrs. Yarborough began probing the student about his goals. When he said that he did not have any, Mrs. Yarborough replied:

That’s a problem then, isn’t it? If you don’t have any goals what do you have to shoot for? Maybe you can find something you want to be while you’re here. Maybe you can find a way to use school to get where you want to be. Have you ever considered a military career? Have you ever thought about being in the
Army, Navy, or the Marines? Do you know what it takes to do that? [Student replies, “education and college.”] Let’s go simpler than that. The only thing you have to have just about to get in, besides good health, is a high school diploma. And to get one of those you have to pass those high school graduation tests and you have to have 26 credits. (February 1, 2001; Entrance Interview)

While some of these teachers and administrators had the best intentions to help their students set and reach obtainable goals, they may also limit student success by imposing low expectations on their academic and behavioral success. School personnel are more than likely unaware of the generalizations about student success that they hold and perhaps translate to students. Next, I examine the generalizations that some staff members expressed in conversations with me about student success.

“95-90% probably aren’t going to make it.” : The majority of students at this school will not be successful. Several other instances revealed some teachers’ and administrators’ beliefs that many students at Bridges will not be successful. These generalizations are particularly interesting when we consider the fact that many of these staff members were new to the school and had a limited amount of time during which to form these perceptions. For example, when a first-year administrator talked about the kind of teacher she would like to hire, she explained:

Many of them [students] will never be successful. Many of them are not acclimated to a regular high school degree. . . . and somebody who is willing to understand that the majority of them are never gonna be successful and your little successes that you get are few and far between- you relish those because you’re
really doing a service. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in administrator’s office.)

Even a teacher who was new to the alternative setting mentioned that the vast majority of students at this school will probably not be successful. He said,

95-90% probably aren’t going to make it. I wish that there was a way they could find a model- but I don’t even know what that is for sure, except that I have learned to begin again. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Other staff members associated with the alternative school also seemed to relay somewhat limited hopes for the students of Bridges School. For example, this statement made in conversation indicated low expectations:

We have a small percentage who prove to their school, to their peers, and their teachers that they can be successful and they really work hard to go back to their home school. (March 6, 2001; Interview conducted in staff member’s office.)

Perceptions of an Inadequate Academic Program

Students and parents/grandparents spoke about their displeasure with the academic program at Bridges School. The consensus was that the academic program lacked rigor. The following sections examine the voices of students and parents/grandparents in this matter.

“The teachers ain’t real over here.”: Student perceptions. A few students verbalized their concerns with their academic experiences at the alternative school. Addarian, for one, expressed concern that he was not getting what he considered to be a quality education at the alternative school. He said,
The teachers ain’t real over here. They fake. We only do fraction, and division, and negatives- they easy. We supposed to be getting’ our pre-algebra. We ain’t even getting’ nothin’. We don’t know how to do that. . . . The education ain’t right over here, ’cause I need to get the best education you can. (February 12, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Jeremy expressed the need for more rigorous academics. He believed that the academic program should reflect higher standards and said, “The [teachers here] should teach harder stuff. And stuff you haven’t already learned.” Mark also felt strongly about the need for a more challenging academic program, noting,

I think [the education here] sucks. I think the whole school system sucks here. Well, for one, they send us to a- alright, they expect us to learn a lot and when I’m in sixth grade, I’m in a seventh grade class here. When I’s in sixth grade, I’m relearning all the stuff that I learned in sixth grade here in the seventh grade. And like their years, on what you’re supposed to be taught is way different and they don’t hardly teach you anything. ‘Cause alright they give you like a worksheet that has #1-10 in math. That’s like the reason I have such high grades here. It’s not a challenge at all anyways. So they don’t really teach at the rate that you’re supposed to. So last year I was here the first semester and I went back [to my home school] second semester. When I was here, you know, I had pretty good grades and all and when I went back, it’s like learning a whole different thing and I had to work from different stuff to learn up to what they were learning now. And I didn’t learn any of that stuff [here]. So I was left behind. That’s why I had such bad grades last year. ‘Cause I could, once I learn how to do it, I can do it, but it
took me a couple of weeks to get used to it. So I had C’s and stuff when I left [regular school] at the end of the year. They [alternative school teachers] should actually teach more stuff than what they’re . . . yeah, harder stuff, that’s like harder and more up to date to learn. Instead, everything’s old and already been taught. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

“The teachers that are down there are rejects”: Parent and grandparent perceptions. As explained in chapter 3, parents and/or grandparents of three participants agreed to speak with me. While the perceptions of these four adults cannot speak for all parents and grandparents, I do find it important to relate their perceptions of the academic program of Bridges. Of the parents and grandparents that I spoke with, all expressed their displeasure with the academic program of the alternative school. Conversation revealed their perceptions of a rather lax academic program that they felt should be made more challenging. Bradley’s mother, for instance, felt that her son’s academic livelihood suffered because of his placement in the alternative school. She contended that the only thing Bradley learned from his experience was conformity:

He has been there [alternative school] a year and a half because of the one [sexual harassment] comment. I felt like after a year they would let him go back to school but they were just kind of like to me, it was too much for one comment. I realize now that he has to keep his mouth shut. I see the school he is in and I don’t see where it has really learned him- as far as taught him- what he needs to know other than keep his mouth shut. I don’t see how he is getting an education. I don’t see how he can because he is scared to death to go to school everyday. . . . I don’t think they are really up to par. I feel the teachers that are down there are rejects,
along with the kids. It is sad to say, but it’s true. I think it is teachers down there that got kicked out of the regular school. I mean somebody has to do the job. And I believe these are the ones down there doing it. (March 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Bradley’s grandmother’s home.)

Martin’s mother agreed that academics should take a higher priority in the school. She felt Martin was not getting the quality of education that he needed and might possibly suffer academic consequences upon returning to this regular school the next year. However, she did not see any other choices, saying, “I am totally displeased. I’m not even border line. But what can you do? You got to go to school.” Morris’s grandfather conceded that the academics program was inadequate. He said,

> There is very little teaching per se, according to other schools. And Morris is too bright of a child to be here failing. I think one of the reasons he does these little things is so they will keep him here because he has very little work. That’s what my impression is. (April 12, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Morris’s grandfather continued, citing the effect that the lack of academic emphasis had on Morris’s brother:

> They need more work. His brother, he’s mad because Morris comes home with no homework and he comes home with three pages. He [Morris’s brother] gets into a little trouble- he’d like to come to Bridges- he wouldn’t have any work.

The students and parents and grandparents who I interviewed felt that the academic program at the alternative school lacked rigor and eventually made it harder for students to return to regular schools. In addition to the lack of attention to academic matters, parents and grandparents indicated that discipline at the alternative school should be re-
examined and toughened. Other issues of inadequacies in the teaching and learning environment were not as clearly stated in interviews, but became evident in my observations.

**Lack of Power**

The lack of power that students and teachers had, or felt they had, also indicated inadequacies in the teaching and learning environment. In most schools throughout the nation, the lines of power clearly reside in a hierarchy. Within this structure, students hold relatively little power. The power structure of the alternative school reflected this hierarchy. At this school, however, teachers perceived that they held little power as well, except over students who held even less power. The following sections address teacher powerlessness and teacher power over students.

**Teacher Powerlessness**

Some teachers reported feeling as if they had little power in comparison to administrators in the school system. Teachers expressed feelings of dis-empowerment. Part of this feeling was accentuated with the need for voice, the need to be heard, and the need to be appreciated. Mr. Fisher noted his need for voice. He felt as a teacher, his opinion was often ignored, in comparison to those people who worked in other positions but without classrooms. Here he suggested a way to alleviate this imbalance of power:

First of all they can get rid of all the Ph.D.’s in the system that are writing books and telling us what to do. Giving us in-services and telling us what to do and ask us what to do. Then, they with the Ph.D.’s, will have useless knowledge about education, but in fact, what we [teachers] say is going to be a lie because they never ask us. We never get asked nothing by nobody. Or told we do good by
anybody. We only hear when we do bad and that’s all we ever hear. We are told
to model good behavior. They want us to model to our students. You know, “Hey
good job in class today,” or, “Good job with this” or “Nice work with that student
or something.” But all you hear is negative, so after a while you notice the morale
is way below the bottom of the sewer. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in
Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

Another teacher expressed his need for voice and empowerment in terms of resources. He
believed that resources can assist in the professionalism of teachers, and can help
empower teachers. He said,

I just walked down to the office just 15 minutes before I saw you, and said, “Is
there a phone that I can use to call some parents?” The response was, “No, there’s
not; we don’t have that for teachers.” So as soon as our interview is over, I’ll go
into my room and pull my cell phone out of my briefcase, and go outside. And
that shouldn’t be. This room we are sitting in- I’ve asked people, “If there isn’t a
meeting, can we eat lunch in here?” Because it’s a place of quiet. It’s not the
cafeteria with 95 kids around, and I can get my head together. So those kinds of
things to put into the tank of a teacher: energy and encouragement. (January 31,
2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Other teachers alluded to their lack of voice in more subtle ways. For example, one day a
teacher scoffed at a survey given by the county, making it plain that she felt as if a
decision had already been made. Other references were made to county decisions that
were made without input from the schoolteachers regarding support staff positions that
were changed or done away with entirely. Additionally, some teachers heard “through the
“grapevine” that the county is going to do away with the alternative program in the following years. Yet, to their surprise, there had been no conversations surrounding other courses of action that could be explored as alternatives.

Teacher Power Over Students

Characteristic of the school structure, students held relatively little power at their own school. At school, students were told what to do, when, how, and in how much time to do it, and what the consequences would be if they failed to do so. Messages of power were conveyed in a number of ways and by a variety of sources. Teachers often exerted their power verbally over students, yet these same teachers spoke about their own powerlessness in relation to those people in higher positions of decision making than they.

Teachers often reasserted their position in the power structure over students. For example, during one class, Mr. Fisher appeared angered when a student voiced her advice about a behavioral issue with another student. He told her emphatically,

I did not ask for your input. You go to college, you go and get a degree, you get certified by the state of Georgia, and then you, too, can run a classroom. Until then, you do not run this classroom- I [emphasized] run this classroom. (January 11, 2001; Field Notes)

Although Mr. Fisher conveyed to the students that they had the power to act appropriately or not, he also sent a clear message that he was ultimately in control of what was deemed appropriate and not. In our interview, he made it clear that it was his way or none and he noted that he used his physically intimidating size to execute this rationale. He said in our interview, as if speaking to a student,
“You are responsible, not me. I am just here to teach. You can take it any way you like it but you are going to take it. If you don’t like it, then you can transfer to another room, another country, or another planet, I don’t care. This is my room and I am in charge here. I am the boss. You do what I say or forget it.” I found that style very effective for me because of my size. I am still waiting for a kid to come in with a gun. Because I will walk right up to him and calmly take it away from him. If it is my time to go, well, it’s just my time to go. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

In everyday classroom situations, the teacher dictated student actions. It was the teacher, not the student, who decided the procedures: when and how loudly students can talk, when they can move out of their seats, when or if they are allowed to go to the bathroom, and how they will spend a 90-minute class period. For many students, particularly those who assume many responsibilities and decision-making tasks at home, this lack of power can be extremely hard to swallow.

Discipline Plays a Central Role in the School Setting

Discipline was the main emphasis within the school setting. However, this was not to imply that discipline was strictly enforced, but rather school personnel appeared to be more concerned with students displaying appropriate discipline than to the academic achievements of the students. In essence, academics held a lower priority than discipline. The very structure of the academic program within the school predetermined that academic opportunities may have to take a lower priority than in traditional schools. For example, because of the size of the school and the limited number of teachers, only a few subjects per grade level were offered. Unlike most middle and high schools, students had
very limited, if any, choices in the classes they took. Therefore, some students ended up taking classes out of their grade level, classes that they already had, or classes for which they were not academically prepared. Such compromises may have been necessary, but did not indicate to students that academics were of high priority. There was no question, however, that behavioral issues did hold a high priority. The following sections examine teacher and administrator self-identifications as disciplinarians, perceptions of discipline in the school, and discipline as power.

Teacher and Administrator Self-Identifications as Disciplinarians

Most teachers and administrators voiced their beliefs that behavioral issues took precedence over academic ones. Academic expectations were simply not emphasized. Many members of the staff indicated that they saw their primary role as disciplinarian, rather than facilitator of academic learning. In fact, in all of the conversations around behavior, only a few staff members cited the need for discipline as a vehicle for learning. Officer Bo alluded to this need as he described his major function as the school resource officer as one of supervisor:

While classes are going on we’re walking the halls. If teachers have any problems with students, they’ll see us walking and they can just grab us and talk to them. If we see kids out in the halls, we check their passes, make sure they are in class where they are supposed to be learning, not wandering the halls or skipping out of the school. Lunch time is about the same thing. We have to stay in there and make sure there are no conflicts- between not just the kids, but the teachers and everybody else who’s in there. (January 22, 2001; Interview conducted in Officer Bo’s office.)
The principal described his role for the alternative school in a similar way:

I feel like these students need a great deal of supervision. I feel like I need to be a part of that. You will not find a time when I’m not in the hallway during class changes unless I’m talking to the Superintendent, or--there aren’t many things that keep me from the hallway when we have a class change, because students need to be supervised all the time. I see that as a big part of my role here, that I see and hear what’s going on all the time. . . . I just feel really, really strongly that supervision is a vital part of, not just in an alternative school, but in any school. You can’t know what is going on up there in your office with the door closed.

(February 15, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Mrs. Johnson, a seventh grade mathematics teacher also believed strongly in how her role shaped the discipline of the students:

The first thing [about my role] would be the disciplinary. That’s the biggest problem here. We all say that you have to get past that before you can do any teaching whatsoever. That’s what I deal with most of the day. Discipline. And teach second. And in some cases parenting- parenting some of the kids. But the disciplinarian is the first. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in Family Connections room.)

Mrs. Prince, the assistant principal, also echoed the notion of disciplinarian. Part of her official role at the school was to oversee the discipline at the school. She described her perceptions as follows:

It’s challenging to try to determine what is causing the negative behavior. And then to try to discipline that child based on whatever the causes are, and so, I see
my role as looking at the population, looking at the students on an individual basis and trying to determine how best to help them in terms of being successful in the school. Many of them will never be successful. Many of them are not acclimated to a regular high school degree. And as far as my role here, I just see it as trying to come up with ways that these students can focus on success in their life.

(February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Prince’s office.)

Mr. Fisher believed strongly in discipline to define his role as a teacher. He felt that he had much to offer in this area, if the administration would just let him teach as he saw fit. Here he described how he saw his role as a teacher, focusing on the disciplinary structure:

These kids need discipline from me the most. Like I said, I taught kids in the hood with ankle bracelets from the police. They hated me at first. When I would take them to the bus, I would be marching them down the hill singing a cadence. Then they would repeat after me and they were in step. They were digging it and they saw the discipline. They would say, “We got the coolest class in the school.” After a while they learn to respect it. These were real gang members I am talking about. They had seen the violence and the death. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

It was very interesting that even of the teachers or administrators who did not mention their role of disciplinarian as their most important, few mentioned their role in connection to the academic lives of the students. Mrs. Moore perhaps came the closest, when she said, in more general terms,

A teacher’s role would be to do my job to help the kids. That’s why I’m here. I’m here for success. Even if it’s just a small success. I’m here for you to at least
accomplish something. And I’m going to do the best to my ability to see that you accomplish it, whether you want to or not. Because I know that the best teachers I had, I didn’t always like at the time. But then, later on, thank God, they did what they did to make me get what I got. And so I have to look at it like that. I’m here to be a role model for these kids. I’m here to teach these kids and that’s what I’m trying to do. (January 31, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Moore’s classroom.)

There were other indicators around the school that teachers and administrators emphasized discipline. For example, in order to be considered for student of the month, students had to have no discipline referrals by a teacher. Likewise, getting placed back at the home-school depended primarily on how the student performed behaviorally, not academically. This de-emphasis on academics was noted by students and parents and grandparents of Bridges School. Their perceptions of the academic program at the alternative school seemed to indicate that it was inadequate.

Perceptions of Discipline in the School Setting

The limited number of parents and grandparents with whom I talked indicated the need for strict discipline. They often felt that the students responded best to situations that were highly structured. The first section below describes adult pleas for strict discipline. Adults (both teachers and grandparents) often suggested the installment of a military-type discipline structure as a solution, as explained in the second section below.

“If He Sees a Weak Link, He Gonna Take You for a Ride.”: Pleas for Strict Discipline

Four parents and/or grandparents of the participants agreed to meet and talk with me. Each of these adults initiated conversations about discipline in the alternative school setting. The parents and grandparents with whom I talked felt that discipline policies at
Bridges School needed to be more strictly enforced. Some parents and grandparents felt that a “strong hand” kept their children out of trouble. Martin’s mother reported her son’s need for strong discipline in the classroom:

I think a strong teacher will be able to help Martin. Yeah, that’s exactly what he needs. ‘Cause that’s what he’s used to. He’s not used to getting away with everything he do. If he sees- like I say, if he sees a weak link, he gonna take you for a ride. Strong teachers, and I understand it’s so hard to find them now, and you can’t blame them ‘cause they getting shot up and everything is happening in these schools these days. You really can’t blame them. . . . Discipline, whippin’ his behind is the only thing that really makes him straighten up. Like I said, I try to talk to him a whole lot, and not have to use the belt on him, but when it gets too far then I know I got to do something. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted at Martin’s mother’s home.)

Martin’s mother mentioned the use of corporal punishment as a solution to maintaining Martin’s good behavior. Since public school teachers in Georgia are not allowed to use corporal punishment, this is not an option for encouraging good behavior, although other parent-figures spoke of its effectiveness at home. Morris’s grandfather also mentioned corporal punishment and discussed the need for the school to have better, or perhaps more traditional, means of discipline, as well as a more rigorous academic program.

I think his main problem was when they took discipline out of school, they do not discipline here. They need the nose in the circle on the blackboard like we did. I do not beat the kids--I do whip them when they need it- they need the whippin’ back in school so the school will have some control over the kids . . . . Everybody
Bradley’s mother and grandmother extended the conversation around the need for strict discipline to the need for more consistent discipline expectations across traditional schools and the alternative school. They felt that Bradley’s placement at the alternative school for a year was a rather severe punishment for making a sexually inappropriate comment, while Bradley himself was threatened and physically assaulted at the alternative school with no consequences. They described their interactions with the administrators of Bridges about a particular incident that happened to Bradley on the bus:

   Grandmother: I was telling her [the administrator] about the little boy pinching and bruising Bradley and Bradley was standing there and she [the administrator] said, “How do I know Bradley didn’t pinch himself?” I mean, I looked at Bradley and he said, “I didn’t pinch myself.”

   Mother: Bradley just rolled his eyes because they don’t believe nothin’ those kids say. They don’t believe it and they don’t pursue anything that is being done to them. Zero-tolerance for threatening and sexual harassment, but they can get threatened and pinched all day long and they don’t do nothin’ about it. They continue until somebody gets hurt is what happens. . . . It is different when it’s
done here [alternative school] because these are “bad kids” and these [traditional school kids] are not. (March 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Bradley’s grandmother’s home.)

In this case, Bradley’s mom was particularly concerned because the boy who threatened Bradley was later found to have a gun at school, hidden between some books in the gym bleachers. It was only then that the student was given any consequence.

As a solution to some of these behavioral issues, a few teachers, parents, and grandparents noted the need for some sort of military-type discipline. They asserted that physical activity and strict discipline would assist in promoting good behavior in students. The following paragraphs detail these perceptions.

“You Can’t Teach a Guy with No Fear.”: Military-Type Discipline as Solution

Some family members and teachers associated with the school believed that military-type discipline might positively influence the students. This seemed to be a fairly commonly proposed solution to discipline problems. Some adults who I interviewed seemed to hold the view that a good dose of discipline would solve the students’ chronically disruptive behavior. Morris’s grandfather offered this suggestion:

That’s one thing they could put in schools- military-type teaching, one hour a day. That right there would help more than anything. Strict disciplinarian. And if they didn’t do right, then do like what we had to do in the Air Force- run 10 miles a day without stopping. If we didn’t do what the TI (Training Instructor) said, then you did 50 pushups or something. If you didn’t do it, you stand them in a corner and he gets ridiculed. Sooner or later ridicule will make things right. Really all schools- until I joined the Air Force I had a bad attitude. That helped me more
than anything. The possibility of one hour a day or one day a week of military-type discipline. And if the parents would just cooperate, come down and join in.

(April 12, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Other adults within the school community held this philosophy. Mr. Fisher echoed this notion as one solution to the state of discipline in the current school system. Here he described a radical make-over as necessary for the system:

I would say coast to coast, border to border, this system needs to be taken over by the Marines, and that may seem like a joke, but I’m actually serious. Every kid would be in a uniform, every kid would have the same textbook from Michigan to Alabama, California to Washington State to Georgia. The system is rotten to the core. It is rotten, rotten, rotten. There is no hope for it and it is only going to get worse. . . . There is no fear. And you can’t teach a guy with no fear. There is no fear in education anymore, none! You can say, “I am going to call your Mamma” and they say “Call my mamma, I don’t care.” “I am going to send you to the principal” and they say, “Oh, good, I like to go to the principal’s office.” They are afraid of nothing. They ain’t afraid of YDC, Boot Camp, or nothing. You can send them to the State Pen but by then it’s too late. There is no fear in this system. It is a shame to even say it that you would have to have a system run on fear but when I was coming up, it was run on fear. I don’t know about you. Fear kept us in line. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

Mr. Fisher also spoke about his discomfort in not being allowed by the administration to rule his classroom with military-type discipline. He felt that style of discipline had gotten him positive results in the past, in previous teaching situations. He described how having
to change his techniques affected his teaching identity. “I thought my role would be to set an example of almost military discipline and how it could work, but they won’t allow that so- now that’s the role I am used to.”

Mrs. Yarborough mentioned militaristic discipline when she described how the alternative school concept was first initiated by Georgia’s former Governor Zell Miller. She said of his philosophy:

The original intent was for school safety and to get all the bad kids, put them in one school, and treat them harsh. He started the Boot Camp and he said, ‘That was what was good for me in the Marines; it straightened out my life.’ (May 18, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Yarborough’s office.)

As Mrs. Yarborough continued, she indicated her perception of the weakness of the argument for military-type discipline.

Unfortunately YDC’s Boot Camps found out the hard way with the recidivism rates huge. It did not work and research shows Military-style discipline does not work. It takes support from families, support for the child, and it is an expensive process to keep the child to learn to deal with all the problems. (May 18, 2001; Interview conducted in Mrs. Yarborough’s office.)

Interestingly, in all of the conversations surrounding military-type discipline, no one mentioned how the need for such control relates directly to the student. There was no mention of what this strict discipline was supposed to lead to, as far as improved academic achievement or decreased involvement in the juvenile justice system. Teachers often asserted the need for discipline in the classroom without making connections as to
how this discipline would better serve the student. Thus, I will next examine the role of discipline in maintaining power.

**Discipline as Power**

From a critical theory perspective, discipline maintains the power structure (Hinchey, 1998). Often, when students are well-behaved, the power resides with the person “in-charge,” the teacher or administrator. When students are unruly, the power structures are unstable and unpredictable and may lead to disruption of the power structure. In this school setting, while there were many conversations surrounding discipline in schools, virtually no one related this to the academic development of the students.

Students were often accountable for behavior that did nothing to promote their academic success, but rather served as the teacher’s demonstration of power. Several observations indicated that teachers, whether consciously or not, demonstrated their power during times of student misbehavior, rather than redirecting the student to promote on-task behavior for the good of the student. While teachers may have been acting out of frustration and not merely in attempts to show power, the actions served to reinforce teacher power. For example, in one class, Keem was asked to leave the classroom for a seemingly insignificant infraction that could have been easily redirected. The teacher said,

Take your books with you. I’m not going to sit here and watch you play with your hair. You’re not coming back in here. If that’s all you’re going to do, you may as well stay at home. (January 11, 2001; Field Notes)
With this example we see that the goal of the teacher seemed to be to punish the student for playing with his hair. He took him out of the academic setting instead of getting the student back on task and focused on academic matters. These types of power-plays surfaced frequently in the school environment as students were reprimanded for walking a few paces behind their classmates in the hallway or for failing to bring the proper materials to class. Disciplining for the sake of power served only to perpetuate cycles of delinquency. This excerpt from my research journal describes my frustrations as I reflected on how a teacher’s display of power can contribute to delinquency:

Today I became very frustrated while observing in a class. A teacher yelled at a student because he did not have a pencil. In turn, the student became angry and aggravated, and proceeded to take this out on other teachers and students throughout the day. It’s just not fair that the kids who need it the most get the very least and they are treated like criminals when they walk through the door. Well, guess what, everybody, they wouldn’t be in here if they hadn’t done something to get kicked out of school! Given this, why does that mean that they should suddenly turn into perfect students when they get here and be able to follow rules and know how to control their anger, and suddenly, as if by magic, be able to make good grades and come to school prepared with materials? . . . We put these kids in the same situation in a different school and without really changing much, we expect them to change? They don’t have the ability or the support to know how to change. I keep thinking, what if someone told me that my life could not go on unless I learned how to become a successful shoplifter? My world would suddenly be a lot harder. I really don’t know how to shoplift. I don’t know the
tricks, I don’t know how to keep from getting caught, and I don’t have any friends that regularly shoplift who could give me support. I think that’s what we expect from kids sometimes though. It doesn’t make any sense. Everyone keeps telling them they aren’t bad kids, but then why are they treated that way? (February 28, 2001; Research Journal)

Teachers I observed sometimes focused more on punishing students for misbehavior than in redirecting it, and thus, issues of power surfaced in the data. When teachers seemed to discipline “for the sake of discipline,” students often reacted adversely. Perhaps without conscious realizations, teachers used discipline as a way to maintain their position of power within the classroom and thereby sustained the status quo of traditional power structures within the school. The following sections shift in focus to examine the interaction patterns of students and teachers that I observed at Bridges School.

Patterns of Interactions in the School Context

In this segment, I explore the patterns of interactions that I observed at Bridges School. I ascertained distinct patterns in the ways in which students associated with their peers, as well as the ways that teachers interacted with students. I describe peer interaction as performance and teacher-student interactions at Bridges School.

Peer Interaction as Performance

The most striking element of peer interaction that I noted was performance. Elements of performance surfaced in almost every peer interaction. Performance elements have often been noted in narration. Traditionally associated with African-American linguistic patterns, performance “is often understood as a potentially superficial, unilateral reenactment of a previously scripted scene for the purpose of
entertainment. . . . A performed style of presentation is dramatic, animated, openly
time expressive, improvised, and interactive” (Craddock-Willis & McCabe, 1996, p. 100). The
purpose of performance is to evoke humor from peers and others who witness the verbal
interaction. Craddock-Willis and McCabe describe the deeper purpose of performance as
being, “not simply to entertain, it is to express the humorous . . . to engage and connect
with individuals but also with the larger community” (p. 100). Mahiri (1991) contends
that these interactions are meant to be both humorous and exaggerated.

Students at Bridges interacted with each other through this display of performance
in a way that defined their peer community. The purpose of the peer interaction was
typically not to gain new information, to produce a narrative, or to communicate real
meaning, but rather the purpose was entertainment--to perform for the surrounding group
of peers-- the audience. Boasting and bragging are also associated with this interaction
style (Mahiri, 1991). Within the performance interaction there were rules to which the
students adhered. For example, students assumed one of two roles in their speech, the
initiator or the respondent. Verbal interactions were typically kept short and consisted of
quick, one-sentence exchanges, with no person occupying more than a few seconds of
time. Much of the performance depended on students consistently interacting verbally
with their peers by trying to make each other feel inferior, by being argumentative, and
by failing to show any emotions, which might reveal their vulnerabilities. While
performance may be in part a factor of their developmental stage of adolescence and is
not specific to this group of students, the degree to which these student depended on this
interaction style was highly magnified in comparison to most students I have observed in
other middle school settings. This phenomenon suggested that either the students
themselves were more prone to this type of interaction, or the setting in which they were placed socialized them into using this performance element. This example of student conversation, heard over lunch, illustrates the performance nature of student interaction:

Student 1 to Student 2: Boy, you come over here, I’m gonna pop you upside your head.

Student 2 approaches Student 1 and they are both laughing. Student 1 makes a playful attempt at punching the student, knowing no physical contact will actually be made, but the attempt is to make a “scare.” Student 2 says, “I’ll tear you up. You lucky Officer Bo right there.”

Student 1: “Give me 50 cents. I gotta go to the snack room.”

Student 2: “I ain’t givin’ you nothing.”

Student 1: “Boy, I said give me 50 cents- I’ll rip you.” He turns to another student and reaches for the Reese’s Cup candy bar that is sitting on the table.

Student 3 (owner of the candy bar) stands up and towers over Student 1: “Give it back, you punk.”

Student 1 laughs and slides the candy bar back on the table and quickly looks around to see with whom he will interact next. (February 15, 2001; Field Notes taken during lunch period.)

In this example, we see how the “meat” of the conversation was a request, and a denial for $.50. Yet this “meat” was surrounded by elements of performance: the playful attempt at hitting, the provocative fighting words, and the taking of another student’s candy bar.
This short excerpt of typical interaction between two boys also shows how much of the student verbal interaction was not centered around exchanging meaningful conversation, but rather its purpose was performance.

Students at Bridges School often interacted with each other by trying to make their peers appear inferior. This behavior was found in classes as well as in informal settings such as lunch and P.E. Many interactions revolved around derogatory remarks about family members, clothes, hairstyles, and lifestyles. These playful attempts have been called “ribbin’,” a term that originated on the streets of Buffalo, New York. Ribbin’ describes the verbal game of taunting, making fun of someone, or laughing at them (Foster, 1974). Students at Bridges School engaged in this such verbal game by constantly bantering back and forth.

Peers who were present typically served as the audience. Their role was to listen and occasionally assume the role of initiator or recipient as they entered into the performance. The roles for the interaction were as follows: One student, the initiator, tossed out a derogatory comment, and the receiving student, in return, either said something in defense or tried to “one-up” the last comment by saying something that was to be perceived to be more hurtful or damaging. Consider the following example of verbal interaction observed during lunch within a small group of African-American male students. The first student begins the ribbin’ and the second student, in defense, engages in “playing the dozens.” Playing the dozens refers to a traditional African-American verbal game in which a student talks about another student’s mother (Foster, 1974). Ball (1992) describes it as a ritualized speech that is distinguished from both academic and mainstream American English. Playing the dozens is considered a deeper insult than non-
family related jabs. Here, the second student actually engages in “dirty dozen” by inserting sexual innuendoes about his peer’s mother:

   Student 1 about Student 2 who has an afro: Look at the nigger’s hair. It nasty.
   [Laughter from several boys at table.]
   Student 2: That’s not what your mama said last night when I had her. (February 1, 2001; Field Notes taken during lunch period.)

“Playing the dozens” is a particular kind of bantering (Johnson, 1971). Bantering, however, refers to any game of interactive, humorous insult. As Foster (1974) notes, bantering, and the dozens are “played by boys and girls, adolescents, and adults. For some, the only purpose of the game appears to be to amuse onlookers and participants” (p. 212). So was the case with the students of Bridges School.

Comments were often not truly directed at one person, but rather were expressed to entertain a group of peers. One student merely served as the source of entertainment for the entertaining comment. In this bantering style of interaction, students very rarely, if ever, appeared bothered by the comments that were directed at them, even when these comments were made at their own expense. The bantering was “part of the game” and thus no student took personal offense when the bantering was pursued in a light-hearted manner. Elements of performance were not limited to informal gathering times of peers, but rather occurred in the classroom as well. Table 4 contains field notes with my interpretations that illustrate how Darius noticed a seemingly insignificant event in the classroom on February 19, 2001, and worked it into a performance interaction. As the excerpt in Table 4 shows, interactions among peers followed much the same pattern, with
### Field Note Excerpt Depicting Peer Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field note excerpt</th>
<th>Researcher interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Addarian to class: “I can’t concentrate. Y’all talk too much.” He gets up and walks over to the classroom door where the school menu is posted. “Man, they didn’t have nothing good for breakfast or for lunch. Cheese sandwich.”</td>
<td>Here Addarian is making a comment to the class, but addresses no person in particular, yet he sets the tone for the verbal exchange. He is not necessarily looking for a response.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius says: “I got something for you.”</td>
<td>Darius now assumes the role of initiator, and poses a challenge to Addarian to respond.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addarian responds: “Man, go back to sleep.”</td>
<td>Addarian accepts the verbal challenge and responds with a comment that is intended to offend Darius.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darius: “Shut your fat face.”</td>
<td>Darius tries to “one-up” the last comment by saying something more derogatory.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
one person initiating a dialogue and the other person accepting the role and thus engaging in a defensive role. Throughout the day, students constantly switched back and forth between the roles of initiator and the recipient in dialogue. Referred to as “mounting” in the street talk literature, Foster (1974) contends that initiating verbal contests are an important way for male youth to assert their position and reputation in male street society. Losing a verbal challenge feminizes the male, but putting down adversaries exhibits strength and masculinity. On the street corner, males perceive verbal ability as desirable as physical strength (Foster). With these students, the idea of “one-upmanship” extended beyond the verbal interaction of peers. Male students also asserted displays of masculinity in their actions. The following sections describe the show of masculinity as peer performance and emotional expression as peer performance.

Show of Masculinity as Peer Performance

Some of the student interaction extended beyond verbal interchange and intertwined displays of masculinity as peer performance. Often, this interaction among males focused around trying to appear “tough.” Anything that made them appear otherwise to their friends was considered a threat to that masculinity and was avoided at all costs. In the following sections, I discuss the role of physical challenges in the quest for masculinity and affection as a threat to masculinity.

“You ain’t got no game.”: Physical challenges. These displays were meant to typify patriarchal and masculine traits such as strength, courage, and superiority. Similar to the interaction style of initiating a verbal challenge that must be defended or redirected, male students often initiated physical challenges that had to be met as well. Young males of this study often engaged in activities such as wrestling holds, arm
wrestling, hitting and punching, as well as comparing muscle size to exhibit their masculinity. These displays often occurred before class in the hallway as students were changing classrooms, after lunch, during periods of “free time,” and even during class when students felt they could escape reprimand. These displays of masculinity were often evident in sporting competitions and were particularly palpable as students played basketball in the gym each day. Such remarks as “you ain’t got no game” and “sorry-shooting punk” served as a way for one student to challenge another and as a way to accentuate one’s superior skill over another player’s. This excerpt of field notes describes one such loosely organized display of masculinity that occurred during “free time” in a class while a substitute teacher was present:

After a game of trashcan basketball ends, a wrestling match begins to take place. Boys begin to challenge one another to see who can be knocked down first. The boys begin the “match” a sort of standing bear hug with both arms wrapped around each other. Then they bend at the waist and try to cause their opponent to collapse on the floor. In the classroom of 10 boys there is no more than one or two pairs of boys wrestling at one time. The other students watch when they are not engaged in a “match.” At one point, Timothy’s opponent, Allen, causes him to double over on a table in the back of the room. Allen and Jackson take turns hitting him. They are not using punches hard enough to bruise, but they are not exactly soft either. Timothy is laughing, so I don’t think he is in serious pain. The play fights continue and the boys structure it like a tournament so that everyone has a chance to “fight” everyone else, with winners paired up with other winners. At the end of the “tournament,” the boys are busy reviewing their success. Jeremy
says, “I beat everybody in here except for him.” At this point, the boys move on to arm wrestling, and follow the same procedure, with pairs of boys sitting in student desks to arm wrestle. Again, one or two arm wrestling matches will occur at once while the other students watch. (March 2, 2001; Field Notes)

In another class, Mark challenged a classmate to a contest in holding his breath during Mr. Morton’s language arts class. The following quote shows how this stunt assumed the characteristic of a masculinity display:

Mark: “When it [second hand of clock] gets to 12, hold your nose like this.” [He closes his mouth and holds his hand over nose as if he is going underwater.] They hold their breath for a few seconds and then gasp for air. Soon Martin, Jeremy, and Campbell also join in. Mark adds, “You can make yourself pass out like this. Ready. . . go!” [They all try to hold their noses and mouths closed, but they begin to giggle.] Mark redirects the small crowd of students now. “Okay, watch. Ready?”

Mr. Morton interrupts, now noticing what is taking place. He says to Mark, “You started this. Now you need to finish it. If you do it again you will have a detention.” (March 5, 2001; Field Notes)

Students easily turned everyday events and interactions with one another into displays of masculinity. Consider this example in which two students were walking on the bleachers in the gym and shortly thereafter engaged in a show of masculinity, when one student prompted another.

Billy, (wearing his cool pink sunglasses that he borrowed from Leigh) is walking on the bleachers and talking casually to friends as some of the other students are
playing basketball. Mark and Billy find a crack in the wood in a section of the bleachers and jump on it continually to attempt to enlarge the crack even further. They are seeing who can jump the hardest and loudest, but continually check the other end of the gym where their teacher is sitting. Getting caught will surely mean an end to the game. With Billy’s last piercing stomp on the bleachers that echoes across the gym, Mrs. Johnson, the gym teacher calls out, “Billy, Mark. Cut that out!” Billy jumps from the bleachers, about three rows up. Brandon, who is sitting nearby, asks, “Is that as far as you can jump?” Billy, accepting the challenge that has been set forth, responds, “No” and then goes about midway to the top of the bleachers, about six rows up, and contemplates jumping from there. As he is thinking, Brandon challenges his masculinity by saying, “You’re chicken. Chicken, chicken, chicken. Bock! Bock! Bock!” Billy, now having to make a choice between responding and risking injury, or denying the masculinity challenge and appearing inferior, says, “Man, do you know how high this is? Look at it from up here.” Again, Mrs. Johnson intervenes, calling to Billy, “Come here.” Billy walks down the bleachers two at a time and goes over to Mrs. Johnson, probably for a reprimand. He returns, saying to Brandon and to anyone else who may have been listening and watching, “I was gonna do it too, man” as a way to preserve his dignity without actually having to go through with the challenge. (March 6, 2001; Field Notes)

Shows of masculinity most often erupted spontaneously and occurred regularly. These displays may also serve to explain other aspects of student behavior, particularly male students’ need to appear emotionally invulnerable. Many participants seemed to feel
that expressions of affection would threaten their masculinity, and thus they avoided affection, and even portrayed their fathers in stereotypical male roles.

“You don’t like people touching you?”: Affection as a threat to masculinity. Some of the participants seemed to be so concerned with adhering to this notion of masculinity within their performance interactions that they outwardly appeared reticent to any gesture that might suggest that they were anything other than a “tough guy.” Some of the students appeared uncomfortable accepting gestures of affection or love, particularly when a person of their same gender expressed it, perhaps because they feared it would detract from their masculine image. Part of the performance element of peer interaction dictated that males needed to show that they did not need other males. For example, when Dr. Bailey came to speak to the class one day, he touched Martin on the shoulder as he spoke. Martin immediately withdrew from the hand on his shoulder. Dr. Bailey said, “You don’t like people touching you?” Martin replied, “No.” Later in a private conversation, Dr. Bailey revealed that he often uses touch as a way to break down barriers with his clients and he found it interesting that Martin withdrew from his touch. I asked Martin about his reactions to Dr. Bailey’s visit, and he began by talking about his discomfort when Dr. Bailey told him that he loved him:

Martin: Like when he said he loves me. I don’t like for a man to say he loves me.

Carol: He just means he loves you like a friend.

Martin: I still don’t like it.

Carol: Why not?

Martin: I don’t know. Seems like he is gay or something.

Carol: Does your dad or your step-dad ever tell you that?
Martin: Nope. My mom tells me that she loves me. But she supposed to tell me that she love me. But not my Daddy. (February 26, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

In Martin’s case, accepting a gesture of affection from another male may have made him appear vulnerable to his peers, or to me in our conversation above. When students of this study were presented with these tensions of love and affection from an adult, versus the emotional detachment that their peers expected, students most often engaged in the performance that rendered them invulnerable to their peers, thereby maintaining their masculinity. Perhaps as part of maintaining typical gender roles, participants were quick to reveal their fathers and step-fathers in ways that characterized those relationships as detached or abusive- anything other than caring and affectionate. In addition to the fact that participants’ fathers may have expressed little affection, perhaps participants also felt more comfortable sharing illustrations that typified their fathers in masculine roles instead of portraying them in loving and affectionate terms. For example, Billy often described his tumultuous relationship with his father, often citing arguments and screaming matches as their typical exchanges. Here he explained the only recent communication he remembers having with his father in a normal tone of voice:

We never- well, the most he’s ever said was when we sat down- the most I’ve ever said to him and he has actually said to me, is like, the first thing that we said that we didn’t have to yell to get across, was he was watching a football game and I sat down and asked him what the score was, and he told me that score. And that’s the first thing that we’ve ever said that we didn’t yell. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)
Likewise, Jeremy easily revealed information that added to his masculinity profile when he talked with another participant and with me about his father. Our conversation went like this:

Jeremy: I saw him [Dad] yesterday, but I ignored him. I was outside with my friends and he waved.

Carol: Are you mad at your Dad?

Jeremy: No, no, I ain’t worried about my Dad.

Carol: How often do you see him?

Jeremy: I used to see him every other weekend. But I never see him now.

Carol: How do you feel about that?

Jeremy: I feel good about it.

Carol: It doesn’t bother you?

Jeremy: No, he has him a 6-month old baby. It’s all right. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

In the same conversation, Mark told about several very rough “play fights” he had with his father that involved putting holes in walls and breaking furniture as well as bones. One of these fights ended in police involvement, as he described:

I tackled him twice and the third time he pushed me back and I fell and hit my head on a rock. I took after him in the yard, and I was swinging, and I was hit by my dad. A police officer was near and he saw it and he turned in my dad and he was mad at me. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Despite the disturbing nature of some of these interactions with their fathers, the participants did not hesitate to share the stories. Rarely, if at all, did I hear opposing
stories that demonstrated affection from same-sex parents. Perhaps this need to demonstrate masculinity was accentuated in certain families who also frowned upon demonstration of affection with same-sex family members. As evidenced by observations, when participants were uncomfortable expressing and receiving affection, the need for performance in their verbal interactions was amplified. The display of masculinity in emotions related more generally to an overall assertion for peer performance in emotional expression. I examine this element of performance within emotions in the following section.

**Emotional Expression as Peer Performance**

Performance factors seeped into the way in which students expressed their emotions around their peers. Even within the context of emotional expression, peers tried to entertain each other, despite the inappropriateness of this response. Consequently, there was very little talk and display of true emotions. Anger, though it usually led to trouble, was just about the only emotion that students felt comfortable sharing. Expressions of anger reinforced their masculine, “invulnerable” identities, as discussed in a later section of this chapter. Revealing emotions such as sadness, fear, and hopelessness would probably lead to peer rejection or scoffing. In order to keep up the performance, students rarely showed that anything “got to them” and they went to great lengths to remain unfazed by events that would typically warrant emotional response. For example, this became particularly clear to me when Dr. Bailey visited the site and was met with laughter and silliness, despite the serious subject matter. Even when he elicited responses about the murders of Columbine High School, the students responded with nothing less than laughter and sarcasm. What I interpreted as callousness at the time, I later thought to
be performance. When students laughed or joked about the Columbine murders, perhaps it was not necessarily because they were untouched by the tragedy, but maybe because they lacked the ability to properly express their feelings in a way that their peers would not laugh at them. By covering up their emotions, perhaps they could safely remain at a distance from the emotional component and concentrate on the performance, or the less serious matter, surrounding the emotional issue. On the day that the news broke about the murders near a San Diego high school, I again observed performance elements in students’ speech. When I asked the students what they thought about the situation, most only shrugged their shoulders and said, “I don’t know,” acting as if it were really no big deal and not worth their attention to discuss the matter. The only student who did comment focused on the shooter, and said, “He only got two? That’s pitiful.” At the time, I was very disturbed by the lack of emotion that I felt the students were able or willing to express. I first expressed this realization in a journal entry that I wrote after Dr. Bailey’s visit to the school. A selection of my journal read as follows:

I think back now to the second period that Dr. Bailey and I went to and it had a remarkable atmosphere. The students were extremely silly. Everything was funny to them. A lot of it makes sense to me now. For a lot of these kids, if they took anything too seriously, they’d be completely depressed all of the time. It’s so frustrating to us as adults, but if they took life seriously, it would be absolutely too much to handle. I know I couldn’t handle the things that these guys do. They are so immature, yet so smart. . . . It’s almost like they have no capacity to feel, because they have been so good at shutting that off for so long, and have to in order to survive emotionally. I think back to when Martin was on that prison tour
and he started to tear up. Then half an hour later he was laughing about it on the bus ride home. It’s all about covering it up. I think he was truly terrified to think that one day he could be standing among those men, with the fear of rape and the lack of freedom, yet the only way he can process all of that is through humor, by laughing it off. (February 26, 2001; Research Journal)

After having had time to reflect on the issue, I suspect that students more than likely were not so “emotionally hardened,” but rather they were unwilling to reveal true and vulnerable emotion to their peers as the consequences for doing so were too great. This phenomenon was suggested repeatedly in my observations of students. For example, as I mentioned in the preceding journal excerpt, during our field trip to the state prison, one of Martin’s eyes began to swell up with tears as he was lambasted by prison officials and inmates. His peers, seeing Martin’s display of emotion, quickly teased and laughed at him as soon as they were back on the school bus and on “safe” territory. Perhaps to cover up his vulnerabilities, Martin denied his emotional display, laughed about the things the prison officials yelled at him, made fun of the inmates, and quickly launched into similar events that revealed other peers’ vulnerabilities, making others laugh. He quickly turned a frightening and somber experience into a comical, entertaining situation through use of his emotion as performance.

Another event at school also turned my attention to the way in which students employed performance to distort the display of their true emotions. In this journal entry, I describe a conversation I had with a student after a sobering event, and my initial reactions to our conversation:
Having just yesterday left a classroom where the students said that the Columbine murders were “funny,” I am sitting in the office where two students are waiting at a table that sits in front of the senior secretary’s desk. One of the students, the sister of a seventh grade boy I know well, is sitting with her leg propped up on a chair and is waiting for her mom to pick her up from school. The secretary looks at her and says, “Tell Ms. Pearson what happened to you this weekend.” The student replies frankly and with a smile, “I got shot.” I say, “What? What happened?” She goes on to tell me that she was shot with a .22 rifle that grazed her leg. She tells me it bled badly and she had to go to the hospital. She is actually laughing as she tells me the story. I can hardly concentrate on what she is saying because I am so focused on the fact that here is a girl who perhaps does not even realize that she could have died. Instead she is sitting here laughing about the incident, I suppose thinking it makes for a good story. These kids are absolutely untouchable. No wonder we can’t get them to care about things like algebra and history. They don’t even seem to care when they are shot! I am so amazed- and so frightened for her. What has happened to her to make her so callous? Would she be acting any differently if she had obtained a serious injury from this shot? Why are there kids playing around with .22s and not being supervised? (February 26, 2001; Research Journal)

I would argue that part of the peer interaction required that students must disengage from their emotions in order to maintain the performance component. Displaying emotions, in what most people would consider appropriate ways, might carry too great a cost for the student.
Performance defined student interaction. Whether it was in verbal exchange, physical displays of masculinity, or emotional expression, performance was the crux of peer interaction. The performance element, although it did appear in teacher-student interactions, did not assume as essential a role. The focus of the next section turns to the patterns of interactions found between teacher and student.

Teacher-Student Interactions

Just as students exhibited predictable patterns of interaction with their peers, teachers also showed patterns of interaction with students. Each of the interactions described below were observed in classroom interactions. These patterns of interaction greatly influenced how students received and reacted to teachers in their classrooms. Below I describe what I considered to be the most prominent teacher-student interaction patterns, and show how students reacted to these varying patterns. Teacher-student patterns included teacher talk (also referred to as school talk), non-traditional teacher interaction, and non-school talk. It is important to note that while teachers showed predominant interaction styles, none were so deeply entrenched in one type of interaction that they did not engage in other interaction types at some point in time. Mrs. Moore used school talk about as frequently as non-school talk even though she occasionally also used non-traditional school talk. Many teachers used all types of interaction styles, although some teachers relied more heavily on one interaction style than others, thus dramatically shaping their relationships with students. Table 5 outlines the predominant interaction style of each teacher. The following sections examine each of the teacher-student interaction styles: Teacher talk, non-traditional teacher talk, and non-school talk.
Teacher Talk

Teacher talk, or school talk, is that language which makes one “sound like a teacher.” This interaction, as I define it, incorporated school, the goals of school, reprimands, morality, and academic welfare. School talk clearly defined the teacher as “expert” and the student as “novice.” Teachers in this setting used teacher talk such as, “Sit down,” “You should come to school prepared,” and “Who can tell me the answer to question #5?” Teachers at Bridges School, as the adults, often asserted this interaction style over students, which assisted in delineating the power structure that existed in classrooms. During one class period, I observed how Mrs. Moore slipped into school talk as she conversed with students in an informal way. In the following example, notice how her school talk reasserted her role as a teacher, drawing the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate verbal interaction between students in her class. By her school talk, she made it clear that her classroom, while informal, was not a place to display hurtful language that can be so typical of student banter.

Bradley and Keisha engage in typical student interchange and banter back and forth. Keisha, in response to Bradley, says, “Shut your pregnant self up!” Keisha is loudly and firmly told by Mrs. Moore, “That is inappropriate. That’s street talk and will not be used in my class.” Mrs. Moore’s voice and teacher talk has such an effect that I even find myself looking down to avoid eye contact with her. (January 10, 2001; Field Notes)

Through her words and tone of voice, Mrs. Moore used teacher talk to clearly designate between informal conversation and typical peer put-downs. Her use of teacher talk again asserted her power as teacher as she regained control of the interactions in her classroom.
Table 5

Predominant Interaction Style of Seventh Grade Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seventh grade teacher</th>
<th>Teacher talk</th>
<th>Non-traditional teacher talk</th>
<th>Non-school talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Fisher</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Johnson</td>
<td>✓ (minimal and direct)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Moore</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Morton</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not surprisingly, many participants responded negatively to teacher talk and the power implications that came with it. Mr. Fisher relied on school talk as part of his teacher-student interaction. Students expressed that Mr. Fisher “talks too much” when they saw the school talk as irrelevant or unnecessary to their lives. Some students saw teacher talk as intrusive on their time, perhaps because they saw it as extraneous. For example, one day in class, Mr. Fisher engaged in teacher talk by suggesting writing with a pen instead of pencil. He was met with groans and sighs from students who demonstrated their displeasure. He engaged in school talk, and said,

A pen was designed to roll faster. Unlike a pencil that is a rock that has been put into wood, and it’s like grinding rock to write. So if you want to write by grinding some rock on your paper, be my guest, but I’d prefer to write with a pen. It was designed to roll with a ball on the end and you can actually write faster. (January 11, 2001; Field Notes)

Mr. Morton also tended to use school talk frequently in his classroom, a rather turbulent place, where students often displayed their most challenging behaviors in resistance to teachers and schools. Students did not seem to respond well to Mr. Morton’s stories that he related to try to make a point. These stories came across as teacher talk. Perhaps viewed by the students as interference, they continued to resist the power structure that suggested the teacher knew more than they did. The following example shows how Mr. Morton tried to make a point about following directions, but in so doing, turned the students off by using school talk.

Mr. Morton has just asked a student, “Do you need a pencil? You need to ask for one instead of just sitting there. You’re not being responsible.” To the class he
asks, “Okay, how are we doing?” There is no response from the class. He circulates around the room and stops at one student’s desk. He notices a student has not followed directions for completing the assignment, Mr. Morton adds, “Let me give you a story about directions.” He then goes into the following story: “There was a job in a factory and they had to know how to follow directions. The boss gave a test with a place for the name, date, time, job number, and then there were about 3 or 4 pages to fill out and he gave them half an hour to complete it. At the end of half an hour only one person did it. The one person said to the others, ‘You didn’t read the directions.’ For the directions it said ‘please read all of the test before you start the test.’ After #100 it said ‘you only have to write your name on this paper and you can ignore all of the others.’ They wanted someone who could read directions. All I asked you to do on this exercise was Part A and then I’ll explain Part B.” (January 19, 2001; Field Notes)

Teacher talk may also describe the interactions surrounding the enforcement of rules. When students perceived that they were never “given a break,” they came to resent the teacher talk that surrounded the discussion of the rules. One participant described how he felt about this:

He [teacher] just takes everything you do seriously. You can’t joke with anybody or nothing. You start talking and he calls out your name. Like today, I didn’t do nothin’ but he called out my name and said I was doin’ something that I wasn’t even doin’. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

Mr. Morton depended heavily upon rules to guide the behavior in his classroom and thus he often reacted negatively to interactions that were unrelated to school. For
example, when Susan commented about an impending storm outside, saying, “it’s dark outside,” Mr. Morton did not engage her with a quick response, but instead reminded her that she should not be talking, by saying, “Susan, we don’t need that.” When it did start to rain and some students began singing fairly quietly, “It’s raining, it’s pouring, the old man is snoring,” Mr. Morton responded with, “I’m sorry it’s not appropriate to sing.” These interjections of teacher talk served to reaffirm the distribution of power within the classroom setting. The following sections describe student resistance to teacher talk, school talk as interference, and school talk as a source of confusion.

“I started gettin’ badder.”: Student resistance to teacher talk. When listening to school talk, participants often disengaged from the teacher and from school by engaging in passive resistance behaviors as previously discussed. I often saw students put their heads down on their desk, sleep, do other activities such as drawing or communicating with a peer, and roll their eyes. I noticed these responses consistently throughout my observations. When students predicted that the teacher talk would continue for quite some time, they were more likely to disengage from their surroundings. I found this particularly true during school talk episodes such as educational videos. Often teacher talk seemed to incite boredom and students sought other outlets to engage them. The following excerpt of field notes describes how one class appeared during one episode of non-engaging school talk.

The students are watching a video about Cleopatra. I notice a new student here today, sitting next to Keisha. She has her head down on the desk. Morris gets up to ask Mr. Fisher a question, but I can’t tell what it is because the volume of the television is so loud. Morris returns to his seat. Bradley says something to Mr.
Fisher, though again it is inaudible to me, sitting across the room. Mr. Fisher, who is sitting with his legs propped up on his desk in the back of the room, looks at Bradley and says, “Watch the T.V. I’ve told you 16,000 times!” Bradley immediately puts his head down on the desk, on top of his folded arms. Billy has tried to make conversation with Brandon, but because he has gotten no response, he, too, puts his head down on the desk. I notice Morris, who had been watching the video, now appears disinterested, and puts his head on top of the books on his desk, also. Now five of the seven students have their heads on their desk. No one is watching the video. The other two students are writing—one on his desk and the other in her notebook. Oops, there goes one more head down. Mr. Fisher has his eyes closed as well. (February 16, 2001; Field Notes)

Students were equally as likely to actively resist school talk, especially when they perceived that they were being challenged. Linking back to the performance element in peer interactions, perhaps students did not want to appear as if they had been outdone, so they escalated the verbal exchange such that they could regain some of the power. Here Mark described how he might react when he felt as if he was being intruded upon by a teacher:

Mark: And that gets on my nerves now. So when they get on my nerves, I start trying to get on theirs. Just because they did.

Carol: What do you do to get on somebody’s nerves?

Mark: Throw my books off my desk. Like if he put a book on my desk, I’ll just throw if off. You know, throw my paper on the floor, or I’d tear it or something.
Anything to make him mad. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in vacant cafeteria.)

Such responses were fairly common in school talk situations where students felt a lack of power. Martin reiterated this notion, and described what he may do in a classroom to upset the power structure. He said,

Aggravate her [teacher]. Talk loud. Write on the board without permission. Sit on her desk. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

School talk can sometimes be generalized to any talk from an authority figure holding power over the student. This kind of talk is seen as interference in the students’ lives and is not easily tolerated.

“I hate lectures”: School talk as interference. Martin indicated that school talk is closely aligned to “parent talk.” In essence, it appeared that the students viewed these interactions with authority as interference in their lives. Participant conversations suggested that students preferred just to be “left alone.” Martin said of his mother,

If I don’t make up my bed, that’s a lecture. If I don’t feed the dog, that’s a lecture.
Every time I come in to do something, that’s a lecture. I hate lectures. (February 26, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Perhaps seventh grade teachers established positive relationships with their students by taking a “non-interference” approach. Students seemed to respond favorably when teachers merely gave them their work, without much teacher talk, and they were left alone to complete it in what they considered to be a reasonable amount of time. Jeremy illustrated this concept when he spoke about one teacher he liked, saying that instead of
talking “all the time, when she gives you work, she don’t mean for you to do it in one day. She’ll give you a bunch of time to do it.” Part of this hands-off approach meant giving students their work and then leaving them alone to complete it. Students indicated through their discussions that if they had to do work, they would rather just get through their assignments with as little interaction as possible. One participant noted that if he already knew how to do the work, he did not want to have to sit through another explanation of how to do it. For example, Darius said,

If you gonna give out some work, just give it out. Like Mrs. Moore, she just hand out work. She give directions and let us start and we jump all to it and we finish. Mr. Fisher, he just keep talking and don’t want to stop. He cool now, he just talk too much. He be alright if he stop talkin’. He talk about work. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Martin also indicated his desire for teachers to take a hands-off approach. Here he described a teacher who also seemed to appreciate minimal interference. Martin described this mutual desire of both teacher and students wanting to be left alone:

He [teacher] give you your work and then he just sit back and let you do it. If you can talk softly, you can do your work and talk . . . but one thing he don’t like is for us to work on his desk. He be like, “Do I work on your desk?” But when somebody get him mad, it’s gone then. He don’t want to be bothered. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Perhaps when teachers in this setting avoided school talk, it created a place of safety for students who have traditionally been unsuccessful in the school environment. I would speculate that for students this “non-interference” might mean a comfortable lack of
interaction. School talk, for many students, might entail discomfort in behavior correction, and in academic discussion. When teachers do not force school talk on students, they may be preserving student dignity by allowing them to remain “successful.”

Perhaps part of Mrs. Johnson’s rapport with students was indicative of her limited interaction with the students. By allowing students at least 20 minutes of free time in each class period, students were free to engage in their own style of interaction with limited interaction from the teacher, and thereby avoid all teacher interaction altogether by maintaining good behavior. The use of free time perhaps served to build stronger teacher-student bonds in that students did not feel intruded upon, even though it resulted from an avoidance of teacher-student interaction.

Additionally, Mrs. Johnson used a direct style of interaction with her students that has been documented in African-American family interaction styles (e.g., Delpit, 1995). She asserted a non-emotional style of discipline where she merely stated the action to redirect misbehavior and thereby minimized teacher talk. She quickly controlled behavior by getting directly to the action that needed to change. “Stop the beating.” “I need you to sit up.” “Get back in your seat.” In so doing, she addressed the essential teacher talk without going into long-winded explanations or requests that tended to create further resistance. The students responded well to this minimization of teacher talk and usually acted immediately to correct the behavior. While teacher talk often served to redirect behaviors in order to accomplish desired results, some teacher talk did not get the desired results simply because it was misunderstood.
“What truancy mean?”: School talk as a source of confusion. The differences in teacher and student talk often served as a source of confusion for students. Sometimes this confusion in terminology can even perpetuate cycles of delinquency. When students did not understand the terminology, it was difficult for them to change their behaviors, or know that they should expect certain consequences. These examples illustrate: In class one day Mrs. Moore told Keem that she had written him up for truancy. A truancy charge for Keem meant a violation of probation, another court appearance, and based on his record and terms of his probation, possible placement in the Youth Detention Center. The following conversation suggested that although Keem faced serious repercussions for not coming to school, he lacked the vocabulary to associate his actions with the legal ramifications:

Mrs. Moore: Keem, do you have an excused absence for me? ‘Cause you know I referred you for truancy.

Keem: What truancy mean?

Mrs. Moore: Just so you’ll know when the officer comes to your house. (February 20, 2001; Field Notes)

If there is a lack of common terminology, then students may be missing pertinent information that could have important implications for their behavior. Addarian expressed confusion one day when he asked what the difference was between unexcused and excused absences. The teacher’s response was that “they get you for truancy” as a consequence for too many unexcused absences, but he never really explained what unexcused absences were in comparison to excused absences. With such
confusion, it may have been more difficult for students to display appropriate behavior, as they were unsure of expectations.

In addition to school talk, one teacher relied heavily on non-traditional school talk, or talk that we do not typically associate with teachers in school settings. I examine this type of teacher-student interaction in the following sections.

**Non-traditional Teacher Talk**

Some teachers at Bridges School also engaged in what I call non-traditional teacher talk. I define this term to mean any verbal interaction from teachers that disrupts our conventional ideas about how teachers should relate to students. As described below, non-traditional teacher talk borrowed elements of peer interaction and showed elements of performance.

**“Shut up!!!”: Borrowing elements of peer interaction.** Foster (1974) asserts that “youngsters respect the teacher who can best them at their games without losing his dignity and without coming down too hard on them” (p. 210). Mr. Fisher frequently, and more than any other teacher, engaged in non-traditional teacher talk. For this reason, this section depends on his examples more than those of any other teacher. Mr. Fisher frequently borrowed elements of peer talk. He was reprimanded by the administrators of Bridges for using a sarcastic tone in his speech, one that reflected the nature of peer interaction. For instance, in addition to giving direct orders or directions, in class, Mr. Fisher added comments like, “Watch the tv; I’ve told you 16,000 times!” or “I’m not asking you to build a submarine ship, I’m just asking you to clean up a little.” His speech, although it is not what we may expect from an educator, often mirrored student interactions, and thus sometimes evoked a positive response such as laughter and smiles.
from students. For example, when Mr. Fisher became frustrated with students talking in class he yelled loudly, “Shut up!” to the whole class, or simply “Why are you getting on my nerves today?” to one student. Other teachers used similar phrasing such as, “Go away,” “Can’t you bother somebody else?” and “You are on my last nerve.”

Through this type of speech, teachers aligned with students in using their type of interaction and challenged our traditional notion of teacher. In Mr. Fisher’s everyday speech, his interactions often more closely mirrored peer patterns than teacher talk, perhaps helping students to see him as “one of us.” For example, one day as Mr. Fisher searched for another video to play, he noted, “I don’t think this one will work, but there are some cool death chamber scenes in here.” He also used simple phrasing such as “they” instead of “we” to reinforce his alliance with students and his disassociation with school personnel. As an example, he explained the consequences to a student for too many unexcused absences, saying, “If you get too many unexcused absences, they get you for truancy.” This is not the typical type of interaction that we would expect from a teacher, yet the students seemed to identify with it and reacted rather positively, by smiling, laughing, or referring to comments in later conversation. His disassociation from the school personnel made sense too, in that he had been reprimanded for his “inappropriate” behavior, just as students had been for theirs.

Additionally, Mr. Fisher was comfortable assuming the interaction role of initiator and defender that is characteristic of student talk. When Billy became startled as he realized Mr. Fisher was standing right behind him, he said, “Oh, you scared me.” Mr. Fisher responded, “I figured it wouldn’t take much.” Such interaction was typical of student interactions, but was not as common in student-teacher communications. Mr.
Fisher’s style of talking often assumed the peer roles of initiator and recipient. In these examples from different class periods it seemed he intended his speech to provoke some sort of response from the student:

“That’s the second slowest I’ve ever seen anybody work before.” (January 11, 2001; Field Notes in class)

“Do you have Terret’s syndrome?” (January 17, 2001; Field Notes in class)

“I’ve got enough problems; I don’t need any more from you.” (February 16, 2001; Field Notes in class)

These comments, reminiscent of peer bantering, followed the code of the verbal game students played. Students responded favorably, as detected in their facial expressions and laughter. However, his comments did not result in the typical bantering back and forth between those involved in the interaction. The power structure that existed between the teacher and these students prevented the students from acting as they would with their friends. So while Mr. Fisher initiated such interaction, it did not mirror true student interaction because the students would have gotten in trouble for challenging the teacher as they would a fellow student. In the following instance, it is clear how Mr. Fisher postured his position of power when a White female student challenged his ideas:

Mr. Fisher starts the movie Bruce Willis movie, Armageddon, and says,

“Remember these asteroids are real. This really happens. It has happened and will happen again. It’s what killed the dinosaurs.”

Leigh, a student says, “I thought they don’t know what killed the dinosaurs. Some say it was volcanoes.”

Mr. Fisher responds, “You might believe that, but I don’t. It was asteroids.”
Another student asks, “How do they know?”

Mr. Fisher: “Because they are scientists as opposed to bubble gum makers.”

Leigh: “But there’s a bunch of theories.”

Mr. Fisher: “Look, we can argue about this or we can watch the movie. I’m just telling you what I know. If you want to go to your internet and research all the thousands of possibilities, go right ahead. I’m just telling you what I believe. But go ahead. You feel [pause] free.” (January 23, 2001; Field Notes)

Even though Mr. Fisher engaged in a student style of interaction, the position of power remained constant, thus Mr. Fisher never appeared as vulnerable as peers would be when they participated in the bantering style of interaction. Teachers borrowed other elements of peer interaction as well. Elements of performance were also determined, though not as frequently, in teacher talk.

“Don’t worry, I’ll slam the door for you”: Elements of performance. Just as with peer interaction, some teacher-student interactions also contained elements of performance. Some teachers made use of distinct voice tones that added an element of performance to their speech. Though not often, sometimes a piercing yell expressed anger. One teacher also used an exaggerated slow pace in talking to promote a relaxed, calm atmosphere that he believed was conducive to good student behavior. The use of such performance, although perhaps not the teacher’s intent, reflected the notion of power. Teachers were “allowed” to raise their voice to speak in anger, yet the students were not and would be punished for doing so in the classroom. Likewise, Mr. Fisher used performance elements when he slammed the classroom door to punctuate his anger. This action became so common that students began to expect it. One day when Billy was told
to “get out of the room”, he said on his way out, “Don’t worry, I’ll slam the door for you, ‘cause I know that’s what you’re gonna do.” Mr. Fisher also used performance elements such as putting his feet up on his desk to reflect the casual, slow-paced nature of the classroom. Both actions were reflective of performance elements that complemented his speech and again displayed the lopsided distribution of power, as students would be punished for displaying either of these actions.

In addition to using school talk and non-traditional school talk, teachers used a more informal, casual mode of conversing with students. I deemed this interaction style non-school talk, and discuss it in the following sections.

Non-school Talk

Another type of interaction in which teachers engaged students is non-school talk. I define non-school talk as talk that is unrelated to the goals and purposes set forth by the school. This type of interaction elicited a more personal appeal and, unlike school talk, was reminiscent of conversations that may occur outside of the school environment. Non-school talk assumed a more equal distribution of power between teacher and student.

Mrs. Moore often engaged her students in non-school talk. This interaction contributed to a rather “laid-back” and comfortable atmosphere in her classroom. Part of her rapport with students depended on her ability to relate to them about non-school issues and her ability to engage them in casual conversation about such matters. For example, one day Mrs. Moore flipped through the dictionary to help a student find a definition and she came across the word “Prozac” when she searched for another word. Many teachers would have remained silent about this discovery, thinking that a
discussion about anti-depressant medication was not appropriate for school, but Mrs. Moore brought the word to the attention of the students.

She says, “Prozac! I’m surprised that’s in the dictionary.”

Morris asks, “What does it say about it?”

Mrs. Moore, “Oh, it’s a drug.”

Morris, “I know, but what does it say?”

She reads, “A drug for anti-depression.” (January 10, 2001; Field Notes)

Mrs. Moore took the opportunity to engage in non-school, but relevant talk for some students, as several of them took anti-depression medication. She related to students in this way and established a rapport with most of them through her ability to relate to them about issues that appeared in their everyday, and non-school lives. She exhibited this type of interaction with the students on a daily basis. Perhaps Billy best expressed how her non-school talk translated to him when he said of her, “She really understands what it’s like for kids today.” In addition, Mrs. Moore periodically temporarily removed herself from the teacher role and associated with students in a way that was more reminiscent of peer interactions than teacher-student. Although she did draw the line as in this example, Mrs. Moore talked about school issues, but often from a student perspective. Consider, for example, this excerpt of field notes taken during class in which Mrs. Moore engaged Bradley in a conversation about another authority figure, a substitute teacher:

Bradley is talking about a substitute who ended up walking out in the middle of the school day. He says in Mrs. Moore’s class, “Remember Mrs. Fort?” He asks Mrs. Moore if she met her and she confirms that she did. Bradley says, “I think she was relieved when the real teacher came back.” Mrs. Moore agrees, “Yea, I
think she had enough of this place. I don’t know if we’re going to see her again or not.” Bradley continues, “She . . .” and Mrs. Moore cuts him off, reassuming her own teacher role and says, “We’re not going to talk about other teachers in here.” (January 31, 2001; Field Notes)

Mrs. Moore also used non-school talk in class when she engaged students in conversations about other students. Notice how Mrs. Moore began in “school talk” but slipped into non-school talk when she commented on the absences of certain students, again assuming more of a peer than a teacher role.

“Let’s see who’s out today. Addarian. I need to call his house and talk to his mama. Where is Keem? I need to call and get some conferences going here. Keisha? We got too many zeros, people not doing their work.” Students start to question how many absences and zeros they have and then she comes to another name. “Billy. Billy the pill man.” [Billy is in the hospital today because he has attempted an overdosed on pills.] She continues, “What kind of pain pills was he taking, Tylenol?” Morris responds in defense of his friend, “I don’t think you can get sick off Tylenol.” (January 21, 2001; Field Notes)

Several teachers used non-teacher talk during their classes. Mr. Fisher effectively related to the students through his use of non-school talk. This type of interaction was expressed in a conversational way, with the students and Mr. Fisher exchanging speaking roles more frequently than was seen in teacher talk. Here Mr. Fisher opened a small window into his personal life as he related to the students about their interests. Students responded to this personal side of teachers, even if it was just a short insertion here or there. This small snippet illustrates:
Billy comes into class saying, “I’m gonna get beat up. Nick said he’s gonna beat me up.” Billy asks, “Mr. Fisher, have you ever been threatened by anyone?”

Mr. Fisher responds, “No, actually. I’ve had guns pointed at me, but nobody’s ever pulled a trigger.” (January 23, 2001; Field Notes)

Mr. Fisher occasionally engaged in informal non-school conversations. Like Mrs. Moore, sometimes these conversations had to do with other students. For example, during class one day, Mr. Fisher learned the status of a former student through informal, non-school interaction:

Mr. Fisher: “How is Gary doing these days, Billy?”

Billy: “He’s in Boot Camp.”

Mr. Fisher: “So you don’t see him?”

Billy: “No, not since he’s gone. He broke into a store during daylight. They stole his mom’s car and he ended up in Boot Camp.

Mr. Fisher: “Really? But he seemed so mellow, so relaxed.”

(January 11, 2001; Field Notes)

Again, part of Mr. Fisher’s rapport depended on his ability to talk with students about what they considered important. Instead of squelching all non-school talk, Mr. Fisher often joined in the conversation. For example, one day as students began discussing the television show featuring the “Crocodile man,” Mr. Fisher added his own stories from his experiences in the swamplands. Perhaps these informal interactions allowed students to respond favorably to Mr. Fisher as they subscribed to the belief that “he’s okay once you get to know him.” Part of “getting to know” Mr. Fisher entailed students becoming familiar with the different styles of interaction that he used.
In summary, the interactions in which peers and teachers engaged were complex yet occurred within predictable patterns. Peer interaction was based on a need for performance rather than conventional notions of discourse. Performance elements translated to students’ need to assert their masculinity and to disguise their true emotions. Teachers used teacher talk, non-traditional teacher talk, and non-school talk to interact with students. Though each interaction style prompted varying student responses, each has its place in the school environment. The next section examines the ways students and teachers resisted in the school context.

Ways to Resist in the School Context

As discussed in chapter 2, resistance is a response to a situation in which a person feels otherwise powerless. In this school setting, teachers and students demonstrated resistance as a way to gain power over situations within the school context. The following sections address teacher resistance and student resistance found within the school context.

Teacher Resistance

The teachers at Bridges resisted the school context by leaving their position at the alternative school and finding other jobs. The high turnover rate suggested that the teachers were often not satisfied with the conditions of the school or the population that they served. Of the four seventh grade teachers, all indicated at one point during the study that they wanted to leave their position at the alternative school. Teachers perhaps also resisted by disengaging, and doing a minimal amount of class preparation. By doing minimal preparations for class, perhaps they felt they had more control over their school situations in which they possibly felt overwhelmed, tired, frustrated, or ineffective. For
example, one teacher noted that he often took advantage of his planning period by sleeping during that period. He said in an informal conversation, “Since it’s the last period of the day I usually just take a nap- try and get some sleep, or just go home early.” Other teachers noted planning times as “free time” during which teachers may or may not complete school tasks. One teacher commented in response to my looking for a seventh grade teacher during the first period, “Oh, sometimes she doesn’t come in during her first period since it’s her plan [planning period].” Perhaps part of this resistance also meant spending little time in planning lessons and resorting to textbook work or worksheets as the primary resource for students. All of the means of resistance contributed to the lack of innovative teaching within the school setting.

**Student Resistance**

Students demonstrated their own ways of resistance, which basically assumed two forms: active and passive resistance. I use the term active resistance to refer to resistance in which students *do* something to resist. Active resistance commonly involved acting out and creating disturbances. Passive resistance, on the other hand, refers to inactivity, or when a student *refrains* from doing something. Probably the ultimate disengagement, or passive resistance, for a student is school drop-out. Because students under the age of 16 are required by the Compulsory Education Act to attend school, these seventh graders disengaged in other ways. Below I examine students’ active resistance and passive resistance.

“I Said I was Gonna Shoot Somebody.”: Active Resistance

As explained by critical theorists (e.g., Fine, 1991), students often develop ways to resist their lack of power. Students of this study seemed to demonstrate active
resistance by insubordination: misbehaving and disrupting class. I observed such
demonstrations in classrooms and talked with participants about resistance in interviews.
Students described and exhibited times when they felt treated unfairly by others who
were in a position of power and they took action to regain some of the power, most often
through misbehavior. For example, Martin described one instance that could be
interpreted as resistance. In this scenario perhaps he attempted to regain power by gaining
attention from a teacher who he believed was ignoring him and giving another student
more attention.

‘Cause I was bad in her class, but he was bad, too. But he got more attention than
I did. I started getting’ badder. [I would] throw paper across the room. Hit people,
Aggravate people. Aggravate her. Talk loud. Write on the board without
permission. Sit on her desk. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty
classroom.)

Some of these students become, as Mrs. Yarborough said, “master manipulators” and can
find what truly tests a teacher to keep in control. When Martin believed that he was
falsely accused of a wrongdoing in elementary school, he resisted this feeling of
powerlessness by doing something he knew the teacher would not like:

She just came in there and we were doing our math center. She just got mad at me
and started hollerin’ at me, telling me to get up and move my desk. I don’t know.
I sit like that in my desk [he leans back on two legs of his chair]. Everyday. I just
broke the back of the chair. I know she didn’t like that. ‘Cause I always lean back
on my desk and I always sit on the back of the desk. She just made me mad. It
was about to break anyways, so I just broke it off. She was always telling me that
it was going to break off one day. So I broke it off. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Other students, such as Darius, resisted a teacher’s “fussing” by cussing out the teacher. He said,

She get on my nerves. She just fuzzed at me 24 [hours a day] / 7 [days a week].
Like I was the biggest problem in the class. Other people in the class acting up more than I do. She just fuss at me. I got tired of it. Started cussing her. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Addarian also showed signs of resistance when a teacher at his traditional school called him “stupid” and he retaliated by talking back, and thus was punished. Darius, too, perhaps showed resistance when he found himself in a powerless situation with authority. As is often the case, his resistance led to trouble. He described the instance:

Coach B wouldn’t let me go to the bathroom so I got mad and said I wasn’t going to do nothing with my life and I said I was gonna shoot somebody. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

In public school, his statement warranted a terrorist threat and was punishable not only by the school but also by the court system. Several other expressions that I interpreted as resistance were noted in my observational notes as well. For example, when Mr. Morton asked Martin in class one day, “Why are you interrupting my class?” Martin responded with “I hate this stupid class,” providing an expression of resistance in addition to the answer to the teacher’s question. Once Martin felt that he had been singled out, he went to great lengths to attract more attention, and further upset the atmosphere of the classroom. For instance, when a knock at the door immediately followed this exchange,
Martin yelled loudly and inappropriately, “Come in.” This kind of behavior was very typical. That same week, Sean, another seventh grade student, challenged Mr. Morton, seemingly trying to make his life as a teacher as difficult as possible. Consider this exchange of conversation as both people tried to regain power. Notice how Sean became more intent on resisting as the teacher appeared to give him less and less of a “way out” to save his dignity.

Mr. Morton: “Pick up that desk that you turned over.”

Sean: “I didn’t touch it.”

Mr. Morton: “How did it fall over if you didn’t touch it?”

Sean: “I just touched it a little bit.”

Mr. Morton: “You know, that’s like saying you were only driving 10 miles over the speed limit when you accidentally ran over a child.”

Sean’s eyebrows lower and his head tilts backward. He looks puzzled and as if he does not understand the metaphor the teacher has proposed.

Sean: “What?”

Mr. Morton: “I was just making a metaphor.”

Sean: “What’s that?”

Mr. Morton suggests he look up the word in the dictionary and write him the definition. Class continues, but Sean, now aggravated, begins to cause disturbances in the class. He talks to other students, throws wads of paper in the room, and makes loud banging noises with his desk. Finally, Mr. Morton says, “Sean, you need to get out in the hall.”

Sean: “Why? What did I do?” (January 19, 2001; Field Notes)
These kinds of interactions were typical and occurred almost daily in the classroom. Whether it was repeatedly talking back or continually asking to do something for which they always got the same answer (such as asking to go to the bathroom), students often found ways to disrupt the classroom until the teacher became frustrated and overwhelmed. Efforts to agitate the teacher were not a difficult thing to accomplish when several students joined in the effort and created multiple problems for teachers in a class period. This example of field notes illustrates how students often “teamed up” to disrupt the class.

Mr. Morton begins class by asking someone to remind him what types of verbs they have been studying in class. He begins a review of action verbs and verbs of being. Meanwhile, the students have super-glued two books together before class and are egging Mr. Morton on to pass out the books so that they can delight in their stunt. He does not pass out the books, but is trying to conduct a lecture. Gregory begins this challenging period by asking Mr. Morton if he can go to the bathroom. He responds, “No, You will have to wait until after the period. You were warned on Friday.” Several minutes later Gregory pretends to cry. Martin comes to his defense, yelling, “That boy gotta go to the bathroom. That boy sit back there and cry and you don’t even care!” Mr. Morton tries to continue the lecture, but several students are having a contest to see who can hold their breath the longest. As Mr. Morton solves that dilemma and moves on to the academic topic of the day, the class is interrupted by Susan, who has shown her male classmates a tampon in her purse, eliciting all sorts of laughing and hollering. Mr. Morton responds: “Susan, you have a detention. That was inappropriate.” There is
conversation back and forth between Susan and Mr. Morton and those classmates who are coming to Susan’s defense saying that the detention was unfair, unwarranted, and without warning. (March 5, 2001; Field Notes)

As shown by these examples, students often engaged in power struggles perhaps as ways to resist. They knew that these situations were challenging for teachers, and the longer they went on, the better chance they had to regain power. Martin often engaged in power struggles, as shown here:

Martin enters class eating a lollipop that he got from another teacher. He lays down on the floor and gets ready to watch the movie for the day. Mr. Morton begins the movie. Mr. Morton asks Martin to put his lollipop away. Mr. Morton says, “I said, no food.” Martin puts his lollipop back in a wrapper and puts it away. A few minutes later, Mr. Morton turns off the movie that the class is now watching and pulls out worksheets. Mr. Morton asks Martin to move away from me and my notes. Martin says, “I hate this class.” Mr. Morton responds, “I think you hate anyone who asks you to do something that you don’t want to do.” To the class he adds, “Do you want to watch the movie?”

Martin takes his lollipop out again. Mr. Morton says, “This is your warning, Martin.”

Martin responds, “I don’t care.” Then he adds, “Mr. Morton, you know you got an ugly car?” Mr. Morton, who attempts to disengage from the interaction says, “I know, but it gets me to work and back.” Mr. Morton turns the movie back on. Martin pushes a chair toward me to get my attention.
Mr. Morton comes over and moves the chair so that Martin will not push it in my direction anymore. He begins to push other chairs and Mr. Morton says, “Martin, stop pushing those chairs or you will be sitting in one.”

Martin says, “I gotta go to the bathroom. Can I go?”

Morton responds, “No. At 5 or 10 minutes after. Put your brush away.” And so Martin’s behavior continues in this fairly predictable way, continuously gaining negative attention. (February 19, 2001; Field Notes)

Martin also used similar techniques to resist school work, particularly in situations where he thought he might not get in trouble for it. This example illustrates a conversation he had with a substitute in mathematics class when he used verbal interaction to resist:

The substitute asks Martin to please listen to the directions for a game they are about to play. Martin, sitting on a desk, says, “I’m listening. Okay, man.” Then he begins to talk immediately.

The sub says, “No, be quiet.”

Martin: “I am. Okay.” He starts talking again.

Sub: “No, you’re not, you’re still talking after everything I say.”

Martin: “Okay.”

Sub: “Please be quiet and stop talking.”

Martin mumbles, “Punk” under his breath as the sub begins to talk. (March 2, 2001; Field Notes)

Students often acted out in ways that openly defied teachers as ways to resist. In this example, one student continually made noises as a way to defy the teacher:
Jackson walks around the room provoking other students by flipping their books and moving their work. Assuming the usual banter, Mark says to Jackson, “Chill, so we can keep our check.” The students receive a check when they cooperate with the teacher. When they get four checkmarks, they receive a reward. Jackson responds to Mark, “Man, suck my chill. Who you talkin’ to?” He gets up and postures a fighting pose and goes over to Mark, who remains seated. After Jackson sits down, he begins making a “whoop, whoop” noise. Mr. Fisher asks for the noise to stop, though he is unsure who is making the noises. He says, “If I hear that whoop, whoop noise. . . .” Before he can finish the sentence, Jackson begins the noise again. Mr. Fisher responds, “Okay, I heard it, now I gotta do it.” He erases the checkmarks and with each successive whoop, whoop, he adds a minus check mark so that the class ends up with three minus checkmarks. (February 19, 2001; Field Notes)

Resistance can also be displayed in more subtle ways. It has been documented in gang literature that young men often assume certain postures to illustrate their resistance. For example, gang members wishing to show undetected irreverence for a judge may sit with their legs outstretched, heels planted, and toes tilted up (Humes, 1996). Students at Bridges also showed resistance by tilting their head to one side with the chin raised and eyes focused downward instead of straight ahead. This posture is commonly recognized by authority figures as “disrespectful” and was even addressed on our tour of the State Prison. Prison officials continually called for students to “put your head up and look straight ahead.” Students often found that these active ways of resisting evoked
responses from authority figures. When these authority figures (such as teachers who had less severe consequences than prison officials) were befuddled by such acts of resistance, students were able to regain some of the power, probably causing them to repeat the acts. However, students also resisted in less active ways that allowed them to passively reject the power structures under which they fell.

“I Ain’t Gonna Do Nothin’ Then.”: Passive Resistance

Students in this study often chose to resist by disengaging from school, even though they were required by law to physically attend school until their sixteenth birthday. Because students were required to attend school, they often assumed other ways to avoid participation. Disengagement may have meant simply a student putting his head down on the desk and tuning out the surroundings, or it may have meant a conscious refusal to work. Billy illustrated how one of his traditional-school teachers responded to his act of disengagement, which ultimately led to active resistance:

I remember sitting down and I put my head down and she [teacher] told me to put my head up and then I got my head up and then I was just sitting there and she told me to stand up and I asked her “Why?” and said, “Because I told you to” and then I just snapped and I just cussed her out. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

One day in class, I observed Addarian react specifically to a situation that I presume he considered to be unfair. Perhaps because he felt he had been unfairly targeted, he disengaged from his school work as if it was “not worth the effort” if he was going to be treated unfairly. The following excerpt of field notes explains:
A classmate tells Addarian that the substitute teacher, who is White, is “getting him in trouble” and he becomes concerned, asking “Why? What did I do?” in an agitated voice. He looks at the substitute teacher who is writing on her clipboard and occasionally looks up in Addarian’s direction. Pointing to his table of African-American students, he says, “she’s just gonna get us in trouble like that. Everyone else is talking and she’s just gonna get us in trouble like that.” I agree that many students are demonstrating the same behaviors, and say, “Why do you think?” He shakes his head back and forth in disgust and says, “I don’t know, but you just wait.” I suspect Addarian believes it is because of race, but Addarian will not confirm or disconfirm my suspicions because he won’t give me a direct response even after I ask him again. The substitute looks at him again and then sits back in her seat at the back of the room. Once Addarian thinks he is “in trouble” he says, “Man!” and then he crumbles up the sheet of paper on which he has been completing his assignments and he tosses it to the trash can. He says, “I ain’t gonna do nothin’ then. I just been doing my work and she gonna get me in trouble like that. That wrong.” (January 29, 2001: Field Notes)

By resisting, either actively or passively, students are able to assert some sort of power over a situation in which they feel rather powerless. Through their actions, they regain some of the power, often in a negative, yet effective manner. The next sections examine how school may serve to deter and contribute to cycles of delinquency.
School Deterred and Contributed to Cycles of Delinquency for These Students

Data from this study suggest that school played an imperative role in the participants’ lives in both impeding and continuing the cycle of delinquency. Students noted that the supervisory role of the school was essential in thwarting delinquency. They also noted how the school’s over-dependence on rules and low tolerance for anger often led them to trouble. They felt as if they often received inappropriate consequences for their misbehavior. The problematic behaviors and consequences often led to labeling effects for students when they returned to their home schools. The section below describes the role that school played in deterring delinquency: school as a supervisory structure.

**School as a Supervisory Structure**

It is well documented in the literature (e.g., Elliot & Voss, 1974; Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981) that school may serve as a deterrent to delinquency, often acting as a buffer to the outside forces that infiltrate a student’s life. The very structure of school ensures supervision. As well, it offers a consistent, predictable structure that often contrasts with a student’s family-life. While some students may make a myriad of negative associations with school, at the very least, they come to know school as a predictable, dependable, consistent structure in their lives. Students of this study identified the school’s supervisory role as the main deterrent to delinquency and cited examples of times when they had gotten in trouble when no such supervision was intact.

Several participants noted that attending school helped to keep them “out of trouble.” They noted that if their attendance were not mandatory at school, they would probably be wandering the streets, involved in activities that could constitute or lead to
delinquency. In one interview, Addarian and Keem addressed this notion of school as the ultimate supervisor. Keem began,

   Because if I wouldn’t be in school, I’d be tore up. If I won’t at school, I would be somewhere I am not supposed to be. I ain’t supposed to be smokin’. (March 30, 2001; Interview conducted outside on school grounds.)

Addarian agreed, saying,

   Me too, I would be in jail. ‘Cause when I’m here, I’m not hanging with my cousin. (March 30, 2001; Interview conducted outside on school grounds.)

Martin also mentioned the supervisory role of the school in his discussions with me. He believed that although school personnel tried to help him stay out of trouble, he often did not heed their advice, leading to trouble for him:

   They [School] tell me to stay out of trouble. But I sometimes I don’t use it. I get into trouble on my own. (February 26, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Morris also contended that the school, by its mere supervision, helped him stay out of trouble. He added, “It [school] has kept me inside for 7 hours a day.”

Pointing to supervision as a way that school deterred delinquency was meaningful for many of the participants. Participants did not point to any other way in which school helped them stay out of trouble. While some participants cited school supervision as an important factor in keeping them “clean,” they also cited examples of non-supervision when they engaged in delinquent activities. They noted that they often got into trouble during periods in which they were not supervised. Such examples reinforce the notion that school provided a necessary structure that was often missing from family and
communities. The following examples illustrate the types of delinquent acts that participants become involved in when they were not overseen by an adult. Martin began by relating a story in which he explained some of his contacts with the police. This episode, though it did not end in punitive action from the police, did indicate typical peer activities that can often lead to trouble. He described the scenario,

It was me and my friends, Tom and Jim. They were White boys. And another White boy--we didn’t, well, he was alright to me. Then everybody was like “let’s get him” because he tried to do something to their house, ‘cause they were brothers, we were walking and we had a Rotweiller. You know how bad a Rotweiller is. His name was Pebbles. And um, we walked down the street. He was bad. I was walking down the street and he knew Jim, he grew up with him, and he saw Mike on the bike. So Mike got off and started walking and I just let my dog go and it got him. He got bit on his calf. He called the police on me and they came and they just talked to me. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Darius related a similar episode in which he spent unsupervised time with his friends and his brother and became involved in a fight. The situation that he described was potentially dangerous:

I got to fightin’ on the street. . . . He say the next car coming down the street was gonna be a Suburban, so they put money on it and it was an Expedition and he tried to take my brother’s money. My little brother said, “Naw, you ain’t gonna take my money.” I came out of there and talking about, “Naw, man, you ain’t gonna take my little brother’s money.” He tried to run, so my boy, my friend, he
caught him and I called him the “b” word and he gonna take off his shirt and he was talking about “I ain’t gonna. . .” and then he swung and I hit him and my little brother hit him and was going at it. I hit a boy’s head with a brick. I was getting’ beat up and I don’t like to get beat up. He was tryin’ to jump on my little brother. He slammed me on the ground- he was bigger than me and he started hitting me. I saw that brick and I had just hit him over the head with it. A lot of blood started coming out then of his head and I got scared. I thought he was going to pass out, all that blood coming out of his head. The police came and he got a scar on his head. But they didn’t give me nothin’ but probation. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Darius described his living situation as one that left him unsupervised much of the time. He lived with his uncle who did not return home until very early in the morning when Darius was already asleep. He said,

I live with my uncle, just us two. It’s going alright. He don’t come home until about 3 or something. I beat him home usually. I get there before he get there.

(February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Morris and his grandfather noted that Morris grew up with parents who were not concerned with supervision and his grandfather believed that this led to much of Morris’s involvements in delinquency. Morris’s parents had a history of drug and alcohol use, which often led to the improper supervision of the children. Here Morris described a time he engaged in illegal activities when he was 10 years old:

In my neighborhood this old house burnt down. I went looking inside and I found some car keys. The car was still outside. So I figured, “I doubt it runs, but I’ll just
see.” I went out there and it cranked up. So I was like, “Oh, cool. I’m driving this.” So I went back down there about 11:00 at night and I cranked it up and I had my friend sit at the top of the hill and wait for me. I went riding around. I picked up my friend and we went for a joyride all around. But I brought it back. The next day the cops showed up at my house. Some old lady saw me. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Things for Morris changed dramatically when his grandfather assumed custody, about 18 months prior to this study. He became better supervised and adhered to rules or was handed consequences. Morris described an instance in which his grandfather’s supervision led to such consequences:

Last time I went to court was for smoking weed. I was at my grandparents’ house and I had just put it out and I was smoking a cigarette and my grandfather walked up and pretty much he don’t care about cigarettes, but weed he does. And he said, “I smell marijuana,” and I was like, “Yea.” And then, I just went ahead and told him. And he was like, “Okay, I’m telling your probation officer.” So the PO filed a juvenile complaint and I went to court. I was supposed to have 2 years probation, but my grandfather talked him into letting me off in about a year. I had two weekend Boot Camps. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Although Morris’s living situation was more stable with his grandfather, and meant more supervision, there were still times that Morris experienced inconsistency in his surroundings, leading to inconsistent supervision and behavioral expectations. He said of this inconsistency:
Well, my grandfather owns a trailer park and he owns a lot of land around there and everywhere, but he’s got a camper down there and some nights they’ll all get drunk and my grandmother will run us off. Not meaning to, just drinking and drugs and stuff. She’ll run us off and we’ll go to the camper and stay, or we’ll go to a friend’s house, or whatever, you know. On the weekends, most of the time, we’ll go up to my dad’s house, which my dad’s mom and dad are living there because they are old, and plus my dad’s in jail. So, we’ll go up there and that’s where I have my dirt bike and my four-wheeler. And I know a lot of people that live up that way, too. So that’s pretty much where I stay. Oh yea, and my best friend’s house. But it’s kind of crazy. When me and my little brother and there, there are 9 kids. Two adults. During the weekdays, probably Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, I’ll stay at my grandparents’ house and then on the other days I’ll stay with someone else. And Monday, they might want to go out to eat so they’ll ask somebody if I can stay the night with them. I’ll stay the night with them and they might have something planned, or I get home too late, or something. Just whatever. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

These examples of family and community episodes of non-supervision can be directly contrasted with the supervisory structure of school. Despite the fact that school does offer a supervised environment, it can also serve a role in the continuation of the delinquency cycle.
How School Perpetuated Cycles of Delinquency for These Students

The structure of this school also served to perpetuate cycles of delinquency. Students in this study suggested the over-dependence of rules, the low tolerance for expressions of anger, and inappropriate consequences as reasons that encouraged them to act-out. They also mentioned labeling effects when they returned to their home school as a factor in the delinquency cycle.

Many school personnel, including those of Bridges, heavily depend on rules to keep their school running smoothly. However, the purposes behind these rules were not always clearly explained to students. Likewise, some rules were made “for rules sake,” and truly there was no clear reasoning behind them. Such rules simply acted to preserve the existing power structures. At Bridges, a preponderance of rules often made it more challenging for students to fit within the confines of the “right” or “acceptable” behavior. Additional factors seemed to work against the students as well. For example, because of the small class sizes at Bridges School, students were closely supervised by their teachers. Close supervision more likely led to students getting caught for infractions. Likewise, since all of the students at Bridges were considered to be “chronically disruptive,” teachers and administrators perhaps came to expect certain behaviors from students. All of these factors served to increase the likelihood that students would continue negative behavior cycles. In combination with these factors, students and parents believed the school often implemented inappropriate consequences for infractions. Students holding this view tended to further resist in the school context, and consequently, got into more trouble at school. Additionally, the general structure of the participants’ alternative and traditional schools left little room for the expression of
emotion, particularly anger. These schools seemed to encourage students to deal with their anger in unhealthy ways such as ignoring and suppressing it. When these strategies failed, perhaps students did not know appropriate strategies for coping with their anger. Students at Bridges were particularly prone to these circumstances, as they often resorted to explosive and even violent outbursts of anger that served to perpetuate their identities as, at worst, “bad kids,” and at best, kids who made poor choices. As evidenced in the following paragraphs, all of this negativity stemming from too many rules, resistance to inappropriate consequences, and inadequate means of emotional expression, led to labeling effects for some students when they returned to their home schools, which further perpetuated cycles of delinquency.

A salient component of this discussion is how the delinquency cycle is actually perpetuated by a student’s misbehavior in school. Let me provide an example of how the two are connected. Let us consider that a teacher, administrator, or any other adult who deems it necessary, files a juvenile complaint against a chronically disruptive student in a traditional school. That student would be summoned to court and may be charged with “disruption of a public school.” The judge sends the student to the alternative school and puts the student on probation, which in the community of Montreat is usually for a period of 2 years. (If the student is already at the alternative school, there is typically an alternate consequence such as community service). During the probationary time, a Probation Officer (PO) is assigned to the student and the student is expected to check in with his PO once a week. If any problems or infractions are detected, the PO takes that information back to the court. For the sake of our example, let us say that during the probationary time, this student is caught skipping school, by law a count of truancy. The student
returns to court and is given a more severe consequence, probably placement at a weekend Boot Camp or, depending on the student’s history, is assigned to the Youth Detention facility after repeated infractions. In this way, the more trouble that the students gets into at school, the more he is caught up in the Juvenile Justice System as well, particularly when he is put on probation and is assigned a probation officer who often visits him at school. In effect, when a student violates certain school rules, he also suffers consequences with the juvenile justice system. Thus, schools and the juvenile justice system are closely linked. Table 6 provides a list of some possible school violations that could result in juvenile justice involvement.

As students are more often seen as “troublemakers,” they are more closely watched by not only their PO, but probably also by their teachers and administrators. While supervision has been shown to diminish delinquency, it also becomes more challenging for the student to escape the cycle of delinquency as his actions are more heavily scrutinized. It may be particularly challenging for students when interpretations of rules are very strict, for example as in the recent news report that indicated a kindergarten child was expelled because her key-chain was considered to be a weapon. With each infraction, the student becomes more and more involved in the Juvenile Justice System.

Several students described how school perpetuated their cycles of delinquency. For example, Bradley pointed to school in a rather broad way, perhaps unable to articulate specifically how he saw school as a contributor to his behavioral problems. He, his mother, and his grandmother contended that he was rather well behaved at home, and did not get in trouble there, but that his problems arose mainly with peers at school.
Table 6

Possible School Offenses That Could Result in Juvenile Justice Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Battery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronically disruptive/Disruption of public school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug possession (including use of inhalants) or tobacco possession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gang involvement, paraphernalia, or graffiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual harassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terroristic threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat to teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapon possession</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although he has an older sister, Bradley pointed to the fact that he was not around other young adolescents at home. He said,

    I don’t get in trouble nowhere else. I just get in trouble in school. It is the only place I got in trouble really. I don’t know, because I was so happy to be around kids, I thought it was cool to be like a class clown or something, but that gets you in so much trouble. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Participants pointed more specifically to the notion of “too many rules” at school as a contributor to their problems. The next sections examine the over-dependence on rules, the low tolerance for anger, perceptions of inappropriate consequences, and labeling effects.

“Too Many Rules.”: An Over Dependence on Rules

    One way in which the alternative school perpetuated cycles of delinquency was in the school’s over-dependence on rules. Sometimes it appeared to me that perhaps the school implemented rules for the sake of rules, and that the reasons behind these rules were not clear, especially to students. For example, one day Martin was reprimanded because he lagged too far behind his classmates as they filed in the classroom. He arrived to the classroom no more than 3 seconds later than the others, yet he caused the class to fail to receive a check mark for good behavior that day. Such an example makes me question the reason for the rule of staying close to your classmates. Martin did not miss any instruction time, nor did he lag far enough behind to escape supervision, yet he was verbally reprimanded for these actions in front of his classmates. Students often resisted such tight control in discipline by further disrupting class when they were reprimanded for breaking rules that they did not see as necessary. Students spoke to me very frankly
about those rules they saw as important and those they did not. If students failed to see
the reasoning for the rules, it was unlikely that they “bought into” them, which ultimately
causeshemtoteresistthem,causingfurtherdisciplinaryordelinquentinvolvement.

Students found the dress code policy to be especially problematic. This policy is plainly
stated in the school handbook, “All pants must fit and be worn at the normal waistline.
The use of a belt is encouraged.” Reminiscent of age-old arguments between teens and
their parents over appropriate dress, problems ensued when administrators and students
did not share the same interpretations of “fit” with administrators. Darius said that school
helped him to get in trouble, particularly when it came to rules about the dress code. He
explained, “Too many rules. Like your clothes, about the pants. You can’t hug on girls.”
Billy echoed his concern with the dress code. He felt that the resource officer at the
school was “out to get students” because of the dress code, a violation that can lead to
serious consequences. Other students echoed the belief that the resource officer, in
particular, adhered to an interpretation of the dress code that was too strict. Billy said,

I just think like Officer Bo would jump on all of us kids (not just me) like every
kid, he would just, if you said something you really didn’t mean, he would just
write you up for that. And he wrote me up for my pants falling down. And your
hair is supposed to be only one color. I think that’s stupid. I think the pants thing,
I mean, I think it’s really kind of stupid. I mean, if it’s coming way off your butt
and you can see your underwear then that is disrespectful to girls and the teacher,
but I don’t think just because it’s a little bit down, they shouldn’t jump on all of us
for that. Because we want to be comfortable. And I’ll be worrying about that more
than I’ll be worrying about what the teachers are saying. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Students seemed to view the interpretations of the dress code only as a means of control. To my knowledge, the purpose of the dress code was never explained to the students. I also sometimes struggled to see the reasoning behind the baggy pants rule (within reason) and the rule about hair color: “Outlandish hair color is not permitted.” While I do understand that low-hanging baggy pants are well-documented in gang literature (e.g., Humes, 1996), I also wonder if perhaps schools have failed to “keep up with the times.” With the influx of Music Television (MTV) and other popular culture media, “gangster” dress and rap music have become widespread in mainstream teenage culture, and often have possibly little or nothing to do with the gang dress that it once represented. Conceivably if the reasoning behind these rules were explained and the interpretations of “pants that fit” were not so strict, students would resist less and some of the problems associated with resistance might be alleviated.

Morris and Billy discussed how they think that school officials and students could reach a compromise by establishing rules by which everyone could abide. Both of them alluded to the notion that they need more freedom in the school environment. They believed rules should be flexible enough to accommodate all students, without punishing the whole school because of the few students who abused privileges. Morris began,

Oh, yea, like having to stay in the class all period. They just changed it to where we don’t get to go to the library or the bathroom. There is only one teacher that will let us go to the bathroom. Staying in class an hour and 45 minutes is too long. ‘Cause I mean, I really had to go [to the bathroom] today and they would not let
me go and I thought that was stupid. I think they should let us go but if you see someone out [in the hall] you should check their agenda. And if they get caught roaming the halls they should put a mark in their agenda. And then they won’t get to go somewhere and not everyone gets punished. They stopped—like last year we could go to the snack machine everyday, all day, and every class. This year we can only go at lunch. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

While it is plausible that teachers have their own ideas about the need for these rules, it was clear in conversations with students that there were no democratic discussions that attempted to meet the needs of both teachers and students. Perhaps student perceptions would have been different if they had been a part of the decision-making process. Morris often vocalized the need for compromise with the rules and procedures of the school. Although his suggestion contradicted the “smoke-free” policy of the school, here he addressed the need for a smoking break:

I think smoking at school, I think it matters, but there should be a time that you get a smoking break, like you should get your parents’ permission and all that because sometimes you just get too stressed out and you need a cigarette. My parents would sign a permission, and my grandparents might. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

He continued thinking about other compromises that could be made in other situations for which he had been reprimanded. He said this about teachers letting students sleep in class: “I think that if you’re tired they should like give you a chance to write your name on something that says, ‘I will make up this work’ and then you get to sleep that period.
Billy agreed with Morris’s ideas and added by saying of teachers,

They don’t know what happened that night. I mean, your parents could have been in a big fight and you didn’t get any sleep and you’re really tired. And they don’t even want to know why you are so tired. They just tell you to get up. I mean, if I was a teacher, I would ask the student, “Why are you tired?” or go see the counselor or something like that, you know. And nowadays they are just yelling at you to get up, stand up, and splash water on your face and stuff like that.

(February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

While I am not suggesting that students should sleep in class, Billy does present a valid example of yet another way that schools favor those who come to school ready to learn. Some students, who are legitimately unable to sleep due to family arguments at home and get in trouble at school for sleeping, are consequently punished in both places. Perhaps what Billy is really arguing is that teachers should take the time to find out why students are tired instead of assuming it is out of laziness. Many of the compromises that Billy and Morris suggested seem to point to a need for open communication between teachers and students.

Billy, who was full of suggestions for teachers and administrators, also wanted to reexamine the “no profanity” rule. Coming from a home that reflected values much different than those of traditional school, Billy contended that the occasional use of profanity should be another option for students. He said,

I think profanity should be allowed to be used sometimes. Sometimes that’s the best way we can express our emotions toward people, or to a teacher. Or if we
could have like one thing that bleeps every time we say a word like, “You Mother bleep.” (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Abiding by certain school rules was particularly challenging for students when their home environments presented much different expectations than their school environments. For example, when students came from homes in which profanity was commonly used as a mode of expression, or when smoking was used as an outlet for stress, students found themselves at school with ineffective coping strategies. Their coping strategies were not only not tolerated, but were also punishable by the established discipline penalties. Here Billy explained how both he and his mother used cigarettes as a coping strategy to deal with stress:

That’s why I’m glad they made cigarettes. Both of us. Because my nerves sometimes just get so shot . . . . I think about it and I’m like, I just need a cigarette. My mom would kill me if she didn’t have a cigarette. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

When students’ home coping strategies did not work at school, they were typically at a disadvantage. Differing, or ineffective coping strategies at school can be detrimental to students in terms of consequences. A common challenge for students was how to effectively reveal anger in the school atmosphere, a place that typically shows a low tolerance for emotional expression.

“‘If You Do It Nowadays, You Mostly Get in Trouble.’: Low Tolerance for Anger

As noted previously, students at Bridges were socialized to express very little emotion at school. Most of their interactions were not all that serious and did not reveal anything that could make them vulnerable to others. Anger was the primary emotion
students did reveal, perhaps, as previously discussed, because this added to their
delusive role and did not expose them emotionally. However, when students did
express anger, they usually got in trouble for it, because there were very few acceptable
ways to express anger. Often, the expression of anger only served to perpetuate cycles of
delinquency for the students. Many students lacked appropriate ways to express anger.
They were punished for voicing anger, or were simply removed from the inflammatory
situation, thereby avoiding any kind of resolution. Students were seldom encouraged to
talk about their anger or think about ways to appropriately express their anger. More
often than not, students were expected to suppress their anger. Students who constantly
tried to ignore their anger may have been successful in covering up their emotions for a
while, but when it erupted, it often resulted in physical fighting and violent outbursts.
These actions in turn caused the angry student to be suspended or expelled, which often
meant a violation of probation or other involvement with the juvenile court.

Goodman (1999) describes how students in his school, the Wonalancet
Alternative School, had to deal with anger in his classroom in order to get to the learning
process. Here he describes the very situation that seemed to occur at Bridges, although
students at Bridges were offered few alternatives to deal with their anger:

We learned that if the students came to us with unresolved feelings from any
erlier encounters or interactions, those feelings would continue to hover about
until they were resolved. It mattered not how enthralling our lesson was. If two of
our students were angry at one another, those issues needed to be addressed
before any teaching could take place (p. 34).
At the Wonalancet Alternative School, students were encouraged to talk about their feelings and listen to each other, while they were also given the freedom to “have space to deal with it” (p. 34).

Students of the present study, however, had to find other ways to deal with their anger, ways that kept them out of trouble, which unfortunately usually meant turning their emotion inward. They spoke about what they felt were acceptable ways to deal with anger in the school environment. Most often this meant anger suppression. Students indicated a variety of methods they used to restrain anger. Many students found isolation as an essential strategy in dealing with their anger and preferred to simply physically remove themselves from the inflammatory situation. Some participants saw this as an effective, or at least a “safe,” method for staying out of trouble. They discussed their need to retreat when they felt angry. Martin said,

When I get mad I feel like I hate myself and I be talking to myself. When I get mad I go in a room by myself. At school, I just go by myself at school. I don’t talk to nobody. You just be your own self and don’t talk to nobody. Stuff like that.

(February 26, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Jeremy echoed this need for isolation. He said that when he became angry at school, he would “go sit in the office,” as does Mark, who would “go to the library to where nobody is.” Bradley also experienced problems with expressing his anger appropriately. He attended anger management courses as part of a court order. These classes were sponsored by the Department of Juvenile Justice and were held at the alternative school once weekly for several weeks. Jeremy, who also attended anger management classes, described the purpose of these classes: “You talk about your anger
and how you can prevent from getting mad.” Bradley seemed to find little worth in these classes and told how he continued to suppress his anger:

Well, I go to anger management, but that don’t do nothing. They don’t teach me anything that I don’t already know. It was a court order. I just keep it [anger] to myself. Just forget about it. If somebody makes me mad, like if somebody makes me mad, I go to the bathroom and when I come back I’ll be fine. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Some students described the thoughts they used to suppress their anger. These thoughts included how their actions affected their family members, as well as the prediction of negative consequences that may result from expressions of anger. Martin explained:

I think about my brother and my mama. Sometimes I think about my brother.
He’s bigger than me, he’s 21 . . . when I get in trouble [I think about] how I hurt my mama. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Darius told me the thoughts he used for controlling his anger and said, “I think about why I got sent here [alternative school] the first time.” Such mental exercises seemed to help students think before they acted, often helping to prevent trouble. Billy reflected on the ways that acting out of anger sometimes led him to trouble, and the limited acceptable ways for expressing emotion in school:

Yea, cause if you do it [express yourself] nowadays, you mostly get in trouble. I know a lot of people who hold their anger in and someone will say something to them and they let it all out. [Morris nods and points to self]. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)
In the same discussion, Morris expanded the notion of keeping his anger bottled up and discussed what happens when that becomes an ineffective strategy.

People piss me off all the time and they get me mad and I won’t say nothing about it, and then one time I’ll click and I’ll go off and I don’t mean to, but I’m angry. Sometimes I just get angry at life and how things work. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

These boys, then, are good examples of how schools can, perhaps unknowingly, encourage unhealthy anger suppression. By encouraging students to hold their anger inward, schools almost ensure a volatile release when anger does surface. Experience has taught students and teachers alike that school can be a place of non-emotion. Anxieties tend to rise when emotion, particularly anger, is displayed at school.

Even Mr. Fisher commented on his lack of opportunity to show his emotions. The administrators spoke to him regarding his need to appear more professional in the classroom. They were displeased about his show of anger. Recounting a conversation he had with the school administrators, he said:

They said, “You must stop doing this and stop doing that.” I said, “You have never even seen me upset.” They said, “Oh, we have never seen you upset? Then this is way too upset for us.” (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

Students in this school and traditional schools were reminded that teachers may occasionally “get away with” displaying anger, even though students were reprimanded for doing so. In this way, the school structure reinforces the socialization among students that rewards non-emotional expression and punishes emotional expression. If male
students, particularly, seek to display masculinity, little room will exist for other
emotions to be expressed as well. Other factors contribute to delinquency cycles as well.
Student and parent/grandparent perceptions of the use of inappropriate consequences for
certain infractions also appeared in the data.

“You’re Out of Here.”: Perceptions of Inappropriate Consequences

Students at Bridges School spoke frequently about the consequences that they
experienced in their traditional and alternative schools. Several students, parents, and
grandparents of Bridges expressed their concern with the inappropriate nature of some of
these consequences, specifically the suspension and expulsion policies of both traditional
schools and the alternative school. Some students, parents, and grandparents seemed
confused by the push to keep students in school and the need to suspend students, thereby
removing them from the school atmosphere. Research validates these concerns. For
example, Goodman (1999) deems suspension and expulsion as another means of school
rejection; policies which clearly contradict a positive, caring community needed to
promote student academic and behavior welfare (Short, Short, & Blanton, 1994).
Additionally, suspension policies often target certain students over others. Males are
more likely to be suspended than females; African-Americans are twice as likely to be
suspended than Whites (Short et al.). Students are also more likely to be suspended if
teachers see them as relatively uninterested in school, if teachers believe they are
incapable of solving problems, and if discipline matters are handled largely by
administrative rules (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982).

Martin’s mother reflected the literature that says suspension only assists the
student in getting further and further behind in coursework (Kennedy & Morton, 1999).
She spoke about her dissatisfaction with the suspension policies that took her son out of school. She offered this alternative:

Instead of suspending the students, give them somewhere to go over there at the school so they can be there and get their work done. Like In-School-Suspension, put them against the wall or something, instead of “you’re out of here.” They lose a lot being out of school. Martin was suspended five days one time. I had to run over there [to school] and get his work so he wouldn’t get behind. I didn’t have to, but I didn’t want him to get that far behind in his work. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Martin’s mother’s home.)

Billy pointed to the inappropriate nature of suspensions and expulsions in that it denies the student an education. He also alluded to the resistance that may accompany the suspensions for something that the student considers to be unwarranted. He commented,

Sometimes I don’t think they give like, an education. I mean they preach to us about getting an education, and then they’re gonna go and suspend us for stupid little things. . . . I mean, we’re gonna come back with an attitude ‘cause we’re gonna think it’s so stupid what they suspended us for. Like Mr. Richards was threatening to suspend me because I play around too much. I mean, that is like the most stupid reason I’ve ever heard to suspend someone. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Morris also mentioned resistance in our conversation. “They just suspend us. It’s just gonna make us not want to come [to school] anymore. And it’ll make us want to get into trouble.” Billy mentioned that if suspensions and expulsions did have to be used, perhaps they should be reserved for severe infractions in which it was clear that the student’s
safety or other students’ safety was endangered. He remembered times that he was suspended, and recalled these days as less than productive, and far from a punishment. He said that if he were not in school, he would be “sleeping, outside, or watching t.v. No, I’d be smoking a cigarette, that’s what I’d be doing.” Morris’s grandfather supported the view that suspensions are not effective. He indicated that Morris, who had a long history of severe truancy prior to living with him, viewed suspension as a vacation instead of a punishment. He described how Morris spent a recent suspension day:

They suspended him for a day [for smoking]. He ain’t had it no better. . . . But he hadn’t missed a day all year until then. He came to work with me on my jobs. I do real-estate. Took him with me. Make him pick up trash on rental properties, things like that. But he still had the day off. He’d rather do that. (April 12, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

In addition to missing instructional time, taking students out of school for misbehavior can perhaps send conflicting messages to them. Billy addressed this complex issue, and took it further to participating in class. He described the Catch-22 situation in which he found himself:

There is one thing I hate about school. They always tell you that you shouldn’t come if you are not going to do something, but if you don’t come to school, then you get in trouble. It’s like damned if you do and damned if you don’t . . . (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Thus, an over-dependence on rules, combined with a low tolerance for expressions of anger and inappropriate consequences for infractions can have tremendously negative
implications for students. One regrettable consequence is that of labeling effects, which can further perpetuate cycles of delinquency.

“I’m Not Really That Bad a Person.”: Labeling Effects

Several students confirmed the effects of labeling that occur in school. Even just being placed at the alternative school affixed certain labels to students. According to some students, the alternative school endures a reputation in the county as a school for the “bad kids” and often evoked fear in the students who were sent there. Several participants noted that they feared coming to the alternative school, but found it not to be as bad as they had expected once they arrived. Addarian said, “People used to tell me it [alternative school] was bad, but it ain’t bad. Tell the truth, I really want to go back to regular school.”

Community members also seemed to have strong ideas about alternative school students. Late in my data collection process, I became involved in a discussion with a convenience store attendant. Once he found out where I was visiting, he said of Bridges, “Are you with the Pre-Ks or with the bad kids? [I reply I work with the alternative part of the school.] Oh yea, we know those kids. They shoplift in here all the time.” Undoubtedly, community members have their own ideas about the alternative school and the students within that setting. Additionally, students confront the preconceived notions held by others when they return to their home schools. Billy talked about how he was treated differently upon returning to his home school following his first placement at the alternative school. He began by talking about the interactions he had with the administrators and teachers of his home school, who upon his return, automatically identified him as a troublemaker, saying,
Just like calling you to their office for no reason. Sometimes they just pick on you like with little stuff. I mean, I know some kids use that as an excuse that they get picked on at school, but most of the time it is true. ‘Cause I know a lot of teachers who do. I feel that I’ve been brought out just because of some of the stuff I do, some people think I’m bad because of that and I don’t think that’s fair because of some of the things you’ve done in the past. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

He added later in the conversation,

The officers [at regular school] suck, plus the principal there is always on you. They constantly are nagging at you. Your pants are falling down, are too low, your hair is too long, something like that. I just get tired of it. I would get tired of it and then I would like blow up in their face. And then I would get in trouble for blowing up in their face. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Mark, who had also returned to the alternative school for a second placement, echoed this very sentiment. He perceived that he was treated differently at his regular school because of his placement at the alternative school:

When you go back from this school, I think they do [treat you unfairly], ‘cause they think that you’re a bad person just ‘cause you went there [alternative school] and half the people don’t really know what you’re really like at all. ‘Cause see, when I come here, my parents always told me that, you know, people at this school were really bad, they’re the ones that took guns to school and shot people and stuff like that, you know. So it’s like, you know, my first day here I didn’t
talk to nobody, ‘cause you know I thought about that . . . really meeting people and all they’d done, they’d acted like they did some stupid stuff. Like I did what I did ‘cause I’m not really that bad a person. I just did some stupid crap . . . And um, so they treat you a lot different thinking that you’re a bad person and they load me down with more work when I get back. And the principal is always watching you. He’ll pick out every little thing that you do and give you detention for it. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Billy expressed that teachers were particularly guilty of labeling him and believed that not only were his actions disliked, but he was not liked as a person. Of this matter, he said,

And just like, [school helps me get in trouble] when like our parents say that we’re overreacting when we say that teachers pick favorites or they hate us. But it’s true. Some teachers hate us. And they like to get you in trouble; they pick out favorites. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Labeling effects can also perpetuate delinquency in that these negative beliefs can lead to students getting in trouble even when they had not necessarily committed an offense. When students are continually labeled as “bad kids” they can begin to see themselves as such and thus might be more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (e.g., Becker, 1963; Braithwaite, 1989; Shoemaker, 1990). Billy referred to the effects of labeling when he said, “Sometimes they will believe somebody over you and you’re telling the truth. I don’t think that’s right.” Bradley agreed, and told about a time he was punished for injuring a girl when he closed her hand in a locker, even though, according to him, someone pushed him, which caused him to push the girl into the row of lockers.
In this story, Bradley also mentioned how academically successful students may receive preferential treatment. Our conversation about this event was as follows:

Bradley: We were coming out of a classroom and there is a row of lockers on each side. Hers was at the end and I walked by it and the door was facing this way and I accidentally went by it and somebody pushed me into it and I knocked it and shut her hand in it.

Carol: So you got in trouble for that?

Bradley: Yea.

Carol: Did anybody ever hear your side of the story?

Bradley: They didn’t listen to me.

Carol: What was that conversation? What did she say?

Bradley: The teacher just wrote me up. I tried to tell her but she would not listen. She believed that girl because that girl like, made good grades and everything. I made good grades and everything, too, but she didn’t believe me. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Another problem that students described was not only that they often received the blame when, in their view, it was unwarranted, thereby perpetuating the “bad boy” cycle, but they also found themselves unable to escape their past mistakes in order to move their behavior in more productive directions. Billy commented that even though he was in another school year, he still felt as if he was being judged by his past behaviors. Here he talked about the resource officer at the alternative school:

I don’t know, I guess because like he just senses trouble in me sometimes. Last year I was just getting in trouble for little things and I’ll admit this, that I was
wrong in some of those ways, but just because of what I done last year, I don’t think he should bring that up. ‘Cause it’s like a new year, it’s like a new school year, and he’s still bringing up stuff from the past. (February 2, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Students often felt targeted for misbehaviors, as if they were “under a microscope” and someone was just waiting for them to make a mistake.

Labeling effects have implications not only for the student in school, but also for the student’s involvement with the Juvenile Justice System. The more often students are targeted for misbehaviors, the more likely they are to receive juvenile complaints, appear in court, and establish a history with the juvenile court system whose consequences increase in severity with every offense. The final section of this chapter looks at another dimension of the participants’ schooling experiences: the role of race.

The Role of Race in Students’ Schooling Experiences

One reason for conducting this study was to learn more about how students perceive race as a factor in their schooling experiences. I was prepared to compare and contrast the experiences of White and African-American males and to examine their perceptions as to how issues of race may link to delinquency. However, to my surprise, most students voiced the feeling that race had been rather insignificant in their schooling careers. Both African-American and White participants in the study spoke very little about race as a factor in their schooling experiences. In fact, most participants were unable to recall a single event in which their skin color had either helped them or prevented them from getting into trouble. Throughout the discussion of this theme, I provide my own speculations as to why racial issues were relatively absent from
conversations. The discussion is embedded within the limited data in which students and parents addressed the issue of race. I now turn my attention to race as an uncomfortable topic, perceptions of racism in school experiences, and perceptions of favoritism in school experiences.

**Race: An Uncomfortable Topic**

As a white man, I’ve enjoyed the privilege of choosing whether or not to regard race as relevant, and I have been slow to understand the luxury of having the choice. . . . On the surface, I was afraid to be entering a messy territory in which it seemed nothing useful could be said. My greater fear was that in facing racial inequities, I would ultimately be faced with myself and a choice between acting or retreating to an area of greater comfort. This is where the conversation begins for me. (Schneider, 1997, p. xi)

As Bart Schneider asserts in the forward of his compilation of essays titled, Race: An anthology in the first person, race can indeed be an uncomfortable issue to discuss. Students and parents in this study seemed to avoid issues of race, whether consciously or not. The White students perhaps saw little need to discuss race as influential in their schooling experiences as they often see race as a “peripheral part of their identity” (Schneider, p. xi). The African-American students, although perhaps more acutely aware of the role that race plays in their lives and schooling experiences, faced a White, middle-class, “university-bred” female with whom to discuss their experiences. The following sections present the elements of performance in conversations surrounding race and my Whiteness as a stumbling block to the research. Because racial topics were so limited in the data, I rely heavily on my own interpretations.
Elements of Performance in Conversations Surrounding Race

In examining student verbal interaction in interview contexts, it is feasible to draw connections between elements of performance, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, and conversations regarding race. Most of the students discussed race in a somewhat flippant, less-than-serious tone. In reflecting on the need for performance in student speech and the need to appear emotionally detached, it is possible that students withdrew from such an emotionally-charged and sensitive issue. While a few participants were willing to divulge some of their racial experiences, most did not want to expand upon information that they gave. For example, when I asked Keem, an African-American, if he had ever gotten into trouble because of his skin color, he told this story of how he “told” on one of his White teachers for making generalizations about his race:

He used to say, “Y’all Black people these days just don’t understand.” He ain’t said it no more because I told on him. Like when I didn’t turn in his work and Black people didn’t turn in his work. He was trying to say y’all Black people just don’t know. (March 30, 2001; Interview conducted outside on school grounds.)

However, when I pressed Keem to give more details about what exactly happened, Keem launched into a display of performance: singing, rapping and dancing. These actions signaled to me that he was possibly unwilling to further articulate these experiences and needed to retreat to a place that was comfortable for him. Likewise, Addarian, also an African-American participant, expressed discomfort when I asked questions about how his schooling experiences had been influenced by his race. When I asked him if a teacher had ever treated him unfairly because of his race, he said simply, “I have.” When I asked him to tell me about it, he responded, “No, I ain’t telling you about that.” When I
attempted to get him to expand on the story, he offered this limited information:

“Something bad happened when I was in kindergarten.” Then he told me that he was
“just kidding” and would not return to this issue, despite my attempts. Instead, he
proceeded to play with the tape-recorder and the microphone that recorded our
conversation and told me a seemingly unrelated story about how he stabbed a girl with a
pencil. Perhaps this story was an attempt at performance or even Addarian trying to come
across as masculine (as previously discussed) to mask feelings of vulnerabilities.
Addarian’s example, while perhaps also pointing to my novice interviewing skills,
possibly illustrates the discomfort that he felt in talking about racial issues with me.

Several days later in conversation with Mr. Fisher, I learned that Addarian had failed to
tell me of his most recent racial experience at school. He apparently complained that Mr.
Fisher made racial slurs. Mr. Fisher denied that this happened and said of Addarian,

I had his Mom up here about two or three times. He has made up lies about me,
racial slurs that I never said. He is sneaky and you can’t trust a word he says.
He’ll say one thing and do another. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in
Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

When I asked Mr. Fisher to describe the scenario in which he allegedly made racial slurs
that prompted this conflict, he depicted it as follows:

I was sitting here [in the classroom] at lunch period for about 30 minutes. I spend
about 5 minutes just shoveling it in as fast as I can. I spend 5-8 minutes on
meditative prayer study to sort of regain my incentive. For some reason, he
[Addarian] was bashing on my door. He knocked about three times and I got up
and walked over there and opened the door and there stood Addarian. All I said to
him was, “Did you hit my door?” He went off on me. The next thing you know, I am being accused of calling him, saying something like, “Black folks just don’t know nothing and blah, blah, blah.” I had never said anything. In all the years of teaching, I have never cussed one word. So that wasn’t good, he lied about that, but we got that straightened out. (February 14, 2001; Interview conducted in Mr. Fisher’s classroom.)

Very few White participants engaged in conversations about race, perhaps because they did not see the relevance of race to their schooling experiences. As part of the majority race, they have been granted the privilege of ignoring their race and how their conferred power affects people of color (McIntosh, 1997). As I reflected upon my own role as a White researcher and a member of the majority race, I was forced to examine the limitations that this brought to the research.

My Whiteness as a Stumbling Block to the Research

Undoubtedly my appearance as a White, female, middle-class professional made it challenging for African-American males to share stories of racial importance. Despite my genuine interest in their experiences and reactions, many participants probably saw me as “just another White teacher.” At the onset of the study I was often asked if I was a new Probation Officer. My Whiteness was particularly poignant at the beginning of the study, when I struggled to establish rapport with African-American participants. I became frustrated that establishing bonds with the African-American participants was taking longer than with White participants. I felt as if I was not making connections and knew that my research would suffer as a consequence. I addressed these concerns with Dr.

The email read:

Hi, Dr. Bailey. As I’m sitting here journaling about some of my concerns that I’m having in the field as of late, I decided to email you for some possible help and comments. . . . Well, we knew we’d have this conversation sooner or later, so here it is. My “outsider” status with African-American male students does not seem to be improving as quickly as I had hoped. I still feel like I am relating to them on a rather superficial level, I guess because I am always the conversation initiator. I sort of feel at a loss when interacting informally, and was wondering if you had any suggestions. I feel like I’m treading this line of trying not to get in anyone’s way if they don’t want me hanging around (for example at lunch when it is very segregated) yet also wanting to get to know the students and build up some trust. I don’t want to resort to talking about basketball even though I know a few of the students are interested, simply because I don’t want them to think that I think that stereotypically about them. Yet, I’m still searching for common ground. I’m sure that there is a lot of distrust there, still, of course, even though I think we are getting more comfortable with each other. Am I overanalyzing too much?

The response that I received from Dr. Bailey and Dr. deMarrais helped to remind me that African-American male students have many reasons not to trust White school-related people. Dr. Bailey responded in part,

It has been my experience that young Black males (Black students in general, but especially males) tend not to trust very easily. Try to think of developing their trust separate from your research. In other words, let the research come out of the
relationship you develop with them instead of the relationship coming out of the research.

While rapport and meaningful relationships with African-American participants did develop over time, I do not think that the relatively short amount of time that I was at the alternative school was enough to break down racial barriers that had taken years to establish. A few months was simply not enough time to undo years of experiences. Indeed, no matter how pure my intentions, I was but one example of a White person in their lives full of other examples, and my desire to open honest, and perhaps vulnerable, discussions about race was probably too much, too soon, for most of my young adolescent African-American participants. Of the conversations that did ensue with both African-American and White participants, they were typically brief and revealed limited amounts of information. The following section describes elements of racism that participants discussed.

Perceptions of Racism in School Experiences

Students and parents discussed elements of racism in our conversations. Each of these areas is explored in the following paragraphs.

“She Racist.”: Student Perceptions

In some instances participants seemed to point to racism when they were not sure why else they experienced trouble with certain teachers. Perhaps in some cases participants felt a sense of racism but were unable to clearly articulate the instance that demonstrated racism. For example, Martin offered this example of his third grade teacher when I asked him if he ever had a teacher who did not like him:
Um . . . one teacher. She racist. Third grade. I didn’t even do nothin’ . . . she just came in there and we were doing our math center. She just got mad at me and started hollerin’ at me, telling me to get up and move my desk. I don’t know why she did that. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

When I asked Martin to point to other examples of racist behaviors, he gave this example:

One time it was free time and we couldn’t go outside because it was raining. And I had this door behind me and I looked out the door to see if it was raining and we asked if we could write on the board and we went up there and wrote on the board and we had got through with all our work and so me and three White people, and this girl named Keirra, she was Black. She told me and Keirra that we couldn’t write on the board because we won’t done with our work. But we were. Everybody was. (February 1, 2001; Interview conducted in an empty classroom.)

Martin was unable to recall any other events that year in which his teacher demonstrated racism. Again, without other examples, it is difficult to determine why Martin perceived certain events as racist. At their age, it may have been difficult for them to explain their thought processes about such a complex issue, particularly when discussions of race seemed to prompt feelings of discomfort. In Martin’s case, it appeared that calling a teacher racist signaled some sort of conflict, yet when pressed to identify the specific racial implication, he was unable to do so. One day Martin called Mr. Morton, a White teacher at Bridges, “racist” because he thought the teacher accused him of the same thing. Martin denied that he had any racist attitudes and said:

I don’t know, he thinks that I am racist against him. I don’t know where he gets it. My mamma talked to him and she said that he said that and I ain’t. I just don’t
like him. He always tries to compare us to his two daughters and don’t nobody want to hear about his daughters. (February 26, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

So then, Martin used the term “racist” in a rather loose way, probably as more of a general put-down than in terms of actually racial tones. Martin’s mother gave additional information about this situation in our conversation.

“Misbehaving, Okay, But Prejudice?”: Parent Perceptions

Martin’s mother recounted the instance with Mr. Morton when we talked. Obviously upset by the suggestion that her son harbored negative racial attitudes toward Whites, she recounted the event as follows:

When I talked to him [Mr. Morton] he said, “I think Martin’s got a problem with me being White.” He just said that he think because he’s a White male he think Martin don’t like him. He said, “Now you know that Martin’s gonna have White supervisors, White this and that.” Of course, we’ve all got to live here together. Of course I know that. I don’t even know why he would say that and then after he said that I went straight to the office. I asked another one of Martin’s teachers, I also talked to Dr. Ely and said, “Can you talk with Martin and see if he’s got a problem with that teacher? He said he had a problem with him being White and I want to know why.” ‘Cause Martin goes to Dr. Ely for counseling, but Dr. Ely say he don’t see where that is coming from. And I know Martin’s not like that. I was just shocked. Now misbehaving, okay, but prejudice? That’s not Martin. (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Martin’s mother’s home.)
When Martin’s mother took this information to the principal, Mr. Richards reassured her that perhaps Mr. Morton’s suggestions had been out of line. She explained the principal’s response:

Mr. Richards said all the kids seem to think that, he [Mr. Morton] thinks that about all the children. They got a problem with him being White, all the Black kids. I said, “Well, seem like to me he the one that got the problem.” (March 2, 2001; Interview conducted in Martin’s mother’s home.)

Conversations such as these indicated the complexities surrounding racism. As with Mr. Morton and Martin’s mother, race discussions can often become emotionally charged and can quickly become confounded by misunderstandings. Although Mr. Morton probably had good intentions of trying to help Martin’s mother understand her son’s behavior, he undoubtedly perpetuated problems by making unsubstantiated generalizations about Martin’s attitudes. Their exchange is a good example of ways in which personalized conversations surrounding race can be so difficult to bridge, that they result in a cessation of the conversation altogether. Too often, as in this case, these conversations lead to increased misunderstandings and even further stereotyping. In addition to racism, elements of favoritism were noted in the data.

Perceptions of Favoritism in School Experiences

A few students and parents were able to recall certain events that indicated favoritism. I organized the data addressing how participants described favoritism into two categories: favoritism for self, and favoritism for others. Each type is discussed below.

“My Skin Color Has Never Helped Me.”: Favoritism for Self
Interestingly, no participant believed that he received favoritism because of his skin color. No participant was able to recall an instance in which his skin color had helped him stay out of trouble. There are several possibilities as to why this was the case. The most obvious, of course, is that these instances simply did not exist, and truly favoritism had not played a role in their circumstances. Or, it could be that preferential treatment was exercised, yet participants did not identify it as such, or perhaps they were unable to articulate it as such. It is not particularly surprising that White participants were unable to identity examples of favoritism. Issues of White privilege and the “invisibility” of the White culture (McIntosh, 1997) suggest that White students are often unaware of the societal power and privilege that their whiteness affords them. Without having their attention drawn to such matters, it is unlikely that they would reach such conclusions independently, particularly at such a young age. In any case, students failed to cite examples of times their skin color served in their favor.

However, Martin’s mother, who is perhaps more capable of identifying instances of favoritism than Martin himself, pointed to situations in which she believed Martin was spared harsher punishment because of his skin color. She spoke about a time that she believed an African-American administrator at his previous school gave them special treatment or advice because of their skin color. She said, “Ms. Tony over at his old school; she let him off. She’s Black, you know. And I’m Black, and she’s like, ‘I’m trying to help you.’” While no other mentions of favoritism for self were cited, the data do address some examples of favoritism for others.
“If All You Want To Do Is Be With Black People, I Don’t Care”: Favoritism for Others

A few White students stated they saw others receive preferential treatment. For example, Bradley, a White student, was particularly vocal about ways that he believed African-American students experienced favoritism with African-American teachers. He described a situation that took place at the alternative school:

One time there was a teacher subbing [substituting] and this wasn’t that long ago. That teacher, she was taking up for these other Black kids. She was Black too. She tried to tell me that I was cheating at a game and all kinds of stuff. She said something to me and I told her that she was racist against White people and that she didn’t like White people. I said, “If all you want do is be with Black people, I don’t care.” I said, “If you want to believe them, just don’t believe me.” She said, “Okay.” But she got on my nerves. I just got tired of sitting there and I walked out of class and went to the office. I didn’t want to end up getting in trouble. That was the only Black teacher that ever gave me fits before. (February 12, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

The following excerpt illustrates how Billy saw favoritism not between teacher and student, but among students. He described how he perceived African-American students working together in an effort to make him appear unfavorable to the teacher:

Black people want to tell on White kids but they don’t want to tell on Black kids. I can ignore somebody forever, I learned that, but them kids don’t think I have and they just get on my nerves. Eventually they say something I really don’t like, and I just tell them to shut up or something like that. Then they turn around and
tell the teacher that I said shut up and stuff and that is stupid. (February 23, 2001; Interview conducted in the media center.)

Favoritism, both as cited for the benefit of the participants and for others, in combination with elements of racism in schooling experiences and the discomfort in talking about racial issues, defined the issue of race in the schooling experiences of participants. Implications for these and previously presented data will be further explored in the upcoming chapter.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings; these students represent youth who are at-risk for delinquency. In particular, I investigated how these students

- perceived their alternative school experiences
- perceived their traditional school experiences
- made connections between their schooling experiences and delinquent activities
- viewed race as a factor in their schooling experiences

In order to gain information about these research questions, I conducted a qualitative study using ethnographic techniques in which I interviewed students, parents, grandparents, and staff members associated with the alternative school, and engaged in participant observation. These data sources allowed me to determine some of the characteristics of the alternative school, while also examining it from a structural level. Chapter 5 of this study presents many aspects of the participants’ schooling experiences, both alternative and traditional.

Summary of Findings

Table 7 provides a very brief overview of the findings I presented in chapter 5 and shows the research questions the data of that section address.
Table 7

Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of findings</th>
<th>Research questions addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Philosophy of the School</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers and administrators conveyed to students that Bridges School was their second, but last chance. Students were encouraged to make wise choices and show good behavior so that they could return to their home school.</td>
<td>What are the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings? How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inadequacies in the Teaching and Learning Environments</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources:</td>
<td>What are the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings? How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Additional funding for support staff, classroom materials, teacher resources, and building needs would have perhaps improved the functioning of the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of innovative teaching in the school setting:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teachers relied heavily on traditional teaching methods, most using individual seatwork as the means of instruction. Perhaps this lack of innovative teaching was connected to teachers’ poor preparation for the challenging setting, minimal teaching efforts, and low expectations of students.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parent and student perceptions of an inadequate academic program indicated students were not challenged by the curriculum. Some students indicated they felt inadequately prepared for the academics of traditional schools, making their transition back there more difficult.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(Table 7 continued)

Lack of power:

- Teachers expressed powerlessness in comparison to other structures such as the county office. Teachers, consciously or not, exerted power over students.

**Discipline Played a Central Role in the School Setting**

- Teachers and administrators identified themselves primarily as disciplinarians rather than facilitators of academic growth.
- Parents and grandparents with whom I spoke expressed the need for stricter discipline.
- Teachers, parents, and grandparents often suggested using military-type discipline as a means for controlling student behavior.

**Patterns of Interaction in the School Context**

Patterns of student interaction:

- Peers used elements of performance as part of their verbal “game.” They attempted to entertain peers by bantering back and forth with put-downs and derogatory remarks.
- Students displayed masculinity as a way to perform for their peers. I propose they challenged each other physically and attempted to avoid affection to appear more masculine. Perhaps students also used performance to cover up emotions that may otherwise reveal their vulnerabilities.
Patterns of teacher-student interaction:

- Teacher talk reflected school values and prompted students to resist, perhaps in part because they saw it as interference in their lives and because they had been unsuccessful in school. Sometimes terminologies in teacher talk confused students.

- Non-traditional teacher talk challenged conventional notions of the ways teacher should interact with students. Sometimes borrowing sarcastic and antagonistic elements of peer interaction patterns, teachers occasionally used elements of performance, such as slamming a door, to accentuate non-traditional teacher talk.

- Non-school talk was well received by students perhaps because it had little to do with academics and often showed a more personal side of their teachers.

Ways to Resist in the School Context

- Teachers: most often obtained teaching positions elsewhere or reduced efforts at school.

- Students: actively, by disrupting class; passively, by disengaging from class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In what ways do young adolescent males make connections between their schooling experiences and their involvement in delinquent activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do young adolescent males perceive their traditional school experiences?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences?

| School Deterred and Contributed to Cycles of Delinquency for These Students |
|---|---|
| 1. Deterred delinquency by serving as a supervisory structure for students. |
| 2. Contributed to delinquency by heavily enforcing rules that students did not always see as important. Students did not know how to appropriately express anger. Consequences such as suspensions possibly contributed to delinquency. Students addressed negative effects of labeling, particularly when returning to their home school. |

| What are the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings? |
|---|---|
| In what ways do young adolescent males make connections between their schooling experiences and their involvement in delinquent activities? |
| How do young adolescent males perceive their traditional school experiences? |
| How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences? |

| The Role of Race in Students’ Schooling Experiences |
|---|---|
| 1. Very little data; members of majority culture can easily ignore race. Students seemed reluctant to talk about race, or used performance in conversations, which may indicate discomfort with this topic. My own race probably hindered discussions with African-American participants. |
| 2. Issues of racism and favoritism indicate a need for continued race discussions. |

| What are the experiences of young adolescent males who are placed at alternative school settings? |
|---|---|
| How do young adolescent males view race as a factor in their success or failure as students? |
| How do young adolescent males perceive their traditional school experiences? |
| How do young adolescent males perceive their alternative school experiences? |
Discussion of Findings

As a way to synthesize the research, I have chosen to present a visual display of the findings. Table 8 shows how I have conceptualized the research findings. As you see by the representation, the spiraling process of delinquency defined this research. Data from this study indicated that as a student moved further and further down the spiral, it was increasingly difficult for that student to climb back to the top and experience a great deal of success in a school setting. While many factors contributed and deterred the delinquency process, this research study focused primarily on one factor: school.

The students of this study typically had rather negative traditional school experiences. Many participants had social problems with their peers and many regularly experienced conflicts with their teachers. School problems were often exacerbated by little support from family members and students’ inappropriate coping strategies for typical emotions. Students reported they felt as if they were often targeted for misbehavior, and they had difficulty escaping negative labeling effects. Students often reacted to negative school experiences with resistance. They often acted out to disturb classes, or they withdrew from the classroom altogether. This resistance can be seen as one way in which students tried to regain power in their otherwise powerless situation. However, student resistance elicited teachers, administrators, and community members to label them “troublemakers,” thereby creating further problems in the traditional school. Such behaviors often led students to be expelled or suspended, at which point they were assigned to the alternative school. This situation served to further entrench their labels as “troublemakers.” Once at the alternative school, students became prone to isolation effects, as they were taken from their community schools and environments and placed in
Students had negative experiences in traditional school for a variety of reasons. Conflicts with peers and teachers were common.

Students often had little support from family members. They often used inappropriate coping strategies to address problems.

Students were often targeted for misbehavior. Students resisted actively and passively.

Students were further labeled as “troublemakers.”

Students deemed not successful in traditional schools: suspended or expelled.

Students placed in alternative school.

Negative labels further entrenched. Low expectations imposed.

Little about structure of school differed in alternative setting.

Alt. school: Lack of funding; Difficult to attract, retain quality teachers.

Students resisted, mediated environment

Students returned to traditional school setting

Students placed in Youth Detention Center

CYCLE REPEATS
in new setting...
a transitional setting that offered a very temporary solution. The structure of this alternative, or, temporary school assignment actually resembled that of traditional school structures.

Despite the small class size in the alternative school, instruction was minimal and not directed at individuals. Few opportunities were provided for students to improve social skills. Despite the fact that students had previously been unsuccessful in traditional structures, the alternative school provided few academic or counseling services to encourage student success. In fact, many alternative school officials seemed to accept negative labels that had been placed on students, and some adults held rather low expectations for student success.

Additionally, quality teaching and learning environments in the alternative school were not apparent as priorities. Because of the difficult student population, lack of appropriate funding, and other factors, administrators of the alternative school had difficulty obtaining and retaining quality teachers. Teachers were often overwhelmed with the challenging situations before them. Additionally, the structure of school remained such that students felt rather powerless in their school, although they tried to mediate their environments through verbal interaction and performance. Likewise, students rebelled against school rules they deemed illogical. As a result of certain inappropriate behaviors, students experienced ineffective school policies such as suspensions and expulsions, which only served to further perpetuate non-success. Thus, negative schooling experiences often continued at the alternative school, where students continued to react with increased resistance and inappropriate actions. Eventually, students were forced to choose between two end results upon completion of their
alternative school term. They could either improve their school behaviors enough to return to the traditional school, or they would be placed in the Youth Detention Center. Both choices offered relatively little incentive for many students. Traditional school had already proved to be a place of non-success, but placement at a Youth Detention Center meant a more severe consequence as students were taken from their families. The remainder of this chapter focuses on ways that school personnel may intervene in order to increase student success so that these bleak options are not forced. In the following implications section, I focus on ways that traditional and alternative schools may better serve the needs of students who are at-risk for delinquency so that the student path down this downward spiral may be thwarted. Early intervention in the delinquency spiral is paramount to prevention.

Implications

Undoubtedly, the goal of alternative schools is to educate students who are unsuccessful in traditional schools. However, data from this study revealed a need for the reexamination of alternative school programs. As noted in this study, for many reasons, alternative schools such as Bridges may, in fact, be doing very little to foster student success upon reentry to traditional schools. A lofty, but ultimate goal would be to serve students at-risk for delinquency in their traditional school, and would eradicate the need for alternative schools altogether. Serving students in their traditional schools would prevent isolation effects and would minimize the funding challenges associated with alternative schools. Therefore, the recommendations I make in this chapter outline not only ways that alternative schools may better educate students, but most importantly, ways that traditional schools may better serve the needs of students at-risk for
delinquency. Many of the recommendations I make would simply increase the likelihood of student success, regardless of the setting. This chapter includes implications for classroom practices, the structures of school, teacher education, and future research in this field.

Implications for Classroom Practices

Findings of this study suggest the need to more closely examine classroom practices. This section addresses implications for Bridges School, as well as classrooms in traditional schools serving students at-risk for delinquency. The following sections address the need for highly effective teaching, the need to equalize the power distribution, the need to understand interaction styles, and the need to examine silences in conversations.

Highly Effective Teaching

Findings of this study suggest the need for highly effective teaching at the alternative school. While it seems like common sense that highly effective teaching is an essential component of any school, I make several specific recommendations about how to improve the quality of teaching at the alternative school, or other school environments that may look similar to Bridges.

Highly effective teaching begins with well-trained, professional teachers, who adhere to a rigorous academic program. As noted in this study, several factors such as challenging students, inadequate funding, poor teaching conditions, and inadequate training for the setting can impede highly effective teaching. These factors are discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Professional teachers who are well versed in planning and executing thoroughly developed lessons are essential components to highly effective
teaching. In a variety of classroom settings, well-planned and executed lessons may entail teachers planning and even teaching collaboratively. Although no collaborative efforts in teaching and planning were noted at the time of this study, students might benefit from a team-based approach in which teachers identify the specific needs of students and work together to address those needs. Consistent communication among teachers would assist in evaluating the progress of each student and would direct determinations about how to change or refine the ways teachers are addressing student needs. My study, in particular, revealed three needs for highly effective teaching: increased academic rigor, high teacher expectations, and the diminished use of labels.

**Increased academic rigor.** Academic rigor has been noted as an essential characteristic of effective schools, particularly in schools serving alternative populations (Adger, Kalyanpur, Peterson, & Bridger, 1995; Barber, 1996; Chalker, 1996; Kennedy & Morton, 1999). Highly effective teachers are more than disciplinarians and technicians who implement rules and consequences; rather, they are professionals who believe in their roles as facilitators to promote academic achievement. When some of the students in my study did not feel academically challenged, they sometimes resisted in the classroom or disengaged from school altogether. Perhaps if students were more engaged in the classroom and participated in activities that brought academic concepts alive to them, they might be less likely to resist and cause further disciplinary problems that distract them and their peers from instruction. Teachers, particularly of behaviorally challenging students, can make learning fun and engaging for students by encouraging active participation. Students who are active participants in their learning will construct their own ways of knowing and will view learning as relevant to their lives. Conversely, when
teachers rely primarily on worksheets and textbook exercises, they can create a passive learning environment that encourages convergent thinking. Such methods of instruction also encourage boredom as well as product-focused learning. In classroom communities where learning is valued and expected, students are challenged and are actively engaged in their own learning. Discipline issues tend to be much less problematic in such classrooms when teachers’ lessons are well-focused, engaging, developmentally appropriate, and challenging. Students tend to assume more responsibility for their learning and actively engage in learning when given the chance. Teacher expectations are another necessary element in highly effective teaching.

**High teacher expectations.** Part of highly effective teaching means setting high but obtainable expectations for students. Research indicates that when teachers set high expectations for students, students usually meet those expectations when they are provided with the necessary support for doing so (Barber & Dann, 1996). Several times in our conversations, even caring and dedicated teachers and administrators in this study, perhaps unknowingly, expressed rather low expectations for students, even though some of these faculty members had been in the school for a relatively small amount of time and did not have evidence to support their expectations for this group of students. It is disturbing to think that these expectations may play out in the daily lives of the students, particularly those students who are not of the same gender, race, or class as that of the teacher. Research indicates that low teacher expectations can have accentuated effects for these students, as teachers often base their perceptions of students on their own gender, class, and race identities, and act accordingly (Casanova, 1990). Thus, teacher expectations are bound by that teacher’s own view of such identifiers and may not be
accurate. When teachers know less about certain cultures, races, or one gender, these expectations may be far from reality. Most teachers, as was likely the case in my study, are probably not aware that they transmit low expectations. If teachers in all settings reflected critically on their own expectations, they may be more likely to recognize low expectations they hold for students. Once they identified any low expectations, they may be more likely to embrace their role of encourager and communicate high and obtainable expectations for all students.

**Diminished use of labels.** Research (e.g., Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951; Schur, 1971; Shoemaker, 1990) has consistently shown throughout the years that labeling children as “delinquent” serves to reinforce their negative self-images. It may also prompt children to live up to an expectation of misbehavior. Participants of this study spoke about the labeling effects imposed upon them, particularly by their traditional school teachers, when they returned there. Working with teachers to diminish the practice of labeling students would also contribute to highly effective teaching. As described by the participants of this study, they often found it hard to shed their “bad boy” images once they had been established. Participants in this study spoke about feeling as if they were watched under a microscope, that is, they felt as if someone was always ready and waiting for them to make a mistake. As labeling effects in schools are so well documented in the literature (e.g., Becker; Lemert; Schur; Shoemaker), we need to find ways to minimize labeling practices. This phenomenon is complex and far-reaching.

One way to possibly minimize labeling practices is to look at the social, emotional, and cognitive development of students within their individual contexts. Students who are sent to the “alternative school” are often referred to as the “bad kids,”
which only serves to reinforce negative labeling. If we could make traditional school a more successful place for students at-risk for delinquency, we might also reduce the negative images of those students. If these students could be served successfully in their traditional schools, through counseling and social services, we could eliminate the stigma and isolation effects that come with serving the students in alternative schools. Working with teachers at traditional schools to help them reflect on their own labeling practices would better equip them to serve students at-risk for delinquency.

Equalize the Power Distribution

Data from this study indicate that power structures within the alternative school greatly influenced how students responded to teachers and to schools and even served to perpetuate cycles of delinquency. Therefore, these implications address the needs of any classroom (traditional or alternative) in which the power predominately resides with the teacher. My observations and interviews indicated that when power resided predominately with the teacher or authority figures, students often responded in ways that disrupted instruction in attempts to regain some of the power in classrooms. They resisted actively with their disruptive behavior and they resisted passively by disengaging from their work. In every case, this resistance was a way to control their own school environment. By empowering students in their school setting (both traditional and alternative), students might be less likely to force this power back into their possession.

In effective alternative programs, “power tends to be more evenly distributed among students, teachers, and administrators” (Klauke, 1989, p. 2).
Within any classroom, a teacher can empower students and create a democratic classroom in which all people feel that they share in the power structure. If students perceive that they share the power, they might be less likely to act out. When students share in the responsibility for their own learning and actively participate in that learning, the power shifts to them. Participants in this study suggested many ways that compromises could be made to accommodate their needs. While many of those compromises serve only to lower student expectations, participants did address the need for open communication between teacher and students. If students have input into the academic program as well as the behavioral policies and procedures, they might be more likely to buy into the classroom establishment.

Teachers can also try to recognize resistance for what it is, that is, a response to a situation in which a student feels otherwise powerless. When resistance behaviors are detected, teachers can try to remove themselves from the situation and look objectively at it, using it as an opportunity to examine their own practices that elicit resistant reactions. Teachers, instead of merely trying to regain the power in such resistance situations, can also reflect on why the student is feeling powerless and what can be done in that situation to remedy it. By looking at it this way, the teacher may feel less threatened by the resistant behavior, and the power between teacher and student can be more equally shared. Interaction styles are also tied to power issues.

Understand Interaction Styles

Foster (1974) illustrates the importance of teachers understanding the “game” of interaction that takes place in classrooms:
Few urban educators are either aware of or understand the real rules guiding the teaching and learning game being played in their classrooms and schools. They think they are setting the rules for the game but they are not. Their formal organizational rules do not count; what does count are the informal organizational rules that . . . youngsters are superimposing on the school’s formal organizational rules. (p. 25)

Distinct patterns of interaction were noted among the students and among the teachers and students in this study. Understanding the interaction styles used by both groups can help teachers in all settings make their classroom a more successful place for students. Implications for the interaction styles of peers and teachers are considered below.

**Interactions among students.** In this study, student interactions assumed elements of performance and entertainment. Students bantered back and forth, trying to one-up each other and appear superior. This type of interaction could also be seen as a way to gain power. For example, the student who is able to make the most offensive remark is often seen as the “winner,” and thereby holds power over the peer with whom he interacts. To my knowledge, connections between power issues and student interaction styles have not been explored thus far in the literature. The literature does document this bantering type of interaction as typical in lower-class students (Foster, 1974) but does not explore bantering as a possible attempt at gaining power. We know that students use interactions to assert their masculinity (Foster), but perhaps this notion can be extended to an assertion for power because of their lack of power in other situations.

Teachers who recognize the game and rules of student interaction will be better prepared when this plays out in the classroom. Trying to squelch or change the rules of
the interaction game might only serve to create more problems in the classroom. Teachers, by recognizing that students want to “save face” in peer interactions, can help ease situations, or at least not worsen them, by adhering to some of the student interaction rules. Teachers who are not familiar with the game are often intimated by it and seek to stop it (Foster, 1974), thereby making it worse for the students who tend to react with resistance.

Teacher interactions. Power issues also played out in teacher interaction styles. Teachers in this study whom relied heavily on teacher talk assumed the bulk of the power in the classroom and met with considerable resistance in the classroom. If teachers could examine the interaction styles in their own classrooms and become familiar with them, perhaps they may better be able to see links between those interaction styles and the reactions of students. Teachers may find in their own situations, once they understand the types of teacher interactions they use, that some of their interactions cause some students to “turn off” school talk. If so, teachers may be able to monitor and adjust their interaction patterns to engage more students in the classroom. Additionally, when students are more involved in their learning, and have had input into the classroom proceedings, they are less likely to see teacher talk as distant from their own. When students share in the power of decision-making, the talk around academics will focus on their interests, so that a commonality is created. When students personalize their learning, school talk more easily overlaps with their own talk.

Teachers who used non-school talk were described favorably by participants. Teachers can consider the occasional use or insertions of appropriate non-school talk during their classroom interactions. Students responded favorably when they felt their
teachers exhibited a personal side. By teachers relating academics to real-world events and by bringing the experiences of their students into the classroom when appropriate, teachers can engage in meaningful non-school talk that might not only enhance the academic program, but might also strengthen teacher-student bonds. Teachers can also make use of transitional times such as going to or from lunch, or class-changing times to engage students in non-school talk. Such talk assists in creating a positive and warm atmosphere in which students feel they are valued and respected.

When the teachers in my study engaged in non-traditional teacher talk and borrowed elements of the student interaction style, they established commonalities with their students and shared power with them, and consequently met with less resistance in the classroom. As Foster (1974) indicated, “most often, streetcorner youngsters respect the teacher who can best them at their games, without losing his dignity and without coming down too hard on them” (p. 210). If teachers feel comfortable engaging in peer type of interactions, they may gain respect from their students. Using non-traditional teacher talk must be balanced with professionalism. Teachers have to weigh what they feel is comfortable and appropriate for them with how students will receive them in the classroom. Granted, some non-traditional talk noted in this study did not serve to gain the respect of students but rather served to belittle them. Such non-traditional teacher talk should be reexamined. Teachers in all settings may consider first observing the interaction patterns of their own students and then engaging in similar verbal interaction when they feel it is appropriate. Teachers who do not feel comfortable engaging in peer interaction may still honor the interaction styles of students by not privileging their own “teacher” style of interaction in the classroom. Even this will serve to strengthen bonds
with students which can assist in diminishing delinquency (Hirschi, 1969; Jensen, Erickson, & Gibbs, 1978).

This study, as emphasized in my interviews with participants, highlights the benefit of meeting students, to some degree, at their preferred interaction style. For me, realizing the performance component of student interaction certainly increased my effectiveness as a researcher, just as I suggest it could increase teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom. By conducting interviews with students, I realized the value in honoring these means of communication, instead of expecting students to automatically assume adult-like ways of interacting. Once I understood that they communicated with their peers in distinct ways, I was better able to understand their interactions with me. Such findings can help teachers better understand teacher-student interactions and help them to improve relations. Perhaps providing students time in class to use their styles of interaction, in small groups or informal interactions, can also serve to honor their means of communication and help teachers to become more familiar with peer interaction styles. Being aware of the differences in interaction styles may provide another avenue for teachers to reflect critically on the effectiveness of their classroom practices.

Examine Silences in Conversations

Understanding how students and teachers communicate is as important as knowing what they communicate. In this study, I realized that I had to listen not only to what students and teachers said and how they said it, but also to what they were not saying. To my surprise, I found that two important types of conversations were minimal in the data: honest conversations about student circumstances and honest conversations about race.
Conversations about student circumstances. While I understood the philosophy of the school to include the importance of students making wise choices for success and the need to use the school as a “second-chance,” I rarely heard conversations that helped students examine their own circumstances, or understand what factors they could and could not control in their own lives. While teachers at the alternative school may not have seen this as their role, they often urged students to make wise choices and to straighten up to get back to their home school. Teachers in this setting more than likely viewed such comments as encouragement to students, yet without conversations about how to improve their situations, students were often lost. Perhaps if teachers are not able to follow-up these conversations, counselors or other service providers could discuss with the students the changeable and non-changeable parts of their lives. Students who are at-risk for delinquency may be able to improve factors in their lives if someone assists them in considering how families, economics, and schools help to shape their experiences. Conversations in schools and courts often suggest to these students that they are expected to rise from their family, community, and circumstances and take a new path in life, yet often they are not provided any of the tools with which to do so. Students could greatly benefit from talking to a qualified person (whether that be a teacher, counselor, or social worker) openly and honestly about their circumstances. This professional could help students pinpoint the actions needed to improve their school and court situations. Perhaps best done in a counseling atmosphere, students should be given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences to help them understand why they may have made the choices they have until now. Doing so may help students feel more in control of their future if they explicitly determine what they can and can not control. By identifying factors that are
imposed upon them and those that are not, they can concentrate on factors that they can control. Teaching students reflective skills in order to make changes for the future could be a key component to modifying unacceptable behavior.

Conversations about race. Conversations about race were limited in the data. I believe this absence of data has implications for classroom practices. Despite that fact that race is probably among the first things we notice about a person, it is sometimes the last to be discussed. Why are conversations surrounding race so carefully avoided? As I noted in chapter 5, there are many possibilities for this phenomenon. White students, coming from the majority culture, may not see their race as central to their identity. Because of their privileged status in society, they can afford to disregard issues of race. On the other hand, African-American students may be more aware of the role that race plays in their experiences, yet, understandably may not feel comfortable discussing such issues with people who look unlike themselves. Combined with the issues of performance that permeate student talk, it is very difficult to get young students to talk about such serious matters.

One of the best ways to initiate conversations around race is to bring real-world situations that deal with race to the classroom. In my own experience, the first time that I heard members of the minority culture talk about a racial issue, for example, discrimination, was in college. Until then, issues of discrimination had not even been in my realm of every-day thinking. It appears to me that race plays an important role in our daily lives, and thus it should be discussed in relation to real-world events as early as elementary school. That is not to say that issues of race and culture are not gaining attention in schools. Despite great strides in multicultural education in the last several
years, issues of race continue to remain in the background of many classrooms. Even members of the majority culture express discomfort in talking about race (Cross, 1993). Perhaps if racial issues were discussed earlier and often, even in the lower grades, race would not be see as such an unapproachable topic.

Teachers in all classrooms can help bring issues of race to the forefront of their classrooms. Neuharth-Pritchett, Reiff, and Pearson (2000) suggest such activities as helping students write cultural biographies to explore their own backgrounds and organizing time lines of events to examine the economic, political, and educational histories of cultural groups. These researchers also suggest that teachers and students critically examine the media for images that perpetuate stereotypes. Teachers, they add, can examine diversity issues such as gender and religion within seemingly homogenous classes as a springboard for diversity discussions. Such activities can help to begin conversations around race and do not treat race as an issue to be avoided.

Even when conversations regarding race ensue with adults, after they have had time to reflect on issues, these conversations can often contain misunderstandings and complexities that may even serve to shut down communication between persons of differing races. In chapter 5, I described such a conversation between a White teacher and an African-American mother of a student. I explained how one teacher, despite his favorable intentions, appeared somewhat accusatory and misinformed when the teacher told the student’s mother that her son had issues with him as a White teacher. This example showed how conversations about race may begin, but can quickly disintegrate when both parties are unable, for whatever reason, to delve deep into understanding each other’s vantage point. With the overwhelming amount of teaching responsibilities, it is
conceivable that such misunderstandings can go undetected and that there can be limited
time to heal such miscommunications.

White teachers need to be particularly aware of their majority race status and how it plays out in the daily events in their classrooms and conversations with parents. While White teachers have the privilege of allowing race to remain in the background of their experiences, they need to carefully consider the perceptions of those African-American students and parents who may see race at the forefront of their experiences. White teachers who can step out of their “invisible culture” and begin to relate to students and parents despite their own positionality, can serve to strengthen students academically, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally, while embarking on their own journey of growth themselves.

Implications for the Structure of School

Data from this study revealed that the structure of school plays an essential role in the experiences of students who are at-risk for delinquency. Looking critically at the school as an institution, we can begin to determine how the structure of school might be altered to better serve the needs of students who are chronically disruptive and prone to delinquent activities. In order to know how to alter the current school structure, we have to continue exploring what is working and what is not working for students who are at-risk for delinquency. This study only begins to answer that complex question. However, as a starting point, if we examine the ways that traditional schools are not meeting the needs of certain students, perhaps we can think about ways to alter that structure, instead of focusing solely on how to make students fit into the current mold of school. The following sections address implications for changing the current structure of school, as
noted in student conversations about their alternative and traditional schools. Specifically, I examine the need for alternative education, not just alternative settings; the need to reexamine discipline in schools; the need to attract and retain the best teachers in alternative schools; and the need for increased funding.

**Alternative Education, Not Alternative Settings**

Observational and interview data suggest that while Bridges offered an alternative setting to traditional school, the structure of the educational program of the alternative school looked very similar to that of traditional schools. Because the students had been unsuccessful in many ways in their traditional schools, their success at the alternative school, with basically the same structure as their traditional schools, was limited. While there are some truly alternative models of education that have shown great success in meeting the needs of chronically disruptive students in non-traditional means (e.g. Kennedy, 1999), no one model of alternative education has been successful enough to receive prolonged national attention. More often than not, alternative schools do not imply alternative education. “The term ‘alternative school’ too often becomes a euphemism for warehousing students whose behavior is deemed inappropriate for mainstream schools” (Dunbar, 1999, p. 1). Bridges School basically housed disruptive students on whom the school system had all but given up, a phenomenon reminiscent of many alternative programs (Dunbar). Although deemed an alternative program, this school assumed the basic characteristics of traditional education, except for the low teacher-student ratio that unfortunately rendered very little difference in teacher instructional style. This study revealed two important areas of need for alternative
education: effective use of small class sizes and the need to educate the “whole” student, cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

**Effective use of small class sizes.** The alternative school setting has the potential to promote high quality educational opportunities. Teachers in this and similar settings often enjoy small class sizes of around 10 students. This classroom setting potentially offers a more intimate and academically stimulating atmosphere. However, for whatever reasons, my observations in this school revealed that the instructional strategies of these teachers were similar to the type of instruction that typically occurs with larger classes of around 30 students. That is, teachers most often felt comfortable using whole-group instruction followed by individual practice. Teachers with small class sizes may want to focus instead on providing opportunities for individualized and small-group instruction.

Schools that are structured with such small class sizes can take advantage of low teacher-student ratios by offering individualized attention. Well-trained teachers would be able to diagnose and remediate individual academic deficiencies. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) have been noted as an essential component in working with populations similar to that of Bridges (e.g., Kennedy & Morton, 1999). Instead of being seen as a place to “bide time” until returning to traditional school, the alternative school could offer a place where teachers give students the extra attention and help they need to excel academically. Such efforts would not only assist in the transition back to regular school, but may also influence behaviors that are an attempt to cover up academic deficiencies. Schools that seek to improve student achievement through small classes, as was likely the case with Bridges, but fail to modify instruction, may need to examine why such modifications are so difficult to implement.
The use of cooperative, small, or pair grouping activities have been offered as effective teaching strategies and could benefit alternative school students. My observations indicated no structured small-group work was used in the classroom, perhaps because teachers saw such strategies as disruptive, ineffective, or difficult to manage in comparison to other strategies. However, the use of such groupings, when used successfully, may serve to promote positive peer relations as well as positive teacher-students relations. Students at this setting often had trouble getting along with their peers, yet were asked to work in isolation and thus were given few opportunities to practice social skills.

When we examine these findings in combination with other findings of this study, we see how the structures within school often serve to isolate students, yet we ask them to interact well with others. For example, as the case with the students of this study, they have been isolated from their community and placed in an alternate setting. In this alternative setting they primarily work individually in the classroom and they have no opportunity for structured extra-curricular activities or peer interaction after school. In addition, many of them return to homes where they are provided little supervision, but yet we expect them to maintain positive peer relationships. Positive peer interaction, although it can be challenging and frustrating for teachers teaching students to be successful, would help students to build social and interaction skills that would benefit them in school and non-school environments.

 Educate the “whole” student. Students who are chronically disruptive bring a myriad of experiences to school. Often wrought with family and personal problems that serve as distractions in the classroom, these students need emotional, social, and
academic attention. The alternative school teachers of this study were likely ill equipped to deal with so many overwhelming factors with so many students. Perhaps this indicates a need for schools, which have traditionally focused on the academic needs of students, to expand to areas such as counseling and social services. A variety of counseling services could benefit students: group therapy, individual therapy, and family therapy. Support groups aimed at addressing the needs of students and their families can accompany and strengthen individual therapy (Stephens & Arnette, 2000).

Approximately 60% of adjudicated youth have a history of domestic violence in their families and can benefit from support groups addressing domestic violence (Stephens & Arnette).

School counselors are an essential component in the emotional and social well-being of students. At the time of this study, such services were very limited for students at Bridges. Finding themselves in the midst of a budget shortage, students were afforded only one counselor for a student-body of approximately 200 students, and this counselor also served as the school media specialist. Although the counselor was well-trained in this area and had several years of experience in counseling, the sheer number of students he served made it impossible to communicate regularly with each student and track student progress. Because these students bring so many negative conditions and disruptive family situations with them to school, school personnel have a responsibility to address these needs before academics can be properly addressed. If counselors and social workers kept teachers well-informed of student progress, teachers may be better able to see the student in the context of his life, and therefore work with the student, counselor, and social worker to improve the situation. Alternative education calls for a commitment
to providing counselors and social workers that can guide students toward a healthy emotional and social well being so that academic success may follow. Keeping an active, strong communication with school personnel of the traditional school after the student returns there would also ease the transition and promote student success there.

Educational opportunities within the structures of alternative, and even traditional schools should also be reconsidered. As the needs of children in our society expand, so should the educational opportunities for our students. As more and more teenage mothers have to make decisions favoring either education or parenting responsibilities, schools should consider offering parenting classes as well as on-site nurseries for young women who would otherwise drop out of school to care for their children. Additionally, vocational training has received relatively little attention in the public school arena. Such omissions need to be carefully reconsidered, as students should be given choices for all types of career opportunities.

Reexamine Discipline in School

Crawford and Bodine (2001) assert that most schools rely on arbitration to resolve peer conflicts. Arbitration relies on a non-involved adult to determine a solution or consequence to a dispute. Students often are expected to comply with these decisions, despite their lack of involvement in the resolution. Discipline at Bridges reflected this style of resolution and allowed very little input from students at Bridges. They were told how to act and were handed consequences (that they often perceived as inappropriate) when rules were broken. Likewise, they often exacerbated difficult circumstances because they had no appropriate ways to express their anger, which only served to perpetuate their problems in school. Findings suggest employing democratic decision-
making in schools, using appropriate consequences, and allowing for expressions of anger in school could greatly benefit students at risk for delinquency.

**Democratic decision-making.** While I have already discussed the importance of students contributing democratically to their own classroom community, providing students opportunities to participate in school-wide discipline efforts would also be beneficial. Students in this study felt uninvolved in making and enforcing rules at their school. They expressed a desire for increased communication about the rules by which they were expected to abide. They believed that schools often imposed rules and procedures that they neither fully understood nor saw as important. Therefore, they often did not “buy into” the rules set forth by school and were thus quick to rebel and challenge these rules, which appeared arbitrary and meaningless to them.

Although some classrooms involve student participation in making rules, few school-wide discipline plans involve students. Particularly in smaller school settings such as Bridges School, involving students in making and implementing school-wide rules might be a way to achieve a more democratic approach to discipline. By allowing students to have input into making the school-wide rules, and having a formal procedure to challenge school rules, the purpose of certain rules may be clearer to students. Also, the status quo would constantly be challenged, so rules serving little use could be disregarded. Students of this study already suggested ways that rules could be compromised so that students and teachers get most of what they want. These suggestions were often well thought-out and even plausible in some circumstances. The fact that students thought out these compromises and shared them with me indicates some eagerness to become more active in the discipline structure within their school. Letting
students bear the responsibility not only helps them to “buy into” the rules, but also allows them to take the perspectives traditionally held by teachers and administrators, who are concerned with the good of the school community.

The use of peer courts is one strategy that has been tried successfully in juvenile courts (Vickers, 2000) but has not yet been used in schools to my knowledge. After students, teachers, and administrators establish a working set of school rules, a peer court could be implemented to determine consequences for violators. In peer courts, students are trained to serve as “judges” and sit on a panel to hear the concerns of other students who are involved in disputes. Adults serve only as facilitators to the process. Students in school peer courts could rotate serving on the court panel. When a student violates a rule, it would be up to the panel (with the supervision of teachers and administrators) to hear the circumstances and determine the consequences. Peer courts empower students so that they feel that their needs are heard and they hold more power within the disciplinary structure. In addition, serving on the court panel provides them the opportunity to look at rule-violation from another perspective. Practice in using this perspective may help students consider more thoroughly their own actions that could lead to disciplinary measures.

Peer court evaluations in juvenile court systems show that more than 90% of participants report higher levels of satisfaction and feel more invested in the justice process than those who participated in traditional juvenile justice programs. Participants of such programs also showed lowered recidivism rates (Office of Juvenile Justice and Prevention, 2000).

Even if schools are unable to implement such a democratic model, consequences for rule violations could be reexamined.
Appropriate consequences. Students, parents, and grandparents in this study spoke about the need for appropriate and logical consequences to be implemented in schools. They asserted that many consequences serve only to take students out of school, thereby not only removing the student from the instructional atmosphere, but also perpetuating problems of isolation, non-supervision, and non-resolution of problems. Schools may need to carefully reexamine the purpose of the consequences, whether it is to punish students or remove them from the surrounding group of peers in the classroom. In either case, certain consequences should be reevaluated and the benefits and disadvantages weighed.

The use of appropriate and logical consequences in school seems like common sense, yet certain consequences in school are so widespread that they continue to receive attention in the literature. The puzzling question is, if certain consequences have been recognized as ineffective, why are they continually being used in schools today? Perhaps school personnel who administer such consequences see few other options than to remove students from the classroom. In the following paragraphs, I offer alternatives for suspension and expulsion practices. Suspension and expulsion practices were the most poignant examples of inappropriate consequences given in this study. Participants noted that they often received these consequences for seemingly minor offenses such as class disruptions or too many in-school-suspension referrals. The purposes of such consequences were not only questionable, but such practices carry unfair racial targeting as well.

African-American males are more than twice as likely as their White male counterparts to be suspended or expelled from school (Edelman, 1987).
If the purpose of suspension and expulsion is to remove the student from the school environment to benefit the other students, then perhaps in these rather minor offense cases we should consider other methods of removal from the classroom. This way the student is not denied access to school altogether, a practice that often serves only to worsen academic and behavior problems. Perhaps these removals instead could occur within the school building. This removal time could serve as a “cooling off” period, which focuses on getting the student back into the regular classroom as quickly as possible. This may include providing an isolated space that simply allows a quiet place for students to work without enforcing additional punishments. More often than not, students who disrupt class or engage in other minor offenses, simply need time to diffuse their energies and reflect on the situation.

In the alternative school setting, when students needed to “let off steam,” sometimes they initiated visits with the academic advisor, counselor, or other administrator who would listen. Unfortunately, these faculty members were not always available due to the numerous other responsibilities they carried. So that teachers could continue teaching other students, schools could employ other faculty such as counselors and social workers to talk with students about inflammatory situations. If students could talk about the situation and participate in a structured reflection, they may be better able to understand and modify their behavior in similar instances in the future. Taking them out of school for several days meets none of these objectives and may serve very little purpose in helping to change behavior.

“Does it make any sense at all to suspend a student from school when school is the last place on earth that the student wants to be? How illogical can we be?” (Kennedy & Morton, 1999, p.105)
Suspensions and expulsions, for the participants in this study, often led to long periods of non-supervision that often prompted more severe consequences and involvement with delinquency. If schools attempt to use suspensions and expulsions as punishments for students, then those objectives are not always met. Data of this study indicated students more likely saw this “punishment” as a reward of free time. Even worse, Dunbar (1999) relates, “a significant growth in student expulsions and suspensions has been attributed to an increase in drug and alcohol abuse, assault and battery, and weapons in the schools” (p. 2). Perhaps some of the suggested alternatives could better serve the objectives of suspensions and expulsions, by working to understand the causes of inappropriate behaviors instead of merely responding to the behaviors themselves.

The use of suspensions and expulsions represents a general principle within the structure of schools to take a reactive, instead of a proactive role in discipline. Sometimes, particularly in schools with large student bodies, there are very few preventative measures taken to examine why students react in certain ways. Instead, sometimes schools can only punish or respond when students do react in inappropriate ways. With growing concerns of school violence, schools may benefit from acting from a prevention-oriented stance. School personnel who seek to understand why students engage in certain behaviors, and work to assist students with the causes of their inappropriate actions, instead of just the results of these actions, would be far more successful in serving the needs of all students within the school structure. Undoubtedly, teachers cannot serve in these roles alone. Again, counselors and social workers could be
valuable assets to students in helping them make connections in understanding their behaviors.

Allowances for expressions of anger. As part of this discussion of the current structure of school, students of this study spoke about their continual need to suppress their emotions, particularly their anger, while at school. Such denial of emotion and a lack of ability to adequately and effectively express emotion carried negative consequences when these emotions finally, and naturally, did erupt. Instead of insisting that anger be suppressed in schools, schools may better serve their students by helping them to express their anger in appropriate and healthy ways such as talking and communicating their anger. School has traditionally been a place that avoids conflict at all cost. Providing an appropriate time and space for students to deal with their emotions may prove to be a more effective means of managing those emotions than simply ignoring them as if they did not exist, only to see them resurface at a later, possibly inappropriate, time. Suppression should not be the only method for controlling anger. Teaching students to address and resolve conflict instead of avoid it, may pare some of the problems that students experience in controlling their anger. Some anger management programs have been instilled in school programs. The most successful models help students manage anger and frustration by helping students recognize that these emotions are present in conflict but that expressing these emotions can also trigger problematic responses from others. Successful programs help students learn the words necessary to identify emotions verbally and ways to express emotions in non-aggressive, non-inflammatory ways (Crawford & Bodine, 2001).
Attract and Retain the Best Teachers in Alternative Schools

Schools of all types best serve the needs of their students when they attract and retain the best teachers who are available. Alternative schools are certainly no exception, although attracting and retaining teachers at such sites may be more challenging, as the principal of Bridges School indicated. Research indicates that often the least-prepared teachers work with the most needy students (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001a). Currently, there are few incentives for teachers to teach at alternative schools. They work with challenging students who often come from difficult situations and with families who are seldom able to show their support. For these and other reasons, many teachers prefer to teach in traditional settings where they feel more prepared to teach. As was the case in the alternative school of this study, salaries of alternative school teachers are most often the same as traditional education teachers. However, just as national discussion has ensued about increasing salaries for teachers in critical-need fields, perhaps teachers of alternative students should receive higher wages. If school systems were able to provide incentives for teachers at alternative schools, they may attract more highly qualified teachers. Such incentives may include more than salary increases. For example, it would be mutually beneficial if the school system paid for schooling expenses for alternative school teachers to further their education. Paying for alternative school teachers to get their master’s, specialist, or doctoral degrees in Special Education or other areas that focused on the needs of chronically disruptive students would be beneficial for both the system and the teachers. Teachers who are specifically educated in this field might be more likely to remain at the alternative school and ideally would be capable of providing a quality education for their students. While some of the
teachers and administrators of Bridges School did possess a commitment to the students at the alternative school, many expressed that the payoff there was not as great as it is in traditional school settings, and thus they sought employment elsewhere. Offering incentives and higher salaries would create a competition among teachers and would allow alternative schools to select the best-qualified teachers for their positions.

**Increased Funding**

Undoubtedly the suggestions indicated thus far carry expensive price tags. Quality alternative schools, with highly trained teachers and effective intervention programs are extremely expensive. This fact is all too-well known. However, investments in schools need to be made with consideration to the long-term benefits. Although schooling costs to effectively serve students who have been sent to alternative settings may be high and may require enormous resources, when compared with the cost of judicial involvement and holding students in juvenile facilities, these expenses appear worthwhile. Figures from the Georgia Department of Education reveal a large discrepancy between dollar amounts spent on schooling and those spent on detaining a youth.

> In 2000, The Georgia Department of Education estimated the average daily cost per child per day to educate a student in regular school to be $34.27. The Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice estimated the average daily cost per child per day to detain a juvenile in a long-term secure facility to be $149.13.

If some of the money allotted to youth detention could be spent on addressing the needs of school youth, society would reap many benefits, many of which extend beyond financial rewards. Prevention programs, even though expensive, have been found to be less costly than involving juveniles in the criminal justice or welfare systems later in life (U. S. Department of Education, 1996). Estimates have projected a total savings of
$18,300 with merely an additional $1750 per year spent on each disruptive student who attends an alternative school. The public would save $14,000 annually in student learning time that would have been lost, $2,800 in grade repetition costs, $1,750 in reduced welfare costs, and $1,500 in reduced prison costs (U. S. Department of Education).

Current budget trends indicate that spending for corrections is continually increasing, while spending on education is not keeping up. In fact higher education budgets have been cut. If trends continue, by the year 2020, more personal income will be spent on corrections than on higher education (Ambrosio & Schiraldi, 1997).

Throughout the 1980s, state spending for corrections increased 95%, while spending on higher education decreased 6%. National statistics indicate this trend continued in the 1990s (Ambrosio & Schiraldi).

With decreased funding for higher education, citizens bear the burden of paying for higher education themselves, a practice that serves to deny many young people access to higher education. This perpetuates a cycle of poorly educated and un-employable youth—precisely the kind of people who fill prisons (Ambrisio & Schiraldi). With increased legislation that emphasizes “tough on crime” policies, prisons are being filled at the expense of education. A vast majority of the increase of these offenders (84%) are non-violent, so people who commit lesser infractions bear the brunt of these “get tough” policies because they are sent more often to prison and serve much longer sentences there. Actually, violent crime arrests represent only one in 10 arrests in the United States (Ambrisio & Schiraldi). So then, at the expense of education, more non-violent offenders are being locked up and for longer time periods.
Concentrated efforts and monetary commitments to education and preventative programs in juvenile justice could greatly diminish the need for the amount of spending needed to secure juveniles. Sadly, youth are often not afforded counseling and other services until they are detained, a time that is often too late for many of them. Providing the same type of services in schools, and particularly alternative schools, would help to reach youth earlier and head-off possible involvement in delinquency. Now I turn my attention to implications for teacher education.

Implications for Teacher Education

In addition to implications for the structure of school and for classroom practices, the findings of this study suggest implications for the field of teacher education. Within this section, I discuss how teacher education training focused specifically on chronically disruptive students might better serve students at-risk for delinquency. I also look at the need for teacher educators to prepare preservice teachers as social change agents.

Training Focused on Chronically Disruptive Students

While there have been tremendous strides made in teacher education as of late, with increased attention to student outcomes, teacher content knowledge, experience in multicultural settings, and increased field-based experiences (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001a), most of these areas generally address needs of traditional schools and regular-education students. Despite the fact that these strides will undoubtedly mean improvements for schools of all types, the needs of alternative school students are quite different than those of traditional-school students. At a time when obtaining qualified teachers can be a very difficult, even impossible task for some school districts (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2001b), it is
even more challenging to obtain highly qualified teachers to teach in alternative settings that serve students who display discipline problems. Many of the teachers in these settings feel unprepared to teach (Brooks & White, 2000), probably because they have not been specially trained in this field. Currently, little attention in Teacher Education has focused exclusively on the needs of chronically disruptive students, or those students who show signs of delinquency. Teacher educators may consider training teachers of this population with a slightly different focus. Two areas that would specifically meet the needs of teachers to work with chronically disruptive students are that of a specialized and collaborative training approach and field placements in alternative settings.

A specialized and collaborative training approach. Because students come to alternative schools with so many confounding issues that distract them from learning, teacher educators might consider specifically training preservice teachers in areas of counseling, social work, and juvenile justice. Perhaps just as teacher education programs have segmented into concentrated programs such as Special Education, English as a Second Language, and Gifted Education, consideration should be made to specialize programs for teachers of chronically disruptive students or students who engage in delinquency. An important part of this specialized approach would be in collaborating with many fields and service providers to meet the needs of students at-risk for delinquency. Granted, some of the needs of chronically disruptive students are addressed in discussions of special needs students, as these fields often overlap. Many students who are at-risk for delinquency may be considered behaviorally, emotionally, or learning disabled and could be served by teachers of Special Education. As Wilson (2000)
denotes, “Large numbers of youth involved with the juvenile justice system have education-related disabilities.” (p. 1)

As many as 20% of students with emotional disabilities are arrested at least once before leaving school (Burrell & Warboys, 2000).

However, the needs of chronically disruptive students who are at-risk for delinquency often extend beyond discussions of Special Education and are often confounded by other factors such as home situations, social problems, and legal ramifications. The students who were served in the alternative school in this study would not have been served in this location if they were labeled special education students. Such information suggests that while Special Education can be helpful for some students at-risk for delinquency, the needs of at-risk for delinquency students are not synonymous with special needs students.

Perhaps the needs of chronically disruptive students would be better met with teacher preparation that focused not only on special education, but also on working with parents, communities, counselors, social workers, and juvenile justice officials. Teacher education programs often address working with parents and communities in regular education settings, but again, the needs of students who are at-risk for delinquency are often far greater. Teachers need to have a good understanding of ways to elicit the support of parents or other adults, for the student’s educational needs, particularly in situations where parent support has traditionally been non-existent. Particularly in this area, there is a need for teacher educators to instill a sense of leadership and advocacy among preservice teachers, who will surely face challenging situations both in the classroom and with community and parent involvement.
Training focused on the needs of students at-risk for delinquency may need to include coursework in counseling, social work, and juvenile justice to strengthen teachers’ abilities to address all of a student’s needs. Because teachers of chronically disruptive students play such a pivotal role in not only the academic growth of a student, but also in the social and emotional growth, knowledge of these areas would certainly enhance all learning in the classroom. When combined with a teacher’s strong knowledge of content, developmental needs of students, and engaging lessons, students at-risk for delinquency would be well served by this collaborative approach. Such an approach considers all of the students’ needs as they interact together, instead of a fragmented approach, which addresses educational needs as separate from the social or emotional needs of the student. Teachers who are familiar with other areas such as counseling and juvenile justice will be able to use this knowledge in the classroom to help their students. Knowledge in these fields would also strengthen the teacher’s ability to communicate effectively with other service providers such as the counselor, social worker, and probation officer. Additionally, teachers could more effectively facilitate student social and emotional, as well as cognitive growth.

At the very least, if teacher education programs are unable to extend education to areas of counseling, social work, and juvenile justice, the importance of communication with these areas should be stressed. Coordination among services (such as counseling, education, and social services) has been identified as the single greatest deficiency in services provided to children (Knitzer, 1984). Strong models of effective communication between service providers should be examined. Preservice teachers who are given
opportunities to participate in meetings and communications with other service providers would have a better understanding of how such communication works.

Field placements. As part of this focused training, field placements in alternative school settings or with detained youth would provide needed experience at a time when preservice teacher support is maximized with a mentor teacher. Many teachers currently serving chronically disruptive students participate in regular-education teacher preparation programs. As part of regular-education training, many preservice teachers train in field experiences in traditional-type schools. Undoubtedly, these mismatches can contribute to educators feeling isolated, alienated, and ill prepared to teach in settings with delinquent youth (Brooks & White, 2000). Teachers working with students at-risk for delinquency might have more meaningful experiences if their field placements more closely reflected the types of environments in which they were to teach. Teachers in alternative education sites often find themselves teaching students who vary considerably in age, grade level, academic competency, and behavior. Research indicates that educators are seldom prepared to teach students of such various and widespread needs (Brooks & White). Intensive field training in alternative schools and detention settings is perhaps one of the best means to educate preservice teachers in these areas. A few such teacher-training programs are now offered by the U. S. Department of Justice, through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Programs include in-service training for current and future educators through the development of an extensive curriculum focusing on the needs of delinquent youth. Part of this module includes guided group processing about the education experiences of delinquent youth, as well as questionnaires to access teacher attitudes about delinquent youth (Brooks & White).
Similar teacher training could be extended to Teacher Education programs throughout the country to better prepare preservice teachers to work with delinquent youth.

Prepare Teachers as Social Change-Agents

Probably the most difficult challenge set forth by this discussion is for teacher educators to prepare teachers, both in alternative and traditional education settings, to become social change agents. Data from this study suggest that issues of race and culture currently remain in the backdrop of school discourse. Issues of race and ethnicity are particularly relevant for youth who become involved in delinquency. For example, African-American youth are referred to juvenile court at a rate double that of White juveniles who are more often referred to other services and are averted from the juvenile justice system.

“Many professionals view the detention decision as the most significant point in a case. Detention subjects a youth to potential physical and emotional harm” (Burrell & Warboys, 2000).

In secure facilities, minority youth, particularly African-American youth, are also severely over-represented (Butts, 1996). Such findings assert the need to examine racial targeting in our society, and in juvenile justice, specifically.

Teacher educators can play a vital role in beginning conversations around racial equity. With the push of multicultural education, the situation is improving; however, there is much work to be done. Teacher educators share in the responsibility to break the silence that envelops race and culture. Doing so means bringing issues of race to the forefront of interactions in teacher education classrooms. A beginning point is to help preservice teachers, the majority of who are White and female (Sleeter, 1996), come to realize their own positionality and shed images of their “invisible culture” (McIntosh,
Teacher educators, through discussions, reflections, and activities, can help preservice teachers become comfortable “in their own skin” within a diverse society. Students, who are often uncomfortable discussing race with teacher educators (Cross, 1993), have to first feel at ease discussing race among themselves before they can attempt to talk about these issues with their diverse students. Only in reaching this comfort level, can preservice teachers begin to bridge the cultural gaps that may exist with their students. It is up to teacher educators to begin and continue conversations surrounding race. If these efforts are not made here, they will likely go unnoticed, as the pressures of daily teaching become insurmountable for teachers in the school setting.

Social change however does not happen merely by talking about it. Teacher educators have to challenge their students to become activists. Many teachers, including myself, were never taught how to advocate for students beyond the confines of the classroom. To evoke social change, modifications at systemic levels are necessary, and include ways in which schools are funded, staffed, and operated. Because teachers can not influence such modifications from their classrooms, they have traditionally been peripheral to these processes and decisions. In my own experience as an elementary teacher, I felt that I was most effective and had the most power for change within my own classroom. Rarely did I consider the impact that I could have on a grander scale.

The culture of school often encourages conformity in teachers. As previously stated, conflict in school is often uncomfortable. Such a culture makes it more difficult for teachers to speak out about inequities and issues of social justice. Many times teachers assume more and more responsibilities in education without ever questioning or challenging these issues, yet with the addition of more expectations, they may become
increasingly overworked, making them less effective with their students. Knowing how to advocate for themselves and for children is not something that is innate in teachers. Teachers have to be taught how to do this as well. There are many ways that teachers can advocate for social change. As teacher educators it is imperative that we address at least some of these ways with our preservice teachers.

I am still in the beginning stages of preparing myself to be a social change agent. Still floundering and experimenting, I know that I have a long way to go in advocating for students who are at-risk for delinquency. I know that there are areas yet untapped that I will soon need to explore and combine with my current interests. For example, I see that knowledge of educational policy is an important area with which I need to become more familiar. Perhaps this will mean involvement in the development of educational policies at the state or national level. Even as I sort through my own ideas about how to advocate for students, I can initiate conversations in teacher education classrooms that can help preservice teachers begin to see themselves as advocates and consider their own paths to achieving social justice. Such conversations and actions are preliminary, but imperative, to preparing teachers as social change agents.

The intersection of school and juvenile delinquency is saturated with issues of race and culture. Conversations around race and culture have to extend beyond the teacher education classroom and into the lives of children and adults if the power structures of schools are to change, and if equity is truly to be realized. The silence around race has to be broken; conversations have to start early and continue well into adulthood. Research is an integral step of this process.
Implications for Future Research

Sociological research has addressed juvenile delinquency from many angles. While there has been much research on the relationships between school factors and delinquency (i.e., Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Elliot & Voss, 1974; Gold, 1978; Kelly & Balch, 1971), far fewer studies in comparison have stemmed from educators attempting to better serve the needs of students who are at-risk for delinquency. Most of the education research focuses on outcomes of delinquent behavior, such as school violence (e.g., Burbach, 1999), bullying (e.g., Ericson, 2001), and gang-activity at school (e.g., Howell & Lynch, 2000). Other research looks at the effects of school-wide programs, such as conflict resolution (e.g., Kreidler, 1997) and drug-free programs, (e.g., Simonson, 2001) that have been used as techniques to prevent misbehavior. Very few studies of delinquency by educators have examined ways to better serve the needs of students. At the intersection of the delinquency and school literature, the use of qualitative methods are rarely reported. Thus, in the final sections of this dissertation, I describe the need for more student input in research in this field and the need for varying research contexts in this area.

The Need for More Student Input

Thus far, we have only scratched the surface in finding connections between schooling experiences and delinquency. Of the studies that have been conducted, most focus on delinquency and school by describing the nature of offenses and the social systems that contribute to anti-social behavior in school. Very few studies have attempted, as my study does, to seek the perceptions of the students themselves about what in school is working for them and what is not. With concerns rising over school
violence, many programs, such as conflict resolution (e.g., Kreidler, 1997) and drug-free programs (e.g., Simonson, 2001) have been implemented as preventative measures. While there has been much quantitative research about the effectiveness of these programs in reducing violence and drug-use respectively, little qualitative research has been conducted to fill the inevitable gaps. Most research, in fact, overlooks the contributions of the students themselves. Undoubtedly, many more studies using interview and observational methods are needed to offer perspectives on student perceptions and experiences. Without student perceptions and input, programs and preventative measure that we implement in schools to reduce delinquency could simply come across to students as “school talk.” As I discussed in the findings of this paper, the student of this study often tuned out school talk, regardless of its worth. That is why it is imperative that we find out from students what we can do to better serve their needs, and how we can best go about doing so.

This study was an attempt to honor the voices of students who have become involved in delinquent activities--to hear what they think, what they experience, and what they think should be changed about schools to better serve their needs. Far more studies are needed to examine other student perceptions about other school factors. Observational data is key in this area as well. Researchers are needed who can spend considerable time in settings to observe first-hand how teachers reach delinquent-prone students and effectively establish bonds with them. While the research indicates that strong teacher-student bonds reduce delinquency (e.g., Hirschi, 1969), few studies have addressed exactly how these bonds are established. Hopefully this study, with findings in the areas of student and teacher interaction patterns, can contribute to this area. I believe that more
attention is needed to students’ stories of their educational experiences. It is essential to learn from actual students what they consider to be important in their schooling experiences, and to learn from their perspectives how delinquency is related to school.

The Need for Varying Research Contexts

Not only is there a need for more student input in research in the field of juvenile delinquency as it relates to school, but, there is also a need to examine the many phases of delinquency (from dabbling in delinquency to serious offending) as it relates to school. Additional longitudinal data is needed to track the experiences of students. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project that began tracking the effects of early interventions with high-risk African-American youth in 1962 (Parks, 2000) is a model worthy of attention. Research on preventing delinquency has increased, but still represents an area of dire need. Equally imperative is the need to converse with students who both adopted criminal lifestyles and those who veered away from delinquency. Looking at the role that school has played in offender’s lives will better portray the entire context of delinquency, and shed light on how schools need to adjust to the needs of students.

One of the most challenging aspects of this research is the dependence upon a trusting, equitable relationship between researcher and participant. These relationships are not easily attained, and researchers have to prioritize the establishment of such relationships above all else. I believe that the data a researcher obtains are only as good as the relationship maintained with the participant. Developing trusting relationships with students who are at-risk for delinquency takes considerable time, but is vital for quality research. Researchers in this area have to commit to considerable time and emotional investments in their participants.
Additionally, researchers of all demographics are needed. Male and female researchers of all ethnicities and backgrounds play a vital role in delinquency and school research, as students may respond differently to researchers, based on their own cultural identities. It is important to obtain data across varying contexts, representing many socio-economic statuses, regions, ethnicities, and ages. Looking across a wide range of possibilities will provide the scope necessary to obtain meaningful information that can then be translated to change school settings to better meet the needs of students who are at-risk for delinquency.

It is my hope that this study offers at least a small contribution to the seemingly overwhelming question of how schools influence delinquency. There is so much yet to be explored, examined, and learned. With the rise of youth crime (e.g., Burbach, 1999) and school violence (e.g., Garbarino, 1999), the need for understanding delinquency, in particular the role that school plays in delinquency, appears urgent. Today’s youth, who are now filling prisons and morgues, can no longer wait for us to determine how to divert this downward spiral of delinquency. My own personal sense of urgency is far greater. Because I now have nine faces and lives to associate with the literature on delinquent youth, the need to continue research and obtain answers has assumed a rather critical status in my work. It is with their stories and experiences at the forefront of my mind, that I hope we will continue the quest for improved school conditions that will better meet the needs of students at-risk for delinquency.
REFERENCES


Barber, M. (1996). Creating a framework for success in urban areas. In D. Hopkins and D. Reynolds (Eds.), Raising educational standards in the inner city (pp. 6-26). New York: Cassell


Appendix A

Student Interview Protocol

Interview 1 prompts:

- Think back to some experiences at your regular school that “got you in trouble,” and tell me the story of how you came to alternative school.
- Tell me about a teacher or administrator that you never seemed to get in trouble with.
- Tell me about a teacher or administrator that you always seemed to get in trouble with.

Interview 2 prompts:

- Can you tell me about a time when you think your skin color had something to do with your getting in trouble? How about not getting in trouble?
- Have you ever had a teacher who was not your race? What was that like for you?

Interview 3 prompt:

- How has school helped you stay out of trouble? How has it helped you get in trouble?
Appendix B

Adult Interview Protocols

Administrators
1. Talk a little bit about the school in terms of why students are here and how long they stay.
2. What brings them here? How is it determined that they return to their regular school?
3. Talk a little bit about the size of the student body and the staff here.
4. What do you look for in a staff member when they are being hired?
5. Tell me how you came to work at this school.
6. What do you see as your role at this school? Is that the same as your “official role?”
7. How do the students’ perceive you?

Resource Officer
1. Tell me what role you serve in the school.
2. Tell me the story of how you came to this job and/or this school.
3. Think about the situations with students that you’ve dealt with this week. Can you relay a couple of those?

Teachers
1. Tell me the story of how you came to teach at this school.
2. What do you see as your role here?
3. What do you think the se kids need from you the most? Can you tell me about a time that this was demonstrated?
4. How do you think the students perceive you? Point to some specific instances that make you think that.
5. Talk about what you feel like is your most effective instruction. What would that look like?
6. Tell me about your interactions with parents.

Parent/Guardian Interviews
1. What have been some of (student’s) problems in school?
2. How, if at all, has he changed since being enrolled at the alternative school?
3. What do you think we should be doing in schools to better serve students like (student)?
4. What do you see as your role in helping (student) be successful in school?
Appendix C

School Map, Exterior View
Appendix D

School Map, Interior View

Front of Building
Appendix E

Assent Form

I agree to talk with Ms. Pearson about my experiences in school. The purposes of these interviews have been explained to me. I understand that we will talk for a period of about one hour each time, and that we will meet approximately three times total. I understand that Ms. Pearson wants to get this information so that she can help teachers make school a better place for me and other students like me who may have had trouble in school in the past. I know that I can change my mind about talking with her at any time, and that I do not have to answer any of the questions that she asks me.

In addition, I agree that with my parents’/guardians’ permission, she can look at documents such as report cards and test records that may help her understand my school history better.

__________________________________                             ___________________
Signature of the Investigator                               Date

__________________________________                        ___________________
Signature of the Participant                                  Date

Please sign one copy and return the other copy to Ms. Pearson
For further information, please call Carol Pearson at 706.542.4244
e-mail: cpearson@coe.uga.edu

Research at the University of Georgia which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to Julia Alexander, Institutional Review Board; Office of VP for Research; The University of Georgia, 604 Graduate Studies Research Center; Athens, GA 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514.
Appendix F

Cover Letter for Parental Consent Form

January 12, 2001

Dear Parents and Guardians:

My name is Carol Pearson. I am currently a doctoral student at the University of Georgia, working on a degree in Elementary Education. Before coming to Athens, I taught school for five years in the Atlanta area. I have been volunteering at XX Alternative School for over a year, tutoring and working with students. Soon, I will be conducting my dissertation research at XX Alternative School.

My study involves talking with students, teachers, administrators, and parents of students at the alternative school. I am interested in finding out about students’ school experiences, both at the alternative school and the traditional school. I hope that by talking to these people, I can learn valuable information that will help make school a better place for students like your child, who may have had difficulties in school. I believe that only they can tell us how to change schools to better meet their needs.

I am asking for your permission to let me talk with your child. A consent form is attached, which explains the research procedures in detail. In order for your child to participate, I will need you to sign one form and return it to school with your child. This study has been reviewed by Mrs. XX and Mr. XX of (School), and by Dr. XX of the XX County Board of Education.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter. I have really enjoyed working with the students and faculty of (School), and am excited to spend more time there during my study. Please do not hesitate to call me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX if you would like to discuss the study further. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Carol Pearson
The University of Georgia
Appendix G

Parental Consent Form

I give my consent for my child _______________________ to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Carol Pearson, a doctoral student at The University of Georgia. I understand that Ms. Pearson wants to find out what my child's experiences in school have been like, so that she may look for ways to provide better experiences for other children like my own, who may have had difficulties in school.

I agree to allow my child to talk with Ms. Pearson about his school experiences. I understand they will visit for about three times an hour each session, and that these visits will not interfere with my child’s other responsibilities. All responses that my child provides will be kept confidential, unless otherwise required by law. Interviews will be tape-recorded for purposes of transcription although no real names will be used. All tapes will be kept in a locked drawer for the duration of the project and destroyed after 5 years.

I agree that in addition to talking with my child, Ms. Pearson may talk to teachers and administrators at the alternative school about my child’s experiences, in order to learn more about ways to help students in similar situations. I agree that Ms. Pearson can look at school records to get a better picture of what school is like for my child. I know that all of this information will also be kept confidential unless otherwise noted by law.

This project and its objectives have been explained to my child. My child understands the explanation that has been provided.

I understand I can change my mind about my child speaking with her at any time, and my child can withdraw from the project at any time.

I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty to my child or me. I can choose to have the results of the participation removed from the research records or destroyed.

_____________________________                            _________________
Investigator's Signature                                                  Date

_____________________________                              _________________
Parent/Guardian Signature                                             Date

Please sign one copy and return the other to Carol Pearson.
For further information, please call Carol Pearson at 706.542.4244 or email: cpearson@coe.uga.edu

Research at the University of Georgia which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to Julia Alexander, Institutional Review Board; Office of VP for Research; The University of Georgia, 604 Graduate Studies Research Center; Athens, GA 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514.
Appendix H

Parent Consent to Interview

I agree to speak with Ms. Pearson about my child’s experiences in school and other experiences that relate to school. I understand that this information is being collected in an attempt to help students who have had difficulties in school. The purposes of the research have been explained to me.

I understand that we will meet at a place that is convenient for me and that we may meet between 1-3 times for about an hour each visit. I understand that interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All responses will be kept confidential unless otherwise required by law. I will be identified only by a pseudonym, a fictional name that has been assigned to me. I understand that all attempts will be made to remove identifying information.

I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time. I can choose to have the results of the participation removed from the research records or destroyed.

________________________________   ___________________
Signature of the Researcher     Date

________________________________   ___________________
Signature of the Participant     Date

Please sign one form and return it to Ms. Pearson. You may keep the other copy for your records. For further information, please call Carol Pearson at 706.542.4244 email: cpearson@coe.uga.edu

Research at the University of Georgia which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to Julia Alexander, Institutional Review Board; Office of VP for Research; The University of Georgia, 604 Graduate Studies Research Center; Athens, GA 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514.
Appendix I

School Personnel Consent to Interview

(Teachers, Administrators, Resource Officers, Parents, etc.)

I agree to speak with Ms. Pearson regarding my perceptions of the school community. I understand that this information is being collected in an attempt to help students who have had difficulties in school. The purposes of the research have been explained to me.

I understand that interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. All responses will be kept confidential; I will be identified only by a pseudonym. I understand that all attempts will be made to remove identifying information.

I understand that I can withdraw my consent at any time. I can choose to have the results of the participation removed from the research records or destroyed.

________________________________   ___________________
Signature of the Researcher     Date

________________________________   ___________________
Signature of the Participant     Date

Please sign one copy and return the other copy to Ms. Pearson
For further information, please call Carol Pearson at 706.542.4244
email: cpearson@coe.uga.edu

Research at the University of Georgia which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to Julia Alexander, Institutional Review Board; Office of VP for Research; The University of Georgia, 604 Graduate Studies Research Center; Athens, GA 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514.
Appendix J

County Approval for Research

COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION

October 23, 2000

Ms. Carol Pearson
Elementary Education
427 Aderhold Hall
University of Georgia
Athens, GA 30602-3199

Dear Ms. Pearson:

Your request to conduct a dissertation study entitled "Exploring the perceptions and experiences of alternative school students: An ethnographic case study" at the [redacted] School was received and reviewed. I am pleased to notify you that your request is approved.

I am sure that you will work closely with Mr. [redacted] and his staff to ensure that the research is not intrusive and the anonymity of the students is maintained. Mr. [redacted] must approve all communications to be sent parents.

We would appreciate receiving a copy of your findings and recommendations.

Please let me know if I can be of assistance.

Best wishes,

[redacted]

Ph.D.
Coordinator of Testing

[redacted]
Appendix K

Letter to Students at Project Termination

Dear 7th grade students of (school):

I just wanted to tell you how much I sincerely appreciate your help with the research project I did at your school. Thank you so much for being willing to talk with me, sharing with me your lives and experiences, and letting me come and sit in your classes. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to get to know each of you, and I want you to know what an impact you have had on my life.

Right now I am taking all of the notes that I took in your classes and all of the conversations that we had, and I am trying to put it all together to make one book, my dissertation. The book will be all about YOU and what your experiences in schools have been, and a large part of it will be about what schools can do to help other kids who have had trouble in school. Without your help and advice, none of this would have been possible. Thank you so much for adding your own special piece to this book.

Since I will need to spend a lot of time writing, I will not be able to come to school very much, but I do hope to get out there about once a week to visit with you, and to continue our conversations as needed.

If anyone would like to write a poem, story, or song about your experiences at school or at home, I would love to include that in the book. You can either mail them to the address at the top, email them to Pearsonca@aol.com, or give them to me when I come to school.

I want each of you to know how much I believe in you. You are amazing people and you have so much to offer the world. I expect great things from each of you. Thanks again for being the experts about school, and what works there and what doesn’t. You have a lot to teach us!

I look forward to seeing you soon. Have a great week!

Sincerely,

Carol Pearson
Appendix L
Letter to Teachers/Administrators at Project Termination

Dear XX:

I trust that things are going well at (school)! I just wanted to thank you so much for all of your help with my dissertation study. Your openness to talk with me, your invitation for me to join the classrooms, and your sincere honesty are all greatly appreciated. The contributions of the faculty and staff will certainly be an essential piece of the study describing student experiences in school. Thank you all so much for making this experience such a positive one.

Currently, I am working on analyzing and reporting the data that I collected, and consequently will need to spend more time at home working, and less time at (school). However, I look forward to visiting once a week or so to see everyone and to continue with any data collection that is needed. I look forward to continued conversations!

Please do not hesitate to contact me at (XXX) XXX-XXXX or pearsonca@aol.com if there is anything that you would like to discuss regarding the study. I will be in contact with you and the 7th grade teachers on a regular basis as questions or concerns arise regarding the study. I plan to continue writing throughout the summer and will look forward to your feedback.

Thank you again for being so pleasant to work with and for allowing me to conduct the study at (school). I am really going to miss being at school so often, but will look forward to my visits. Thank you so much for everything that you have done to make this experience possible.

Sincerely,

Carol A. Pearson
Doctoral Student
Department of Elementary Education
The University of Georgia