

THE EXPERIENTIAL DYNAMIC OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS  
WHO RETURN TO SCHOOL VIA AN ALTERNATE PROGRAM

by

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the experience of dropping out of and returning to school from the perspective of the early school leaver. The co-researchers interviewed for this study were twelve students currently enrolled in an alternate program in one school district in the lower mainland of British Columbia, Canada. The alternate program was a self-paced academic program leading to Grade 12 graduation. The interviews were analyzed according to both the progression of events from the time of first thinking about leaving school until the time of enrollment in the alternate program, and according to categories of situations leading to dropping out of and to returning to school. The results of this study support the literature on the significance of the family, peers, school and alienation in early school leaving. This study also found that these students exhibited developmental delay according to both Erikson's (1963) and Kegan's (1982) models. This study suggests that developmental delay may be important in determining whether individuals will drop out and when they might return to school.

## Table of Contents

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	ii
LIST OF TABLES.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vi
LIST OF APPENDICES.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	viii
 CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION.....	 1
 CHAPTER II LITERATURE REVIEW .....	 11
Situations Associated With	
Early School Leaving.....	11
Consequences of Early School Leaving.....	19
Programs to Prevent Early School Leaving.....	21
Re-entry Programs.....	24
Program Evaluation.....	28
 CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY.....	 32
Co-researchers.....	32
Methodological Approach.....	34
Data Collection.....	35
Pilot Interview.....	36
Co-researcher Interviews.....	37

Data Analysis.....	39
1. Protocol validity check.....	40
2. A) Establishment of categories of situations related to early school leaving.....	41
B) Category validity check.....	42
C) Rating sheet analysis.....	43
D) Reliability check of rating sheets.....	44
E) Establishing category content.....	44
3. Co-researcher life-line analysis.....	45
4. Holistic description.....	45
5. Theoretical analysis of protocols.....	45
CHAPTER IV RESULTS.....	47
CHAPTER V DISCUSSION.....	114
CHAPTER VI SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....	136
REFERENCES.....	144
APPENDICES.....	156

## List of Tables

	Page
Demographic Information.....	33
Family Situations Contributing to Early School Leaving.....	67
Family Situations Contributing to Continuing Education.....	68
Peer Group Situations Contributing to Early School Leaving.....	74
Peer Group Situations Contributing to Continuing Education.....	75
School Situations Contributing to Leaving School.....	83
School Situations Contributing to Continuing Education.....	84

## List of Figures

	Page
Figure 1. Emotional Experience of Dropping Out and Returning.....	59
Figure 2. Peer Group Involvement.....	60
Figure 3. Association With Drugs and Alcohol.....	61
Figure 4. Emotional Proximity to Family.....	62

## List of Appendices

	Page
A Consent Form.....	156
B Pilot Study.....	158
C Validity Summary for Co-researcher # 11.....	161
D Category Rating Sheet.....	166
E Checked Category Rating Sheet.....	159



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## I INTRODUCTION

In 1987 the Royal Commission on Education in the Province of British Columbia, more popularly known as the Sullivan Commission, was told by many of the thousands who presented before it that the school system in British Columbia was not meeting the educational needs of a significant number of children in any consistent manner. One of the most serious perceived consequences of the education system's inadequacies was a very high dropout rate among adolescents. The commission report, *A Legacy for Learners*, cites Ministry of Education statistics indicating that only "approximately 60% of the students who register in Grade 9 will graduate from Grade 12" (Sullivan, B., 1988, p. 104). Although the report does not state how this dropout figure was derived, it is apparent that a large number of students in this province leave school before graduating.

A very strong perception exists concerning the undesirable social and economic consequences of dropping out of school before graduation. Those who leave school before graduation have significantly less lifetime earnings than graduates (McDill, Natriello &

Pallas, 1986) and are more likely to be unemployed and unemployed for a longer period of time (Sullivan, 1988). Female dropouts, moreover, are more likely to be in occupations characterized as constituting the female job ghetto, low level service occupations such as cashiers, waitresses, and domestic helpers (Sullivan, 1988). Rubenson (1992) summed up the feelings of many of the public toward the number of students who leave before graduating: "The dropout rate is a threat not just to the economy but also to the very notion of a fair and just society" (p. 27). It is with a desire for fairness and justice for all of our students that this study is undertaken.

One of the first challenges involved in initiating a study on dropouts is the lack of a consistent definition for the term "dropout". Being a dropout is not a clear status. Students may be absent for extended periods or may withdraw or transfer without notifying the school in which case they may not be counted as having dropped out of the school system. In addition, some students who have either formally or informally dropped out of school may re-enroll in high school, alternate education programs or other education or training centers thereby, according to Orr (1987),

changing their dropout status. Solomon (1989) adds that there is another form of dropping out: "remaining in school but disengaging from the pursuit of academic credentials" (p. 79) with the result of failure to attain the competencies and credentials necessary for successful participation in adult life, particularly in social and economic endeavors.

Each province, state, district and school defines dropouts in its own way and selects its own criteria for data collection and analyses. According to Barber & McClellan (1987):

Currently available statistics often make it difficult to compare schools within a district. It is practically impossible to compare districts to one another, to assess the factors that might be related to dropping out, or to develop model programs of dropout prevention. Consequently, many of the reported dropout statistics - local, state, or national - are in error because they rely on widely different definitions or divergent databases (p. 264).

Mann (1986) somewhat facetiously compared using these data to inform dropout program management to "obstetricians trying to improve their forceps delivery

techniques by peering at the *Current Population Survey from the Bureau of the Census* (p. 322). His intent, however, is that meaning not be attached to the dropout figures without carefully checking the data upon which it is based.

In the province of British Columbia there are countless programs developed at the provincial, district or school level to meet the perceived needs of the potential school leaver and the leaver who wants to return to the school system. In addition, the federal government, through its Stay-In-School initiative (Ministry of Education and Ministry Responsible for Multiculturalism and Human Rights, 1992) has sponsored hundreds of projects in this province and throughout the rest of the country in an effort to combat high youth unemployment and unemployability. Many of these projects are designed and implemented at the school or district level by caring and dedicated professionals on the basis of perceived need rather than on a researched understanding of who is dropping out and why, and who is returning and why. These professionals and the young people they are trying to help would be well served by a clear definition of the term "dropout" so that accurate figures could be compiled, potential

leavers and returnees targeted, and efforts could be focussed where and when they would be most effective.

Morrow (1986) indicated that a review of reasons for dropping out used by school districts suggested three criteria for a definition of who is dropping out: (1) Is the student actively enrolled? (2) If not, has the enrollment been formally transferred to another legitimate institution? (3) Has the student earned a high school diploma or its equivalent? He further elaborates that a useful definition of a dropout is:

...any student, previously enrolled in a school, who is no longer actively enrolled as indicated by fifteen days of consecutive unexcused absence, who has not satisfied local standard for graduation, and for whom no formal request has been received signifying enrollment in another state-licensed educational institution. A student death is not tallied as a dropout. The designation of dropout can be removed by proof of enrollment in a state-licensed educational institution or by presentation of an approved high school graduation certificate (p. 353).

Hammack (1986) stated that school districts vary in the formulas used to calculate dropout rates. There

is some justification for the belief that districts will report dropout rates in the manner most advantageous for their own political needs. If funding is granted on the basis of need for programming for students designated as at risk of dropping out, then the district may report in such a way as to secure the additional funds. If the district is being assessed on the basis of how it meets the needs of the students entrusted into its care, then the dropout figures may be presented in a manner which would minimize their numbers.

The most common procedure for arriving at a dropout rate is to divide the number of dropouts by the total enrollment for the grade levels included during a single year. Other districts follow cohorts, usually across the secondary school years. The Ministry of Education Annual Report for the Province of British Columbia (1991) arrived at the reported provincial dropout rate using the ratio of the number of students entering Grade 8 in 1985 to the number who completed their Grade 12 in June 1990. According to the Ministry figures 63% completed Grade 12 and an additional 24% had entered Grade 12 but had not graduated because of insufficient credits, withdrawal during the year or

following a course of studies that would not lead to fulfillment of the graduation requirements. The Ministry report does not elaborate on the fact that many secondary schools in B.C. do not begin at Grade 8, but have junior secondary schools beginning at either Grade 7 or 8, and senior schools which begin at Grade 10 or Grade 11. The data also do not reflect the numbers of Grade 12 students who may complete their graduation requirements after the June exams by attending summer school, rewriting the failed exams in August, or completing correspondence school courses after the June deadline.

The Ministry's perspective of school completion, however, is useful as a basis for the definition of a dropout for this study. According to the provincial statistics 13% to 37% of young people leave the school program before completing Grade 12.

For the purpose of this research, therefore, a dropout may be best defined in the broadest terms as an early school leaver - one who has left the regular school system before graduation. For the purpose of this study, one subgroup of early school leavers will be examined - those who acknowledge leaving the regular



school system and who have chosen to complete their graduation requirements in an alternate school setting.

No reliable follow-up data exist for the early school leaver in this province. Although it is not known how many, or with which characteristics, some of the early school leavers attempt to resume their education. Many of these young people come back to the school system after only a few months; others after a period of years. Some enroll in training programs such as hairdressing, secretarial or culinary schools which do not have Grade 12 graduation as part of their entrance requirements, but according to Rubenson (1992) more individuals enroll in adult education courses such as these who have completed high school than who have left before graduation.

Other early school leavers re-enter the school system by enrolling in up-grading, social learning or academic programs offered by the school districts. These are usually designated as alternate schools or programs. According to Hahn (1987) the alternative schools "work well for highly motivated dropouts; they do not always work so well for others" (p. 261).

In light of the important function an education serves in both the economic and social future of the

individuals, it would be valuable to look at the process of early school leaving and returning to the education system from the experiential perspective of the early school leaver. This study will examine one group of early school leavers, those who have returned to complete an academic education through an alternate program which allows them to work at their own pace.

This study is important for several reasons.

First, to date the Province of British Columbia has not published a significant body of research studying early school leavers, and in light of the Sullivan Commission report (1988), such a study is warranted. Second, very little research in the field of early school leaving has centered upon the experiential reality of dropping out of and returning to school. This study would provide valuable information to school officials, teachers, and counsellors about dropping out of school from the perspective of the early school leaver; information on which to base programming, curricula, and counselling interventions which may help to retain more students in a meaningful school situation until they graduate. According to Mann (1986) "Everyone agrees that the way young people experience school is the most frequently cited reason for quitting school

early" (p. 309). But what does that mean? In asking the question "What is the experience of early school leaving and returning to an academic alternate program?" this study attempts to focus on a clearly defined subgroup of early school leavers, so that new light may be shed upon the dynamic of leaving school and upon the meaning that the individual makes of his or her school career.

## II LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature in the field of dropout studies may be roughly divided into four broad areas: situations associated with early school leaving, consequences of early school leaving, programs developed to reduce the numbers or rate of dropouts and programs designed to provide re-entry into the education system.

### Situations Associated with Early School Leaving

The literature on causes for early school leaving may be further divided into three categories of situations most frequently associated with or influencing school leaving by adolescents: (a) factors external to the school system, (b) personal characteristics, and (c) factors within the school system. Although factors overlap among the categories, there is regrettably little research exploring their relationships or how they are experienced by the individual.

Low socioeconomic status is the most commonly reported situation external to the school system associated with dropping out (Rumberger, 1983; Steinberg, Blinde & Chan, 1984). The High School and

Beyond study (Peng, 1983) showed on all possible indicators of hardship from low income to limited educational background, that disadvantaged students were three times more likely to drop out than the advantaged students. According to Hahn (1987) school leaving rates tended to increase with the proportion of the student body classified as poor. His research indicated that in urban schools where less than 20% of the students would be classified as poor, the dropout rate was 13%. In schools where more than 50% of the students were poor, the dropout rate was more than double that figure at 30%.

It is not clear from the studies which indicate the correlation of low SES to early school leaving, just what it is about low SES that influences the dropout rate. Karp (1988) found in her discussions with teachers in the province of Ontario that they perceived that many low SES students who came from outside the province did not have the same academic background or cultural perspective for learning structures or in some cases value for education as they perceived in Ontario-educated students. This was particularly evident in the Black cultures which originated from outside of Canada. Because of the

disparate expectations for learning, these immigrants experienced frustration and lack of success, and many consequently dropped out. Two recent studies suggested low teacher expectations for low SES students contributed to early school leaving. Boyce (1990) found that teachers in high SES schools had higher or greater expectations for student academic achievement than did teachers in low SES elementary schools even if the teachers had training in working with students at risk. Kitchen (1990) found that low SES background was a contributing factor to student placement in "low track" or low ability classes and that placement in these classes had a stronger negative effect on the student's chances of completing school than did prior achievement.

Frequently found in tandem with low SES, racial factors are strongly associated with dropping out from schools in Canada and the United States. According to Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock (1986) dropout occurs at a proportionally higher rate among Hispanics and Blacks in the United States. Kunisawa (1988) found that the studies showed that American Indians and Hispanics have the highest dropout rate in American schools, followed by Blacks, Whites and Asians.

Trueba (1989), however, added a most important dimension to the ethnic/SES factor in his discussion of the role of culture in student achievement. He pointed out that if the school is perceived as being destructive to the home culture then alienation will surely result and student achievement will be negatively affected. In a similar vein, Solomon (1989) looked at the participation of black students in sports in a large urban Canadian school. He found that while these students had remained enrolled in the schools, they had dropped out of the academic culture of the school and adopted an alternative sport culture perceived to be supported by their coaches and the media who lionize successful Black athletes. These two studies are seen as particularly relevant to this research in that they have delved behind the demographic description of the early school leaver to understand one aspect of the meaning underlying the socioeconomic/racial association with dropping out and how this is integrated into the meaning-making system (Kegan, 1982) of the adolescent.

Other background factors associated with dropouts include coming from a single-parent family (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Karp, 1988; Neill, 1979; Rumberger, 1983)

and working more hours and for higher wages than school stayers (Ekstrom et al., 1986). In addition, Rumberger (1983) posited that the educational level attained by one or both parents would be a predictor of the child's achievement. If the parents had not graduated, it was more probable that the student would leave school before graduation. Waddell (1990) concluded that early school leavers felt that their parents valued graduation less and would be less displeased if they dropped out or had poor grades.

Of the school related factors, poor school performance is most frequently associated with dropping out but the supporting data for this factor are somewhat unclear. Kaplan & Luck (1977) found that as many as 50% of the dropouts had been held back at least once. Roderick (1991) found that after controlling for background and school performance, youth who have repeated grades are substantially more likely to drop out regardless whether that retention occurred early or late in the school career. She concluded that the risk of dropping out may be attributable to an independent impact of being overage for grade. According to the OERI Urban Superintendents Network (1987) poor academic performance is the single best predictor of who drops



out. Students earning D's and F's are more apt to leave than those scoring A's or B's. In the High School and Beyond study of 1980 and 1982, most dropouts surveyed said that they left school because of poor grades (Peng, 1983).

But a discrepancy between the perception and the reality of exactly what constitutes successful or unsuccessful performance appears to exist in the minds of the early school leavers. The sophomores who remained in school in the High School and Beyond study reported a grade average of "B", while those who dropped out reported grades of "mostly Cs", a difference of about one standard deviation. Sullivan (1988) in a survey of Ontario dropouts and non-dropouts found similar results. Ralph (1989) found that two out of three dropouts report making mostly C's or better. The Urban Superintendents Network (1987) found that less than 15% of all high school students have overall grade-point averages below C. According the High School and Beyond study, the typical dropout's grades were at approximately the sixteenth percentile of the school stayers, yet on the achievement tests for that study, the dropouts' scores were between the twenty-third and twenty-eighth percentile of the stayers

(Ekstrom et al., 1986). It would appear then that the perception of not doing well or not being able to do well in school is a more significant factor in the student leaving school before graduation than the actual performance.

Discipline problems are another school related factor associated with dropping out. Early school leavers are more likely to have cut classes, been suspended or put on probation, have had confrontations with teachers and had serious trouble with the law (Ekstrom et al., 1986). Wehlage and Rutter (1986), however, put the disciplinary factor into context:

If one comes from a low SES background, which may signify various forms of family stress or instability, and if one is consistently discouraged by the school because of signals about academic inadequacies and failures, and if one perceives little interest or caring on the part of teachers, and if one sees the institution's discipline system as both ineffective and unfair but one has serious encounters with that discipline system, then it is not unreasonable to expect such individuals to become alienated and lose their commitment to the goals of graduating

from high school and pursuing more education (p. 385).

Personal characteristics such as poor self-esteem (Karp, 1988), weak socialization and external locus of control (Ekstrom et al., 1986) have been shown to correlate with dropping out. Early school leavers agree that "people think they are losers" (Karp, 1988, p. 26). It remains unclear, however, whether these characteristics are inherent in the student or whether or to what degree they are a product of the school experiences. Wehlage (1989) describes both social and academic isolation as critical factors to be countered for school membership, which he defines as a reciprocal relationship between students and adults bonding the student to the school. The feeling of isolation may be engendered or countered by teaching staff or curriculum and consequently cannot be said to be an intrinsic psychological characteristic. Similarly, self-esteem, self-concept and locus of control are dependent for their meaning at least to some extent upon the interaction of the school, the individual, the home and the community.

### Consequences of Early School Leaving

Some of the literature on early school leaving has recently undergone a shift in nomenclature which may signal a change in perception of the problem of students who leave school before graduation. The potential dropout is at this time commonly referred to as a student "at risk" (Lakebrink, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989). This literature addresses the early school leaving issue from the perspective of the social and economic consequences to society as a whole if large numbers of students do not complete high school. Hahn (1987) stated that the consensus of well-meaning citizens from all levels of government, conferences, committees and studies across the United States was that "excessively high dropout rates threaten the nation's productivity and represent a tragic waste of young lives" (p. 256). Those early school leavers are viewed as "a financial drain on society; they detract from the overall well being of a competitive economic system when they become unemployable, under-employed or dependent upon welfare and other social services" (Wehlage, 1989, p.1). In a similar vein, Kronick & Hargis (1990) point out that dropouts impact on many agencies including welfare, mental health, corrections

as well as education. They further state that "If education could effectively deal with these students, welfare, mental health and correctional systems would not have to" (p. 61). Similarly, in the province of British Columbia the Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology (Rubenson, 1992) stated, "The continuing high wastage in high schools is alarming. This represents a loss of human capital that is one of the major weaknesses in the effort to achieve a competitive economy in British Columbia"(p. 27).

Two recent studies in particular, however, do not concur with the supposition that dropping out leads to negative individual and social consequences. McCaul (1989) used the data from the High School and Beyond longitudinal data source to examine those who dropped out and those who graduated but did not go on to postsecondary education. Small but statistically significant differences existed between the two groups in alcohol use, periods of unemployment and work satisfaction. The results did not confirm that dropping out leads to wide discrepancies in wages or self-esteem. McCaul suggested that given the small differences on some of the measures the real drawback to important life adjustment may not be dropping out of

high school but rather the lack of any post-secondary education. Jarjoura (1990) used data from the Longitudinal Survey of Youth to examine the association of dropping out of high school and later involvement in crime. He found that dropping out of high school does not increase the likelihood of criminality. His study supports the position that the observed dropout-delinquency relationship is largely due to other factors which have been neglected as variables in other studies, primarily measures of prior misconduct and demographic characteristics.

#### Programs to Prevent Early School Leaving

The education system responded at all levels to the consensus that too many students leave high school without graduating by establishing a myriad of programs to prevent or to remediate early school leaving. Most of the programs at the school level are developed in response to a perceived need for a specific population. Of the programs designed to prevent early school leaving, many are implemented for the entire grade level population, not just for the students who have been identified as at risk of dropping out. For

example, some schools perceived a need for an orientation program for students entering the school in order to initiate them into the climate of the school and to facilitate their integration into the desired aspects of the school culture (Santorufu, 1991). The administration believed that this program was instrumental in preventing dropouts by reducing the students' sense of alienation, which the literature indicates is closely associated with dropping out of secondary school (Wehlage et al., 1989).

Some secondary schools have restructured entry level classes into interdisciplinary teams rather than traditional subject departments in response to middle school theorists and writers hypotheses that this structure would enable students to form stronger social bonds with their peers, teachers and the school. Arhar, (1990) did a study which matched a national U.S. sample of teamed and non-teamed schools and found that teaming does have a positive effect on social bonding and that the greatest effect was on bonding to teachers and somewhat less to peers and to the school. Other intervention programs were designed to enhance academic performance, as measured by grade point average (GPA), school attendance and school behavior. Pipal (1991)

reported that both the literature and her research showed that such intervention programs can positively affect GPA and attendance. Carter (1990) surveyed Michigan school programs for children at risk and found that most schools provided remedial instruction, vocational, and substance abuse programs. In addition, they had implemented attendance policies and procedures designed to monitor and curb truancy at an early stage.

At the provincial governmental level, the Ministry of Education in British Columbia reacted to the information in the Sullivan report on the Royal Commission on Education by setting up collaborative teams of educators from the Ministry, school districts and schools to improve the perceived relevance of education to the individual learner. This collaboration resulted in the broad educational paradigm shift known throughout the province as the Year 2000. In addition, gifted learners and First Nations learners were specifically targeted for attention to make their programs more meaningful.

At the district level, the Ministry of Education Annual Report (1991) stated that teachers in two B.C. school districts implemented specific measures to make school more relevant to Grade 8 students who were



identified by a questionnaire as at risk of dropping out. The report stated that fewer students withdrew from the schools using these measures and that the program was to be expanded to other schools. Most B.C. districts offered alternate programs, usually housed separately from the regular school, for various populations such as students who cannot meet the behavioral standards in the regular school, teenage mothers, and young adults who wish to return to school.

The federal government, while not directly responsible for education, funded district Stay-In-School initiatives through the Ministry of Education and Ministry Responsible for Human Rights and Multiculturalism (1992) to alleviate unemployment and underemployment among the young adults.

#### Re-entry Programs

There is some blurring of boundaries between re-entry programs which are designed to facilitate the return to the school system of a person classified as a dropout, and alternate or alternative programs or schools which are designed primarily to prevent students currently enrolled from dropping out before

graduation. It does not appear from the literature that the school districts in which these alternate programs are based have clearly defined roles or mandates for these schools or programs. In most cases the programs have arisen out of need to provide for students who are unable to function in the regular school setting. These students, however, are seldom clearly described other than being referred to as being "at risk" by whatever criteria the district chooses to measure that quality. In many instances, the student enrolled in the alternate program has effectively withdrawn from the regular educational program, and according to Solomon (1989) might best be defined as a dropout.

Alternative schools provide a wide variety of programs and teaching strategies. Traditionally, alternative schools or programs have had a heavily vocational outlook in their programming in an effort to prepare the young people for the job market. Zakowski (1990) found that approximately 18% more students designated as "at risk" stayed in the alternative school and completed high school requirements while enrolled in vocational education than those who were not enrolled in vocational education. Swopes (1986)

surveyed alternative programs in the Missouri Valley area of Nebraska and found that three-fourths of the schools claimed to be student-centered with individualized instruction.

The co-researchers in this study were all enrolled in an alternate program which shall be referred to in this study as the "Amigos" program. The Amigos program is operated under the jurisdiction of Community Education in one of the Greater Vancouver Regional Districts. At the time of the interviews, the program had operated for two years. Amigos developed as an off-shoot of another alternate program which had as its mandate teaching life skills to young people who have left the mainstream school system. The mandate of the Amigos program is to offer an academic program to older students who may have dropped out or who are unable to continue their education in the regular school system. At the time of the interviews there were 50 active participants in the program who attended classes on a semi-regular basis at the school site. An additional 15 to 20 registered students do not attend classes for reasons such as child care problems, but they do come in periodically to have work checked and to receive a new batch of assignments.

Students may be recommended to the program by a friend, counsellor or street worker. The potential student is interviewed and the Amigos program teacher may check with the referring agency or previous school counsellors to find out the background of the young person. If behavior issues were a major problem in previous school settings, the potential student may be asked to go on a waiting list until the teachers are assured that he or she will not be bringing those behaviors into the program. All students are asked to sign a contract adhering to the rules and regulations of the school. Students may be dismissed or put on probation for breaking the rules. Probation involves loss of privileges such as choosing working times and a requirement to attend at the least desirable times, from noon to 4 p.m. five days a week.

This program was designed to provide an academic education to motivated students by providing them with very clear boundaries, achievable goals and virtually unlimited support.

### Program Evaluation

To date, however, very few of the programs designed to prevent early school leaving or to facilitate returning to complete secondary school requirements have been extensively described or independently evaluated. Those which have been described and evaluated have had mixed reviews. Bell (1990) evaluated an alternate school program designed to prevent dropout of at-risk students who returned to their home schools. The students who received this program improved in attendance and in measures of attitude and achievement. A greater proportion of the program participants remained in school after they returned to their home schools than those who had not received the program. In the province of British Columbia, Mutadi (1990) explored three treatment programs on potential early school leavers and found that these programs did impact favorably on the dropout rates.

Other programs were not evaluated as favorably. For example, Kiick (1991) reported that for eighth graders who had repeated one or more grades in a Mississippi school system there was a significant negative relationship between attending a selected

alternative school and program remaining in school. Outlaw (1989/1990) conducted a study of the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs at five California high schools. She concluded that because the programs were not effective in all of the schools, ethnicity, different school cultures and uneven administration of the programs made a difference in the effectiveness of the programs.

Implementation of district-wide programs at the school level has had other negative ramifications. Seeley (1990) concluded in his longitudinal study of a Florida dropout prevention program that inadequate administration of the programs at the school level may have contributed to the totally unexpected result that the dropout rate was significantly higher in the experimental group which had received academic enhancement, counselling and career awareness study than in the control group which had not received any treatment at all.

In studying the vast array of programs designed to help students at risk, Mann (1986) concluded that:

...practical improvements depend on knowing what was done to whom, but (a) virtually everything is being done and (b) at the delivery level we cannot

yet tell to whom or with what effect. Thus we are doing a lot and learning a little about the multiple palliatives (p. 311).

It would seem therefore that before developing additional delivery programs or even assessing current programs, a closer look might be taken at the "whom", the individual to whom all the attention is being paid, the adolescent early school leaver. As an adolescent each of these young people had undergone significant developmental changes prior to and subsequent to dropping out of school. Erikson (1968) characterized this psychosocial developmental period as a time of identity crisis which he described as the following:

Like a trapeze artist, the young person in the middle of vigorous motion must let go of his safe hold on childhood and reach out for a firm grasp on adulthood, depending for a breathless interval on the relatedness between the past and the future, and on the reliability of those he must let go of, and those who will "receive him" (Erikson, 1964, p. 90).

Kegan (1982), whose work incorporates and expands upon the work of Erikson, Kohlberg and especially Piaget, describes the adolescent from a constructivist-developmental perspective as a "self" evolving from

embeddedness in the culture of imperial stage self-sufficiency, competence and role differentiation into the culture of the interpersonal stage of shared subjective experience and mutually attuned interpersonal relationships. This individual constructs meaning from the context of the school, the community, the family and peers. It could be argued that it is the meaning that the individual makes or perceives in any situation which makes him or her "at risk" of dropping out of school while another student, with much the same background and situation is able to stay in school and graduate.

It is clear from the literature that there exists a need for research which will explore the relationships among the factors associated with dropping out, not simply on a descriptive basis, but rather from the experiential perspective of the meaning-making system of the individual.



### III METHODOLOGY

#### Co-researchers

The volunteer co-researchers in this study were solicited from an alternate secondary school program in the Greater Vancouver region. Twelve students enrolled in the program were contacted and interviewed. Table 1 displays the demographic information for the sample. The co-researchers ranged from 3 months to 5 years absence from regular secondary school programs.

The purpose of this alternate setting was to offer an academic program to older students who may have dropped out or who were unable to complete their education in mainstream school setting. Fifty students were enrolled in the program. The students were recommended to the program by friends, counsellors or street workers. They were selected to participate in the alternate program through an interview and test process. The criteria for selection was centered upon a demonstration of commitment to completing the program which involved the potential student taking a test and returning at an appointed time to discuss the results. Students further demonstrated their commitment by

Table 1  
Demographic Information

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<u>Gender</u>		<u>Age</u>						
male	n=5	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
female	n=7							

---

Age at Dropout

Male	-	-	1	3	1	-	-
Female	1	2	3	1	-	-	-

Age at Return

Male	-	-	-	1	-	1	3
Female	-	-	1	0	4	1	1

signing a behavioral contract. Each student worked independently and instruction took place only on an individual tutorial basis.

### Methodological Approach

As the fundamental purpose of this research was to explore the experience of early school leavers, a phenomenological/hermeneutical methodology was chosen as the appropriate methodology. Although phenomenology is not easily defined and may be best considered in a "thick description" (Van Hestern, 1986) as is often used in qualitative research terminology, this study used as a guide Suransky's (1982) description:

The phenomenological task, therefore, lies both in the process of description and critical reflection where the primacy of experience holds sway, and in the attempt to penetrate to the essence of a phenomenon to the core themes that underlie what is being observed (p. 36).

The phenomenological approach in its purest form assumes a presuppositionless approach to the data interpretation. An hermeneutical methodology (Kvale, 1983), while phenomenological in nature, allows for the

interpretation of data within a context or within a pattern of events or within a theoretical framework (Young, 1986). Given the essential contextual framework for this study, i.e. the school system, and the adolescent developmental stage, the hermeneutical approach was chosen.

### Data Collection

The staff of the alternate program were informed that the researcher wished to interview and audio-tape students concerning their experience of early school leaving. The researcher explained that the study was being conducted in fulfillment of a University of British Columbia M.A. thesis requirement in Counselling Psychology chaired by Dr. N. Amundson. The staff were further informed that neither the study nor the researcher had any direct involvement with the school district although district approval for the study had been granted. The staff were asked to mention this information to the students and to ask their permission for the researcher to contact them.

The author contacted potential co-researchers and restated the information given to the staff. In

addition, the researcher explained that the interview would be about 1 hour in length and tape-recorded. The potential co-researchers were informed that their confidentiality would be protected in that they would not be personally identified in the thesis and that the interview would be used for research purposes only. They were also informed that they could refuse to answer any question and they could withdraw from participation at any time.

Interview times were arranged and the co-researchers were given a consent form to bring signed to the interview. Parent signatures were requested and obtained from co-researchers who were under 16 years of age. Each co-researcher or responsible parent or guardian was given a copy of the consent form. (Refer to Appendix A for a copy of the consent form).

### Pilot Interview

Two pilot interviews were conducted to assess the clarity and effectiveness of the interview questions as well as to allow the interviewer an opportunity to familiarize herself with the scope and flow of the interview responses. (Refer to Appendix B for a description of the pilot interview process and

interview questions.) The pilot interview data were not included with the data analysis for this study.

### Co-Researcher Interviews

All interviews took place in an interview room at a site operated by the University of British Columbia for counsellor training. This site was chosen to standardize the interview settings and to provide a neutral, private, safe and relaxed but serious environment.

Each interview began with the researcher collecting the consent form signed by the parent or guardian if the co-researcher was under 16 years of age or signed by the interviewee if he or she was older than 16. A random two-digit number was assigned to each interview and that number was marked on the top left corner of the consent form, on the blank paper to be used for the life-line drawing and on the audio tape. The recording was started with an identification of the date of the interview and a restatement of the

assigned random number. The researcher then asked the following questions:

1. Could you tell me when it was that you first thought about leaving school?
2. Could you make a life-line drawing from just before you first thought about dropping out until right now?
3. Each person considers leaving school in a unique way. Could you tell me your story, describing what happened, what you did and the thoughts and feelings you experienced?
4. Are you at this time considering leaving school? What would have to happen for this to take place or not take place?
5. Is there any person who stands out in your school career? Has this person affected your decision to leave or remain in school?
6. What are your expectations about your life from this point on?

The co-researchers were allowed to answer with as much or as little detail as they wished. The researcher interrupted only for clarification of either the situation, the context or the feelings described by the interviewee. Although a warm, encouraging tone was

employed, care was taken not to influence the co-researcher's statements. Preceding the second question, the co-researchers were handed a pencil and a blank sheet of paper on which the researcher placed the random co-researcher identification number. If the co-researchers were unfamiliar with the concept of drawing a life-line, the researcher clarified this question.

Each interview concluded with the statement that the co-researcher would be contacted at a later date and a summary of the interview would be read. The co-researcher was assured that he or she could add or change anything which the researcher had misinterpreted at that time.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the original transcribed taped interview protocol according to the following outline:

1. Validity check of protocols by telephone interview using protocol summaries.
2. A) Establishing categories of events related to early school leaving and of events related to returning to current alternate education



programme.

B) Validity check of established categories.

3. A) Categorizing meaning units of each co-researcher transcript using the category rating sheet.

B) Reliability check of individual rating sheets.

C) Sorting meaning units into categories.

D) Inter-rater reliability check of sorting.

4. Life-line drawing analysis.

5. Holistic description of the experience.

6. Analysis of protocols within a theoretical context.

#### 1. Protocol validity check

Summaries were made of the transcribed interviews.

Every effort was made to preserve the essential elements of the original transcript. In addition to condensing the narratives as accurately as possible, particular care was taken not to exaggerate or to minimize the feelings expressed by the co-researchers. The author attempted to validate the protocols of every co-researcher but two could not be contacted. The remaining 10 (83% of the sample) were read the condensed version of the transcript. The researcher

read the summaries slowly and frequently interrupted the narrative to ask if the individual found the summary accurate to that point or if he or she wanted to add to or change any part of the narrative. All of the co-researchers found the narrative to be accurate. Their comments included statements such as "yeah, that's cool", "yes, that's right", "you got it o.k." and "that's exactly it". (Refer to Appendix C for a sample of the interview summary.) One individual, however, wished to add that her home situation had very much improved since the interview. A second co-researcher related that she had completed another academic course and was going to summer school.

2. A) Establishment of categories of situations relating to early school leaving

Each original transcript was read several times and lists were made and refined of situations which the co-researchers related to early school leaving or to returning to the alternate education programme in which they were currently enrolled. These refined lists were established as categories. Initially it was anticipated that the categories related to early school leaving and those related to the return to the education system would differ considerably and that two

separate sets of categories would be found. Most categories, however, were present on both lists therefore the researcher combined both lists into one comprehensive set of categories.

## 2 B) Category validity check

A colleague familiar with the research method employed in this project initially read two of the transcripts and was instructed to list and categorize all of the situations in the tape transcripts which in her judgement the co-researcher associated with early school leaving. These categories were then compared with the categories established by the researcher. From the two transcripts the checker derived nine categories which closely matched or were identical to the categories established by the researcher. After reading additional transcripts and discussion with the researcher, the checker agreed upon an additional eight categories. These included a refinement of the checker's initial category designated "school" into five categories; school personnel, attendance, school performance and involvement, perceived reason for early school leaving, and perceived reason for returning to the education system. The researcher also agreed that the established categories of finance and employment

were too closely related in many contexts to be considered separate categories and so they were combined into one category named economics and employment. A rating sheet was developed to analyze the transcript of each co-researcher. (Refer to Appendix D for a copy of the category rating sheet.)

## 2. C) Rating sheet analysis

Each protocol was divided into "meaning units" or segments which were designated as statements. As much as possible, a meaning unit would encompass an entire statement made by the co-researcher either in response to a question posed by the interviewer or along a single train of thought initiated by the co-researcher. Each statement was numbered chronologically and further designated with the letter "R" if it referred to situations leading up to or directly related to the student's return to the education system via the programme in which he or she was currently enrolled. The identity number assigned to each co-researcher was entered on the rating sheet. Each statement was then examined to determine which of the established categories it encompassed and whether or not the reported situation, from the co-researchers point of view, worked for or against keeping the student in the

education system. A meaning unit statement might refer to only one category or to as many as five categories. If the statement was judged to be working toward keeping the individual in school, a check mark was placed in the appropriate category box. If the statement was judged to work against keeping the student in school an "x" was placed in the category box.

2. D) Reliability check of rating sheets

A research colleague was instructed to take each of the numbered meaning unit statements and categorize them on the established rating sheet in the same manner and using the same criteria as had the researcher. The results of both rating sheets were compared and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved. The modified result became known as the checked rating sheets. All references to rating sheet data were taken from the checked rating sheets. (Refer to Appendix E for a copy of a checked category rating sheet.)

2. E) Establishing category content

Segments of each meaning unit were sorted into categories. Any single segment might be placed in one or several categories depending on the content. Each category was analyzed separately to uncover the depth

and breadth of its impact upon the lives of those involved in this study.

### 3. Co-researcher life-line analysis

All of the life-line drawings were reproduced approximately to scale on graph paper to counteract the effects of a six-month drawing in comparison to a six-year drawing on the same one-page protocol. Different colors were used for each co-researcher. The age, approximate date of dropping out and date of return to the Amigos program were noted on the scale drawing as well. The scale drawing was analyzed for patterns relating to leaving school and to returning to school.

### 4. Holistic description

The rating sheets, the category analyses and the life line drawings were combined to provided a written description of the experience of early school leaving. This description focused upon the dynamic aspects of the experience including the situations leading up to dropping out, the process of leaving school, the experience of being an early school leaver and the return to the education system via the Amigos program.

### 5. Theoretical analyses of protocols

In keeping with the hermeneutical methodology chosen for this study, the data were analyzed primarily within

the context of developmental theory. The theoretical frameworks used for the analyses were derived by Eric Erickson (1963; 1968) and by Robert Kegan (1982) whose constructive-developmental theory of self development is derived in part from the theories of Erickson, Piaget (1969), and Kohlberg (1969).

#### IV RESULTS

The data analyses will be presented in two parts. First, based upon the life-line drawings and the co-researchers' responses to interview questions, early school leavers will be described holistically in dynamic progression from the earliest antecedents, to dropping out, to their present enrollment in an alternate program. Following the path that the dropout takes in leaving school is seen as particularly important in light of the dearth of literature in this area and also because it is recognized as being important in planning appropriate interventions at the school level (Kronick & Hargis, 1990). In addition, Appendix C outlines in the summary statement the progression of one individual co-researcher along the path to dropping out. Second, each of the categories of situations relating to early school leaving or returning to the school system will be described and rated from the perspective of the co-researcher as either enhancing or detracting from staying in school.



### Dynamic Progression of the Experience

The following aspects of the experience of early school leaving and subsequent return to an alternate program will be presented and discussed: long-term and immediate antecedents to leaving, the leaving process, the experience of being a dropout, the antecedents to returning to their current educational program, the experience in Amigos, and perceptions of the future.

### Long-term and Immediate Antecedents to Early School Leaving

All but one of the students involved in this study expressed experiencing family relationship stresses ranging from feelings of being misunderstood to being physically abused. Many of the difficulties were of a long-standing nature such as constant fighting and bickering with a parent, in particular an abusive or alcoholic father or step-father. Three co-researchers expressed feeling rejected because a sibling was the preferred child, because the parents wanted to move yet again to a foreign country or because the mother found a boyfriend. Other family stresses had a more immediate connection with leaving school. Five co-researchers reported either leaving or being kicked out

of home. Two co-researchers experienced a death of members of their immediate family.

In summary, during the period before dropping out of school, the co-researchers experienced both traumatic and general alienation or separation from their parents. According to Irwin & Vaughan (1988), Steinberg & Silverberg (1986) and Simmons (1987) early emotional emancipation from family or significant adults can affect adolescents negatively by making them more susceptible to negative peer influences and participation in unhealthy behaviors including drug and alcohol abuse. This study indicates that for this population there is also an association between separation from the parents and early school leaving.

Every one of the co-researchers expressed dissatisfaction with some aspect of the school system. Five of the co-researchers described difficulties with the teaching staff. Their most prevalent report was the "teachers just don't care", didn't help them when they needed it and didn't understand the students. In addition, nine of the interviewees directly or indirectly expressed having had problems with the school work. Only one person reported repeating a grade although two others expressed bewilderment about

why they had been promoted to the next grade when in their opinion they had not passed any classes at the previous grade level. All but one student reported skipping classes or not attending school. Three co-researchers in particular expressed a fondness for elementary school that they did not feel for the secondary school. One expressed feeling resentment after going from the oldest in the school at Grade 7 to being the baby again in Grade 8 and the other two expressed difficulty in adjusting to the multiple teachers and large, impersonal classrooms. These findings support Simmons (1987) contention that transition from elementary school, to secondary school may be made more difficult for some because of their concurrent adolescent development. This study also supports previous research (Newmann, 1989) showing student alienation from schools and teachers may be associated with early school leaving.

Peers played an ambivalent role in the time frame leading up to dropping out. On the one hand, they were reported by four co-researchers as frequently associated with if not instrumental in the co-researcher's skipping classes; on the other hand, three co-researchers mentioned that the only reason

they came to school at all was to "hang out" with their friends. Intense relationships with peer groups, characterized by reports of prolonged daily contact within the peer group and statements of the importance of their group, were evident in all but one co-researcher.

No interview question asked about the student's involvement with drugs and alcohol but situations involving either drugs or alcohol were mentioned in association with dropping out by all but three of the co-researchers. Five co-researchers reported using drugs or alcohol frequently during the time period before dropping out of school. Also mentioned were drug and alcohol use by parents, grandparents, peers and other adults living in the home. One individual referred to being involved personally in selling drugs. Drug use frequently either precipitated or was mentioned in association with leaving home.

The co-researchers expressed negative self concept in the period before leaving school. Individuals expressed feelings of worthlessness, insanity and rebelliousness. Three co-researchers expressed feeling rejected by parents, peers or teachers. Three young

people said if others didn't care about them then why should they care about themselves.

The three co-researchers who used the word "alone" to describe how they felt during this time period, and others who expressed rejection, worthlessness and insanity all give voice to an overwhelming sense of isolation and alienation experienced by these young people which was only partially alleviated by their peer group participation.

#### The Process of Dropping Out

Only 5 of the 12 students in this study described formally withdrawing from the regular school system. Others withdrew from the regular classroom setting with the intention of continuing their education in another setting such as taking correspondence courses at home or enrolling in an alternate school or program. For all but one student, the withdrawal process began with skipping classes or staying away from school altogether for a period of time.

The process of gradual withdrawal from school by skipping suggests that there is a gradual weakening of the "magnetic attraction" between the student and the school which takes place at this time for some students.

Of the seven young women interviewed for this study, five began seriously thinking about leaving school or began skipping out of class or school during Grade 9. Of the remaining two female co-researchers, one began the leaving process in Grade 8 and the other in Grade 10. Of the young men, only one began the drop out process in Grade 9, two began in Grade 10 and one in Grade 12. The difference in dropout age between the young men and the young women suggests that there may be developmental issues underlying early school leaving. These issues will be examined in detail in the discussion section of this study.

#### The Experience of Being a Dropout

While most of the co-researchers reported that they had "dropped out" of school, the experience of being a dropout was unique to each individual. For most the downward trend shown in their life-line drawings continued. Drug and alcohol problems were exacerbated in all but two situations. Of the 12 students interviewed for this study, nine reported living away from home as part of the experience of being a dropout. Each individual described this situation with varying degrees of negative emotions such as rejection, anger, resentment, and helplessness.

They lived on the street, in parks, with friends or in foster homes. Four co-researchers found employment but all of them lost the jobs within a short period of time. All except one of the young men reported experiencing financial difficulties.

During the dropout period the co-researchers continued their very strong associations with their peer group. In all cases this association served to maintain the co-researcher in what they later came to regard as negative situations such as continuing to abuse drugs and alcohol, living with pimps and hookers, running with a gang, or being abused by a boyfriend.

During this time five co-researchers attempted to return to school but were unsuccessful.

What appears relevant in the co-researchers' stories relating to the time frame when they were out of school, is that dropping out of school was not so much a change in status but rather a continuation or progression in a negative life situation.

#### Antecedents To Enrolling in Amigos

Prior to enrolling in the alternate program in which they were currently registered, all but two of the co-researchers underwent some experience which initiated in one young woman's terms "cleaning up my

act". This usually involved getting off or reducing the use of drugs or alcohol either on their own or with the help of friends, family or programs such as A.A.

All but one of the co-researchers returned to their families and reported that some negotiation had taken place between them and their parents or guardians regarding rules and behaviors.

Three co-researchers attempted continue their education during this period. They enrolled and were successful in step-up programs and other alternate school programs.

In the months prior to enrolling in Amigos most co-researchers had undergone or were in the process of undergoing a change in relationships with their peers. They did not "hang out" as much with a group but rather sought the companionship of specific friends. Three mentioned exclusive dating relationships with individuals who supported the co-researchers' attempts to "straighten up" their lives. This combination of events usually signified the end of the "dropout" phase and signaled the beginning of a positive turn on the life-line drawing.



### Enrolling in the Amigos Program

The co-researchers reported enrolling in Amigos for several reasons. They had heard about it from their friends or family member who were currently enrolled or they knew the staff from other programs. All of the co-researchers expressed strong affiliation for the program. They reported contentment with the staff, particularly that they were helpful and understanding. They also valued the concept of learning at their own rate and not falling behind or being punished for missing. Four co-researchers specifically expressed pride in their accomplishments so far in the program, particularly as they felt that the content was academically meaningful.

The return to school for this group of early school leavers was contingent upon having reconciled with their parents or guardians and disengaged from their earlier peer group relationship. Choosing the Amigos program in particular was predicated upon having friends in the program, having teachers who understood them, having a meaningful curriculum and having a desire to complete Grade 12 for future economic benefits.

### Perception of the Future

Each co-researcher was asked if he or she were thinking of leaving school at that particular time. They all responded very emphatically, no. In every case, when asked how they foresaw the future unfolding for themselves, they began with high school graduation. After graduation, their vision was somewhat less specific. They spoke about careers, financial security, desires for marriage and children and happiness. Only one young person had made specific plans for realizing his goals. Two co-researchers reported that they took one day at a time and did not make long-range plans

In summary, the co-researchers experienced dropping out of school as part of a negative, downward trend in their lives. They experienced the return to school as part of an upward trend. This may be viewed as Gilligan (1987) and others (Pipp et al., 1985) suggest that the process involves a steady gain in responsibility, dominance and independence relative to the parents who decline in all of these dimensions. This study also suggests that in the process of returning to school in a self-paced program, the individual's gains in responsibility, dominance and

independence may also be relative to corresponding teacher decline in these areas. This study also showed a process of improving relationships with mothers who were perceived as friendly, in the process of returning to school. It is possible to view the young people who have dropped out and returned to this program according to Gilligan's (1987) developmental model which is build on the distinction between equality and attachment as two dimensions of relationship that shape the experience of self.

It is important to note that most of the young people in this study did not have fathers living in the home or had negative male parenting. If, as is suggested by Pipp and others (1985) part of the developmental process in the attachment dimension is a movement toward feelings of similarity to fathers, who are perceived as more dominant, then these young people may be delayed in this aspect of their development.

The figures which follow are graphic representations of the process of early school leaving and returning to an alternate program. They represent the general emotional experience, the involvement with peer group, association with drugs and alcohol and the emotional proximity to the family.

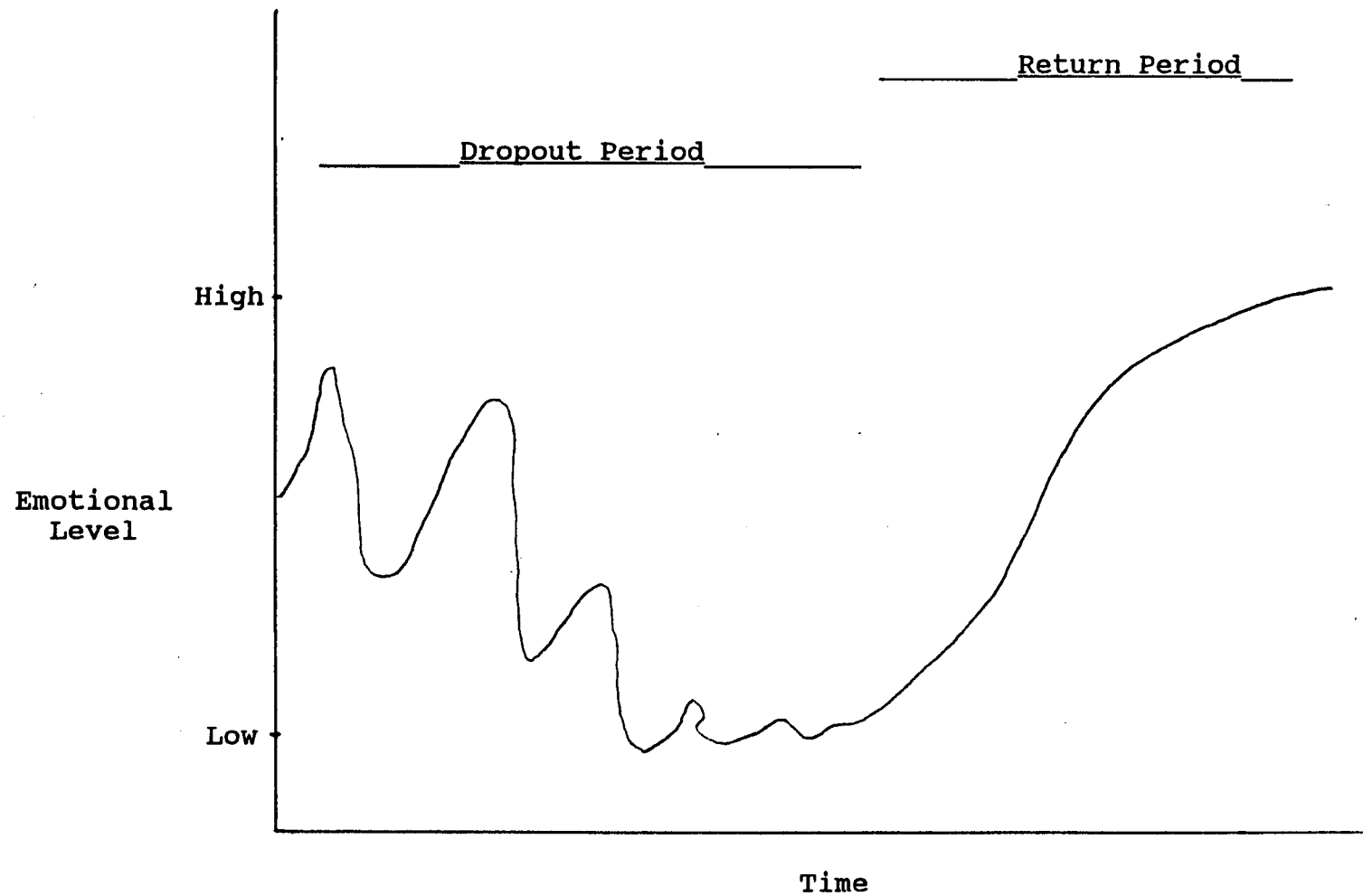


Figure 1. Emotional Experience of Dropping Out and Returning

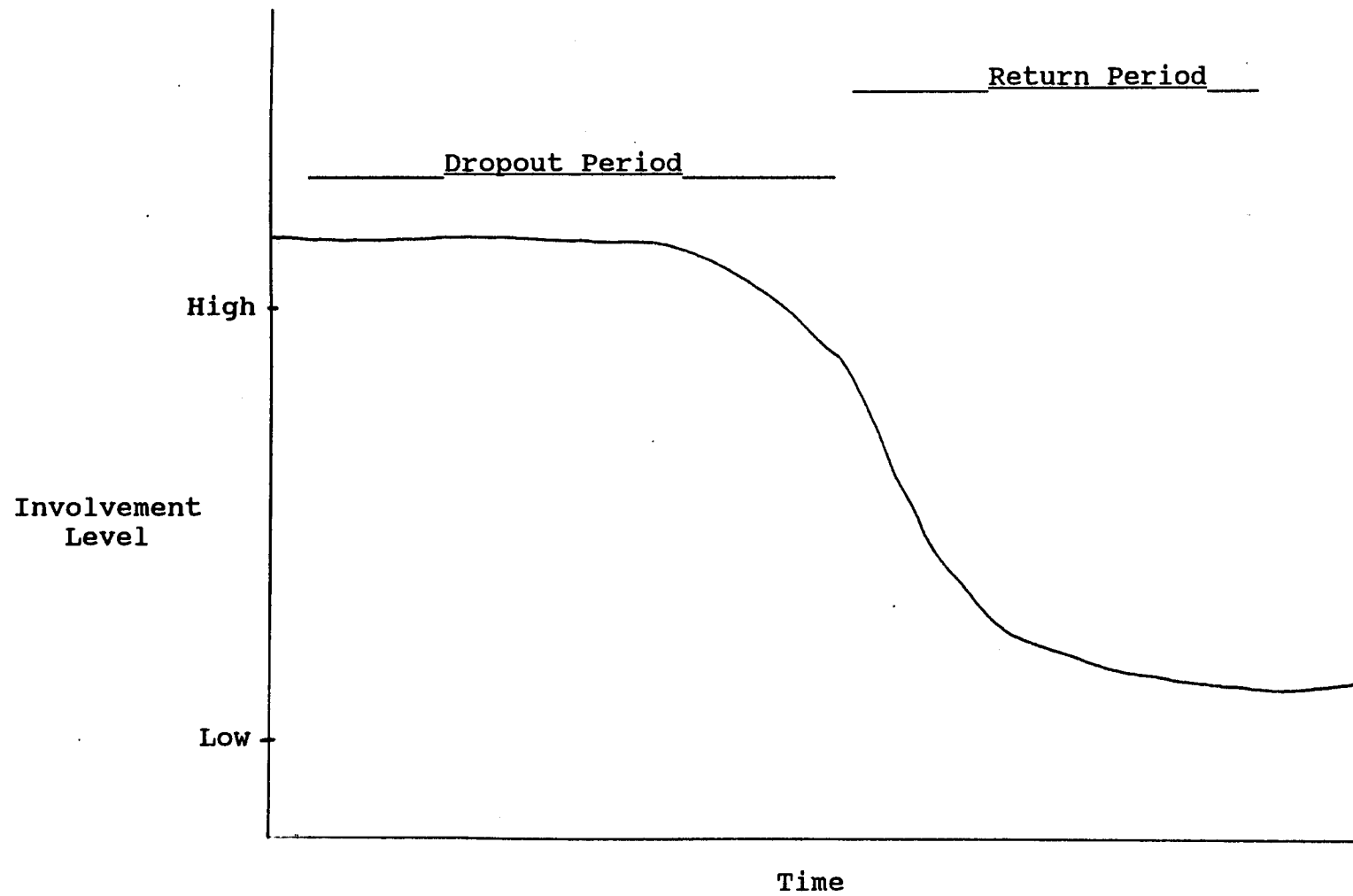


Figure 2. Peer Group Involvement During Dropout and Return

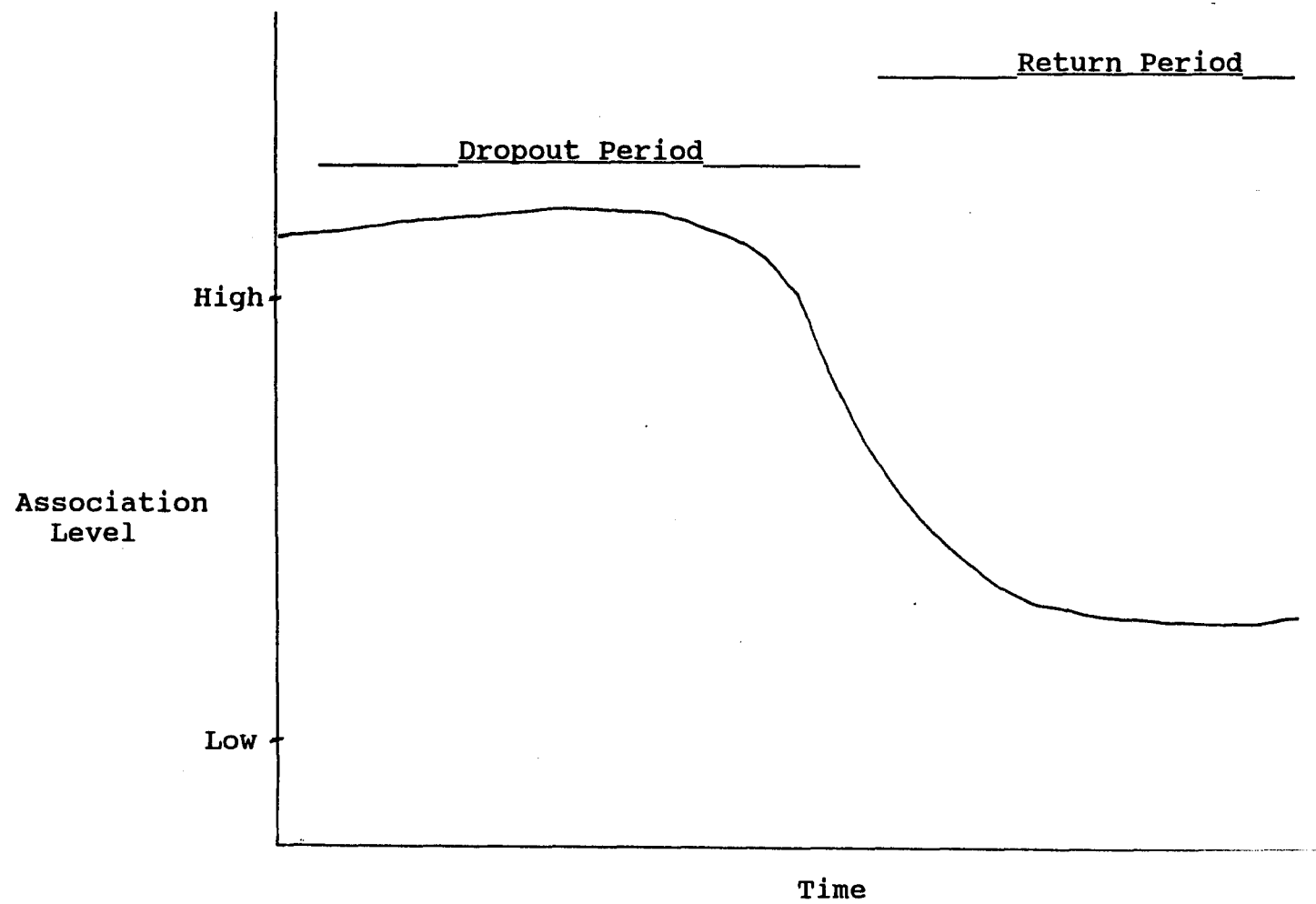


Figure 3. Drug and Alcohol Association During Dropout and Return

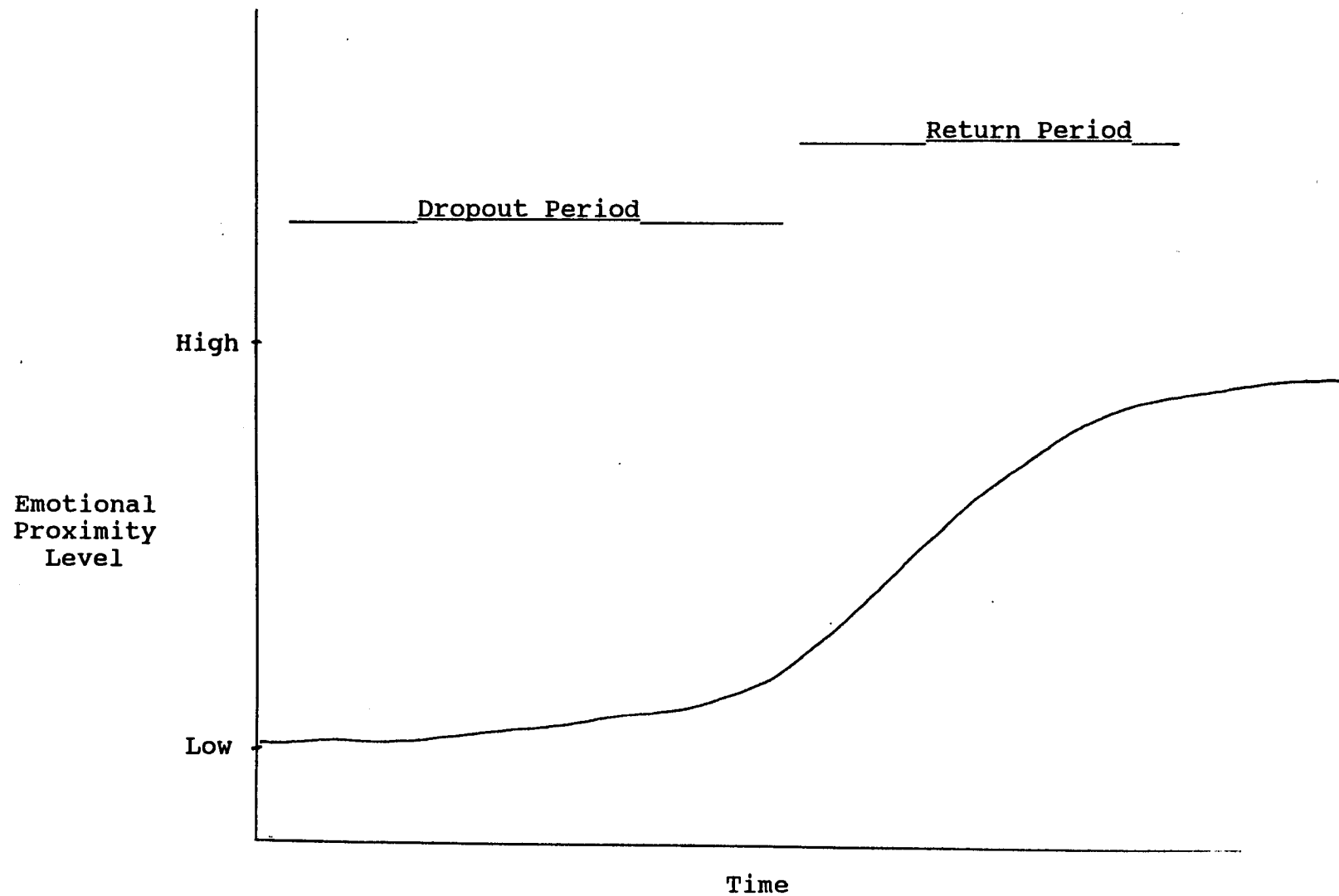


Figure 4. Emotional Proximity to Family During Dropout and Return

### Category Analysis

Each of the tape transcripts was divided into meaning units which were analyzed into one or more of the following categories: Family, Peers, School personnel, Attendance, School performance/involvement, Drugs and alcohol, Economic/employment situation, Perception of future, Law/discipline, Physical activities, Medical/mental problems, Perceived reason for leaving the regular school system, Perceived reason for return to school via the Amigos program, Person influential in school career, Self-perception, Returning or leaving home, Other adults, Abuse, Alternate programs, and Moving to different schools.

In this section each of these categories will be described and the statements comprising the category contents will be rated according to whether the situation contributed to leaving or to staying in school. Many of the situations reported by the co-researchers fit into more than one category. Where this occurred, entries were made in all applicable categories as the following descriptions will indicate.



### Family Situation

This category included situations involving parents, step-parents, guardians who were related to the co-researcher, grandparents, and siblings.

The relationship between these family members and the co-researcher leading up to or at the time of dropout was discordant. The co-researchers reported problems in communication with their parents, parental rules, new step-parent or parent's new partner, drug and alcohol use by their immediate family, death of a parent or grandparent, and parental non-support for education.

Of the 12 co-researchers, 4 lived with both natural parents. Two of these individuals reported having received support from their parents both in withdrawing from the regular high school and in enrolling in the alternate program. These parents also had reacted very strongly when they found out their sons had skipped classes. Both young men also reported a strong bond with their fathers who had steady blue-collar jobs. The other two young women had fathers whom they reported as alcoholic. One young woman reported that her mother and grandfather were alcoholics as well.

Two co-researchers reported living with mother and step-father. In both cases the male parent was perceived by the co-researcher as ineffectual during the period prior to dropping out. In the period leading up to the co-researchers' return to school, these male parents were seen as supportive.

One young man reported being adopted when he was four years old. At the time of the interview his parents had moved to Saudi Arabia. Although he reported choosing to remain behind, the co-researcher reported feeling abandoned again.

Three co-researchers lived with their mother alone or with mother and her boyfriend. In all three cases the mother worked graveyard shifts and moving to accommodate her employment was a common occurrence. The mother's boyfriend was also a problem for one of the co-researchers.

Two of the interviewees did not live with either natural parent. One had been taken from her mother to live with her uncle in Canada so that her mother would have one fewer person to support. The other young woman had lost her mother to drugs and at the time of the interview lived with her mother's previous boyfriend and his girlfriend who was a heroin addict.

The two following tables represent the ratings of the situations included in the family situations category from the perspective of the co-researcher. Table 2 presents the frequency of family situations which co-researchers rated as contributing to early school leaving. Table 3 presents family situations which they viewed as contributing to staying in school.

Table 2  
Family Situations Contributing to Early School Leaving

n	Family situation
11	conflict with parent, step-parent or guardian
9	leaving home
6	alcoholic/drug-addicted parent(s) or guardian
4	moving frequently
3	financial hardship
3	abusive parent, step-parent or guardian
2	death of family member
2	parents left school before graduation
2	sibling dropout
1	sibling drug use
1	being adopted

Table 3  
Family Situations Contributing to Continuing Education

<u>n</u>	Family situation
10	improved relationships with parent(s)
8	moved back home
2	parents supported school
2	good relationship with father
2	parent/guardian joined A.A./N.A.

### Peer Group Situations

Peer relationships played an extensive role in the context of early school leaving. The co-researchers reported that as they entered high school they actively sought or "fell in with" a group. Some of the group memberships were loosely defined by academic achievement. One young man reported identifying with the group that was from his standpoint singled out negatively by the administrators. "Usually the better kids with the better marks, the sucks, you know, they (administrators) let them go easy and other kids that are having a bit more trouble, they pick on them." Some of the academic achievement groupings began in elementary school. One co-researcher commented:

...some of the kids in our (Grade 7) class were good in math. They came to high school and they were good in math. I wasn't one of them. And my friends that I hung around with in Grade 7, none of them were good. All my friends that I hung around with in Grade 7 now have either dropped out or are in Amigos or other alternate schools.

Group membership or affiliation appeared to be of paramount importance for both young men and young women during the transition from elementary school, although

they expressed it somewhat differently. The female co-researchers frequently expressed this need for affiliation with the group as wanting to be in the "in group" or falling in with a group. As one young woman stated:

I was hanging around there. I wanted to be with, you know, the "in crowd" because they were all, you know, wearing nice clothes and having nice boyfriends and cars and all that, and I thought that looks like so much fun, and so I got into that.

The young women also reported that the friends understood, cared and helped them with their problems. Most young men reported "hanging out" with a group of friends, an activity which did not appear to have a formal or stated purpose other than maintaining membership in the group.

Maintaining group membership precipitated involvement in other activities such as skipping classes, ignoring homework, using drugs and alcohol and breaking family curfew rules. While the activities engaged in were similar, there appeared to be general differences in the meaning of these activities derived by the young women and the young men. The young men

experienced the group affiliation as a kind of autonomy or separation. As one young man who had been heavily into both using and selling drugs reported, "After hanging out with the people I was hanging out with, it was hard for me at 13 to say, 'Sorry guys. I got to go home for my curfew at 9 o'clock.' It was not cool, man." The perceived consequence of meeting the family rules was non-acceptance by this peer group who were considerably older than he was. The actual consequence of group membership was separation from his family.

Exclusion from group membership had painful consequences for one young man whose stepfather called him a coward for "not fighting the other kids when they wanted me to fight them, which was quite often." He had failed to attain group acceptance and he had failed to attain parental approval. He acted out his anger by "lighting fires, shoplifting getting into trouble and angering people."

The young women in general used the group affiliation for supportive relationships. The desire for group affiliation lead one young woman to fall in with a "bunch of new people (who) skipped school and did things." She ran away from home and met "a bunch of people that would take care of me...male and female



drug dealers, pimps and car thieves (who were) all hard core, looking out for Number 1 and (who would) demolish anybody that gets in their way." She did not appear aware of the contradiction in the statement.

An analysis of the co-researchers' statements suggests that prior to returning to school via the Amigos program, most co-researchers underwent a change in peer relationships. Six of the female co-researchers had left the group that they had been involved with doing drugs or alcohol or skipping school, and had formed close relationships with a few good friends. Three of these women also reported having an exclusive relationship with a young man and associated more with his friends than with other female friends. Two of the five male co-researchers experienced a change in group affiliation similar to that experienced by the female co-researchers. The remaining three young men involved in this study appeared to experience group affiliation prior to returning to the Amigos program and at the time of the interview in much the same as they had before they dropped out. Two still hung out and did drugs occasionally and the third "just hung around with his friends because it was a social thing." The co-

researchers of both sexes who moved away from the group also returned to a closer relationship with one or both of their parents, step-parents or guardians.

The two following tables represent the ratings of the situations included in the peer group situations category from the perspective of the co-researcher. Table 4 presents the frequency of peer group situations which co-researchers rated as contributing to early school leaving. Table 5 presents peer group situations which they viewed as contributing to staying in or returning to school.

#### School Personnel

Eleven of the 12 co-researchers reported negative feelings toward their teachers or administrators during the period immediately before or at the time of leaving school. Most felt that teachers "didn't care" or "didn't understand". They also expressed resentment at the authority wielded by the teachers and administrators and by the reluctance or inability on the part of teachers to help when the student was experiencing difficulties. As one young woman reported:

...the teachers never had time for their students.

They always said go for the tutor. And then when

Table 4  
Peer Group Situations Contributing to School Leaving

<u>n</u>	Peer group situations
11	intense peer relationships
8	members skipped school
8	members used drugs and/or alcohol extensively
3	members actively involved in crimes
3	friends left home
3	members achieved poor grades
2	members were older
1	members were status conscious
1	peers were abusive

Table 5  
Peer Group Situations Contributing to Continuing  
Education

<u>n</u>	Peer group situations
8	reduced involvement with group
5	new friends
4	friends enrolled in Amigos program
3	friends at school cared
2	friends reducing drug use

you went for the tutor you had this teenybopper tutor that was more interested in their hair or their boyfriend or the date or their clothes. So I dropped out of that. I said, 'No tutors for me.' I said, 'I need help.' and they said, 'Well there's others who need help too, more than you do.' And I guess they were just basically saying you don't want me here. So I never showed up for classes.

Once again, the co-researchers did not make the connection between their absenteeism and their inability to understand the class work. They also did not see the absentee situation and the resulting academic difficulty from the school personnel's point of view. As one young man reported, "Teachers, you asked them for help and they look at you as if you are a retard and don't help you. In regular school teachers get paid to do not much of anything except to play baby-sitter." One young man expressed resentment at being "looked down upon because of my financial situation and who I am."

Not all problems with teachers began in secondary school. One female co-researcher reported being in yelling matches with her Grade 4 teacher. Another

young man stole the teacher's purse because he didn't like her.

Only one co-researcher expressed generally positive comments about her teachers during the early high school period. She felt close to her teachers and thought that they had been nice to her. This young woman reported these positive feelings in the context of having moved frequently and having to make adjustments to new schools, new teachers and new classmates. It would appear that the teachers were the constant caring figures in the unsettled sea of changing homes, schools and friends. A second co-researcher expressed general acceptance of his teachers and described two teachers who were exceptional, one who did not make a fool of him when he came to class under the influence of drugs and another who taught him to ask questions when he did not know the answer. A third co-researcher reported difficulties with older teachers but got along better with younger teachers whom she felt understood her better.

One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for returning to the Amigos program and for remaining in school was the perceived difference between the alternate school staff and the regular school teachers

and administrators. The co-researchers reported that "They inspired me.", "You can talk to them if you have any problem.", "They take time out. Like if you have problems, they'll work something out that will make it easier for you."

#### Attendance

Only one co-researcher did not mention either in class or in school attendance during the interview. For the other eleven co-researches, skipping classes or whole days of school was indicated in the time frame prior to dropping out. For eight of these students it was part of the group affiliation that they skip out with the rest of the group. Extensive skipping was precipitated for one student by a crisis, a death in the family, and for another student by the extended absence by the parents. One young man reported that when he had been caught skipping his father became very angry so the student did not skip anymore.

Paradoxically two of the co-researchers felt that school personnel didn't care because they didn't catch them fast enough when they skipped out. As one of them stated:

The thing that's wrong with this school is that when you skip out they don't catch you. It took

them three months to catch on I wasn't even arriving at some of my classes and then after that they put me on skip slips for two weeks and I'd still skip in those two weeks.

One co-researcher stated the belief that he should be able to go to the classes he wanted to because it was his education, not the teachers'.

#### School Performance and Involvement.

Eight of the 12 co-researchers commented on their elementary schools. Half of them reported that they had moved around a lot and had gone to as many as 12 elementary schools. They expressed dislike, resentment or anger around the discontinuity they experienced. One co-researcher also expressed some enjoyment at meeting new teachers and classmates. Three co-researchers reported liking their elementary schools particularly having only one or two teachers each year, and having small classes with the same students for the whole year. Two co-researchers reported having difficulty with class work as early as in the primary grades. One said that he was "just lazy and undisciplined"; the other reported that "they just kept pushing me ahead. I guess they didn't want me."



The transition between elementary and secondary school engendered performance and involvement difficulties for several co-researchers. As one young woman reported:

...if you go from Grade 7, from a classroom environment where it's one classroom with 25 kids and one teacher and that's where you're taught all day long, and then you go to a school like this where it's enormous and that you've got 30 to 35 kids in the class and you have eight different teachers in a week, that's pretty stressful.

Poor school achievement was mentioned in conjunction with dropping out by all but one of the co-researchers. Several co-researchers expressed bewilderment as to why they had been passed in Grades 8, 9 or 10 when in their own minds they had clearly failed the year and had already dropped out. One student had been told that he was to repeat Grade 9 for the third time and arrived at school in September programmed for Grade 10. One month later he was devastated as he was returned to Grade 9. Six of the co-researchers reported generally poor marks, having trouble with classes and passing only one or two courses prior to dropping out. During the same time

frame, one co-researcher expressed the desire to get good grades, to learn something and to retain the knowledge.

Many co-researchers made general statements about school. Three reported disliking or hating school and one student said that after 15 years of schools, he was fed up and would rather take correspondence or go to night school. Two co-researchers reported being bored and another that he didn't like switching classrooms all the time. Several students reported liking specific subjects such as Drama, English, Family Management and Shop courses and disliking Math and Science courses although one math teacher was mentioned as someone who had been particularly understanding. None of the co-researchers reported that they liked school prior to dropping out although two said that school was "O.K", and none reported being involved in any extracurricular activities such as theater productions, student council or athletics.

Since their return to school via the Amigos program, the students report generally improved grades and pride in their accomplishments. Most students expressed some difficulties they encountered and are still facing in trying to get back into a regular

program of studies. These problems included simply getting up in the morning and catching the bus, getting into a habit of doing homework, trying to attend regularly, staying away from friends, trying to work and study at the same time, and trying to concentrate on studies when worried about family problems. One young woman experienced difficulty trying to balance coming to school and looking after a baby sister while their single mother works. Several of the interviewees had also taken part in a drama production written, directed and acted by the students of the alternate program. They expressed pride in their accomplishments not only as individuals but also as a unit, a school.

The two following tables represent the ratings of the situations included in the each of the school related situations category from the perspective of the co-researcher. The categories include school personnel, attendance and involvement. Table 6 presents the frequency of school related situations which co-researchers rated as contributing to early school leaving. Table 7 presents school related situations which they viewed as contributing to staying in or returning to school.

Table 6  
School Situations Contributing to Leaving School

<u>n</u>	School situations
11	skipping school or classes
11	poor academic achievement
4	teachers weren't helpful
3	teachers didn't care
3	teachers didn't understand students
3	didn't like high school class size or changes
3	didn't like teaching methods or subjects
3	school was a social gathering
2	administration disciplinary action
2	teachers were disrespectful
2	school was boring
1	repeated a grade
1	teachers were bad tempered

Table 7  
School Situations Contributing to Continuing Education

<u>n</u>	School situations
5	teacher understanding
5	teacher helpfulness
4	improved academic achievement
4	self-paced individual curriculum
2	good teachers
2	school personnel contacted parent
2	involved in extracurricular activity
1	recognized learning disability
1	younger teachers

### Drugs and Alcohol

Of the twelve co-researchers interviewed for this study, only three did not mention drugs or alcohol in some context. A forth interviewee commented that he could take it or leave it. For the other co-researchers drugs and alcohol were involved in some aspect of their lives prior to dropping out of school. Four reported drug and/or alcohol abuse by one or both parents. One young woman reported that not only her parents were alcoholics but also her grandfather. One co-researcher reported that her mother had died from drug abuse and another reported that her father was dying from alcohol abuse.

Drug and alcohol use by peers was reported by eight co-researchers, all of whom reported using drugs and/or alcohol with these peers. Two co-researchers described themselves as alcoholics. Siblings and adults other than parents who lived in the home were mentioned by three co-researchers as using drugs and alcohol in a dysfunctional way.

Two of the co-researchers, one male and the other female, appeared to use alcohol to a greater extent than they used other drugs. Both of these young people ran away from home - one from an alcoholic father and

the other from an abusive step-father. One of the young women reported that taking drugs made her "not into school at all, at all. It makes it really hard to concentrate and you really don't really want to do anything except have fun." She reported this with a new found awareness unlike the perception of drug use she sees currently among the peer group from which she has recently disengaged. "It has a lot (of control over your life). My friends don't think they're addicted because they're not on cocaine or anything, but they're still addicted. They can't stop. Like they can, but they don't want to." She had not completely outgrown the drug culture, however, because she added that she still uses drugs occasionally and that her boyfriend still uses frequently.

Two of the young men were currently using drugs and had not reported any change in their drug use pattern since dropping out. One of these individuals had stopped drug use before he entered Grade 8 and then during Grade 8 he began to use drugs again, and to hang out with individuals who were older than he was. He also began to sell drugs. After he had dropped out and worked for a period of time, he lost the job and took the money he had saved to invest in drugs to sell. He

reported no exceptional emotion around selling drugs. Another young man was caught smoking marijuana outside the school by the administrators and after the ensuing discussion, he withdrew from school.

Other co-researchers used drugs and alcohol as part of peer group acceptance. In order to belong to the group or to have leadership in the group, drug use was mandatory. One young co-researcher lived with an adult who was a drug abuser and who would allow her to bring her friends over to get "wasted". Another young man was raped while using drugs and alcohol at another man's home.

Although two of the co-researchers reported at the time of the interview that they were still doing some drugs, most of the other drug or alcohol users reported that they had stopped using entirely prior to returning to school. Two of these former users had undergone a detoxification program. Several reported that their alcohol or drug abusing parent or guardian had entered a program such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous prior to their return to the alternate school.



### Economic / Employment Situations

This category included statements about parents or guardians financial situation, jobs held by students or parents, and future job or economic expectations. The researcher did not ask any direct questions concerning either financial or employment situation.

Of the four co-researchers who lived with both natural parents, three mentioned situations which indicated comfortable financial status. One young man reported that they "had a place" at a well known ski resort where he and his father would go to ski for two weeks of the year. Two other co-researchers mentioned that their parents had taken holidays, one to Hawaii and the other a family vacation by car to Toronto which indicated some degree of financial security. The fourth co-researcher who lived with both natural parents reported that her father was an "alcoholic who was going to die soon" which suggests that the family income may have been somewhat unstable. The young man who was adopted reported that his parents had taken a trip to Mexico and were currently working and living in Saudi Arabia which suggests a comfortable financial situation.

Three co-researchers lived with their natural mother and either a step-father or mother's boyfriend. In all three of these situations, the natural mother was the principal if not sole financial source. Two young women lived in a single mother household. In both cases they had moved frequently to find employment. One of these women reported using the food banks to supplement the family income:

A lot of times me and my mom we had no food at all. Go to the food bank. Like the food in there didn't last very long cause there was me and my brother and my mom and there wasn't very much food in one bag. Mr. Noodles and bread. It doesn't get far.

The other young woman who lived with her single mother reported that she was the live-in baby-sitter for her baby sister while her mother worked graveyard shift.

Of the co-researchers who did not live with their natural parents, one was supplied with food, shelter and basic clothing by her guardians. The other lived with a woman who used the money sent to her to care for the co-researcher to buy heroin and other drugs. The co-researcher reported that she frequently went without food unless she ate at her boyfriend's home. Although

her care-giver entered a drug rehabilitation program before the co-researcher returned to school, the fact of going hungry continued to have deep meaning for her. At the time of the interview she related:

I felt so good yesterday. I opened up my fridge and thought, I could have an apple, a mango or a kiwi. I'd think about how many people would just love to walk into a fridge and go for a mango or a kiwi fruit and I just eat it with pride.

Of the two co-researchers who reported earning any income before dropping out one held a part-time job and the other sold drugs.

Five of the co-researchers reported getting jobs after they had dropped out. In each case they were fired, laid off or quit within a period of a few months. Of the seven young people who did not report getting jobs after dropping out, one continued to babysit for her mother so her mother could continue to work, two continued to live at home with no change in financial status and one was sent to live with the mother's friend and her husband who provided for her welfare. Two young people ran away to live on the streets in "squats" and cheap hotels or with friends. One young woman returned to her natural mother in Peru

and was provided for by her brothers who worked as casual laborers.

The poor financial situation was mentioned frequently as an impetus to returning to school. As one person put it, "I used to see friends who dropped out and I thought, well, it's no big deal. You can get a good job, you can survive. But it's not that easy." Most felt that with Grade 12 graduation they would be able to get a good job which meant financial security and happiness. As one young woman expressed it, "I'm here (in the alternate program) because I want a good job. After that I should be happy. I'd always have money there if I needed it."

For two young men, however, the lure of a good job was pulling them away from the alternate program. At the time of the validation telephone interview one of them was working nearly full time and was experiencing difficulty in going to school at all and the second was reported by his girlfriend to have left to "work for a while on a ranch in Calgary".

#### Legal / Disciplinary Situations

This category included any mention of interaction with the police, illegal activities and disciplinary actions taken by the school. There was no question

which asked directly whether or not the co-researcher had ever been in trouble with the school or the law or had taken part in any illegal activities.

Six of the co-researchers were personally involved in drug use or abuse. Six co-researchers lived in the same home with parents or guardians who were drug abusers, one of whom was a heroin addict. Five of the co-researchers reported drug use and abuse by their peers. With the exception of valium, none of the drugs they reported using were legally available for sale.

One of the co-researchers was involved in the sale of non-prescription drugs. He had also been suspended previous to dropping out and quit school before he could be expelled for smoking marijuana outside of the school. Another young man was implicated with those who let off a military smoke bomb and various acts of vandalism which the school administration was unable to verify. Both of these young men expressed anger and resentment at the school authorities; one for their attempts to make him admit to the vandalism or to name those who were responsible, the members of his group, and the other for trying to make him go to classes and conform to rules that were not his own choice. A third young man expressed his anger at the school and his

abusive step-father by "lighting fires, shoplifting, getting into trouble and trying to anger people". He also stole a teacher's purse because he didn't like her.

Only one female co-researcher reported any illegal activities other than using drugs. She was picked up for shoplifting when she was living on the streets and taken to live in a foster home.

#### Physical Activities

Most of the co-researchers did not report involvement in any physical activity such as sports, running or aerobic exercise. One young man reported enjoying weight lifting, swimming and skiing and mentioned that he had played rugby and baseball. Two young women reported enjoying exercise and riding bicycle. As one of them stated:

As I started riding my bike I started looking better and feeling better. Once I started feeling better, I don't know why, the bike riding was really healthy, made me feel really good about myself because I looked better and was eating better.

### Medical and Mental Problems

This category included mental and physical illness, disability and death reported by the co-researchers.

Two of the co-researchers reported that they were diabetic. One of these young men believed that his parents had given him up for adoption when he was 13 months old partly because he was diabetic. The second young man reported that he had been diagnosed diabetic six years earlier and only in the last year and a half had he been trying to get it under control. This time frame coincided with when he had reestablished positive relations with his parents and had attempted to return to school for the first time.

Two co-researchers reported the deaths of close family members. One reported the deaths of her grandfather and her grandmother within a year. She was particularly close to her grandfather and her sense of loss was intensified. As she stated:

When he first died I was just in shock. I didn't, you know, let it bother me. But then after a month or two, it was, you know, just really hard. I used to have, you know, dreams about him, nightmares and stuff like that. And he was a

really bad alcoholic. My mom was a really bad alcoholic too. I didn't really have no one to talk to cause it was her dad and her mom who died.

When she was in Grade 8 one young woman lost her mother to drugs. It took nearly a year, however, until she was in Grade 9 for it to "click in". She reported, "It started to bother me and going to school was a time to think about it and so I didn't want to go to school. And I never got to see my brother anymore."

One young man reported that his step-father had been a "real good guy" until he was in a car accident and lost part of his memory. This resulted in reduced family income, the mother returning to work graveyard shift, and loss of parental authority.

One young man reported attempting suicide. He reported it in the context of having lost his job, being out of money and ending a relationship.

Another male co-researcher expressed severe mental anguish. He reported:

There was a time when I thought I was crazy. I should be put in a mental asylum because I would at least be around some people of my own kind. I wouldn't have to be judged or have all these problems. I just wished something would happen to

.



me, like something drastic like I'd be put into the hospital or I'd get put away or something. For a while I was considering going to jail to get away from myself.

#### Time and First-stated Reason for Leaving School

Each co-researcher was asked when it was that he or she first thought about leaving school before graduating. Most answered with an approximate age or grade and immediately followed by a reason or situation which prompted the departure from school. This category includes these data.

Seven of the co-researchers, five females and two males reported thinking about or actually dropping out of school in Grade 9; three, one female and 2 males, in Grade 10; one female in Grade 8 and one male in grade 12. Six of the seven female co-researchers dropped out at or before the age of 15. Only one of the five male co-researchers had dropped out during that time frame. The median age of drop out for the girls was 15 while the median dropout age for the boys was 16.

Nine of the co-researchers first mentioned school-related reasons for dropping out of school. The reasons they stated were that they did not get along

with the teachers, they had poor grades, they generally didn't want to go to school or they hated school. One young man reported that the other kids "bugged" him too much. The other co-researchers mentioned personal reasons first. The reasons they reported were the death of a grandfather, the death of the mother and dropping out to take care of a girlfriend.

#### Reason for Return

There was no direct question which asked the time or reason for returning to the school system or for selecting the Amigos alternate program.

The students who were interviewed for this study had been out of the regular school system for varying periods of time. Two students had not spent any significant period of time out of the regular system but had chosen to enter the alternate school because of problems associated with the regular public school. One of these students was moving to avoid the perceived harassment by the administration of the public school; the other was moving to the alternate school rather than continue in her previous school with a group that had lead her into skipping and breaking house rules. Neither of these students had spent more than three months out of the school system, but had dropped out of

the regular system. Other co-researchers returned to school after 6 months to 5 years of absence.

During the interview four of the co-researchers stated that they were back at school for employment or financial reasons. They had found that moderately good jobs were not available to them and that they required their Grade 12 to get into the job market. Another group of four stated that they had chosen Amigos because their friends were there or had recommended that they try the program. For three of the interviewees, the structure of the program and the perceived helpfulness and understanding of the teachers was a major reason for returning and for remaining in the program. The resolution of personal problems prompted two young people to return. As one put it, "I got into 'me'. I became the most important thing."

#### Outstanding Person in Their School Career

Each of the co-researchers was asked if there was anyone who stood out in his or her school career and if that person was influential in his or her decision to stay in school. The following data are the direct response to that question and do not indicate information from other parts of the transcript.

Family members were reported as influential in the school careers of three co-researchers. Two young women mentioned that their mothers were important but for different reasons. One felt that her mother always wanted her to go to school and the other mentioned that her mother was "like a big sister" to her. Her friends liked her mother too and they would come over to her house to visit, making her mother part of her peer group. One young man felt that nobody had been really important to him but he mentioned that he went through the same things at the same time as had his brother. His brother "waited too long to make something of himself" and he did not want to be like his brother.

One young woman reported that her counsellor, social worker and foster mother had all been very important in bringing her back to school. In her words, "my social worker, he was like a father, he pushed me until I did what I was supposed to, and E. (my foster mother) became my second mother.

Three interviewees stated that school staff had been important to them during their school careers. One mentioned Grade 7 and Grade 8 teachers as being particularly important. Another young man mentioned his Grade 5 teacher, but added that all the other

teachers were less than adequate. For another young man, the administrators were the most influential in a negative way. He felt that he would still be in the regular program if it had not been for them. He also said that his friends were important but in a more positive way.

Two young women indicated that their boyfriends were the most influential in their school careers. One boyfriend used to pick up the co-researcher and bring her to school. The other's boyfriend provided a relationship which kept the co-researcher out of an undesirable peer group but also kept her from attending classes some days. Two young men felt that the only person who influenced their school career was themselves. They decided if they were going to school and which classes they would take or attend if they went.

#### Returning or Leaving Home

Although there was no question which asked whether a co-researcher had left home at any time during his or her school career, all but three of the people interviewed reported an experience in this category. In each case the initial leaving home took place at the time of or shortly after dropping out of school. Two

co-researchers ran away from abusive homes. In one case the individual's father had beaten him more severely than usual and in the other her mother's drug-addicted roommate had threatened to lock her in her room. Two young women left home to find freedom from parental rules. This involved hanging out with their friends and doing drugs. One of these young women went to live on the streets, was picked up, taken home and ran away again. She was picked up for shoplifting and this time taken to a foster home. She returned to her own home six months later. The other young woman who wanted freedom from rules used all her money for drugs and returned home after three months.

One young man reported being adopted and "bounced around" when his parents moved. He had dropped out of school to take care of his fiancée and when the relationship went under he attempted suicide. After "straightening out a few things" he left home, found and lost a job, and was thrown out of his basement suite. He lived on the streets for a week and then moved home. His parents then moved to Saudi Arabia but he declined to go with them and he moved to a tent in a park where he was living at the time of the interview.

In three instances, the co-researchers left home at the instigation of their parents. In one case the mother could not handle her daughter and so she sent her to live with a friend who 'grounded her and took away her telephone' so she would be separated from a peer group which was involved in drugs and skipping school. At six years of age one of the co-researchers was sent by her mother from their home in South America to live in Canada with an uncle because the single mother did not have enough money to support all of the children in her family. When she was 14 this co-researcher was having difficulties within the uncle's family and so she left, and dropped out of school to return to her mother in South America. After three years she returned to Canada and her uncle's home to try to finish her Grade 12. One co-researcher reported that his mother had said 'no school no board and room' so when he quit he had to find a place to live. He returned home when he was able to negotiate some changes in the house rules and when he was able to talk to his mother without a fight.

One young man left home to try to "make it on my own". He moved in with four other young men but moved back home after five months because he found that there

wasn't any money left over to do anything after the bills were paid.

#### Situations Involving Adults Other Than Family

Adults other than nuclear family members were mentioned in key situations by eight of the co-researchers. For several of them these adults provided essentially negative experiences. One young man was raped by an older man. One young woman reported that the person entrusted with her care was a "massive heroin addict" who allowed her friends to come over to use drugs in the house. Another young woman reported that her mother's roommate was a heavy drug user who threatened her and treated her like a servant. A young man reported losing a job because the employer didn't like him.

For other co-researchers the adults in their lives played a more supportive role. Three of them mentioned seeing counsellors who were helpful, three reported foster parents who were supportive and one mentioned that her social worker made her do what had to be done in order to turn her life around. One young woman also mentioned that certain rock musicians and certain music were very inspirational in that they provided role



models of people who had cleaned up their lives from drugs and the music gave her hope.

#### Abusive Situations

Three co-researchers reported being abused. One young woman reported that her alcoholic father had hit her and her brother. That had been an issue when she left home and dropped out of school. At the time of the interview she reported that "if he starts hitting, we hit him back, now that we've grown bigger". Being able to stand up to the abuser both physically and emotionally was instrumental in her returning home and returning to school.

Another young woman was beaten by her alcoholic boyfriend. She reported, "If I didn't want to be with him he'd get, like violent. He'd start getting mad and start hitting me. So a lot of it was just fear that he'd hit me if I left." She also reported that he would follow her everywhere in his car, so in order to get away from him she took up bicycle riding which resulted in her feeling better physically and mentally. During the time she spent alone she became aware of her own likes and dislikes and began to act upon them. One of the consequences of her growing awareness was returning to school via the Amigos program.

One young man reported a history of abuse from the time he was very young. His natural father was put into prison for sexual molestation of his two older sisters and abuse of his mother. His first stepfather beat him, forced him to kill rabbits with a hammer and to watch while he shot the co-researcher's dog. The young man was also abused by other students in the school who threw him in the showers, in the mud, or threw eggs in his face. In order to escape the pain he ran away from home and subsequently dropped out of school. Although he ended these sources of abuse, he took up drugs and alcohol and only ended an abusive relationship with them when he was raped by a man while doing drugs at this man's house. He returned to his parents for help and they enrolled him in a detoxification program. The counselling he received helped him to understand his victimization and gave him the impetus to return to school.

#### Self Concept

This category includes comments made by the co-researchers about themselves. Many times they described characteristics of themselves which they felt were constant or that had always been part of their personalities. Two young people represented themselves

as lazy. Both of them expressed the laziness in terms of not wanting to do the homework from the early elementary school years to the present time. Three young people reported strong feelings of loneliness from very early age until the present time. Many of the co-researchers expressed low self-esteem prior to and during the dropout period. Only three co-researchers made direct references to specific areas of inferiority which had persisted until the time of the interview. One reported that she could not do two things at once. Another reported that she was easily swayed and the third that she had difficulty with school work. Two young men reported a strong sense of independence. Both of them remarked that they should be able to take whatever classes they wanted and attend when they wanted because it was their education, not the teachers'. They both attributed their success to their own efforts and their failures, such as dropping out of school to the fault of the teachers or the administration.

With the exception of one young man, each of the co-researchers had become aware that he or she had undergone significant change since the first thought of dropping out of school. The changes included becoming

aware of their individuality separate from the group, improved self esteem, particularly in their perception of being capable of handling academic school work, and increased sense of responsibility not just for themselves but for the others around them. The meaning of these changes will be discussed in the following section.

#### Alternate Programs

Four interviewees reported attending other alternate education programs before entering the Amigos program in which they were currently enrolled. Each of these alternate programs was set up to meet the needs of certain populations of students. Of the programs mentioned by the co-researchers, two were designed as re-entry programs for students who had left the regular school system for a short period of time. These programs offered some junior high school subjects and the students were allowed to work at their own pace. They also taught writing, reading and study skills and other basic skills on an individual or small group basis to students who demonstrated need. They offered a Grade 10 equivalency certificate at the completion of their course of studies and the students could at that time re-enter the regular senior secondary program or

seek employment with the assistance of the school staff. The co-researchers reported that they had enjoyed these programs but that they had not learned a great deal there. As one young woman described it:

I left school for two months and I went to the alternate school. That was just a game. It didn't help me at all. Down there they let you screw around and do whatever you want. And it's so easy that when you come up here to do your Grade 10 you're lost. But it was good. I learned some stuff from down there but education-wise, it's the pits. You're better off going back to the regular school system.

Interestingly, she and several other interviewees made clear distinctions between what they viewed as "alternate schools" and the program in which they were currently enrolled.

One young man reported that he had attempted an adult learning program which was designed to assist adults who had been out of school for two or more years to complete their secondary school education. This program offered Grade 12 equivalency at the completion of the course of studies. The co-researcher reported that he had gone for about one month but had not been

able to discipline himself enough to show up. He said, "It was very slack. It was "work at your own speed" but it was like the teachers didn't really care if you were there or not."

The Amigos program received very strong approval from each one of the co-researchers. Three of them reported that they liked being there because of the people in the program who were accepting and "like a family". Three co-researchers mentioned that the teachers were particularly helpful and understanding. They spent as much time with the individual when and as needed in any subject. The young people were effusive in their commendations of these educators. The co-researchers also liked the program design which allowed them to attend when they wanted, to work at their own pace and offered the realistic hope of Grade 12 academic graduation. As one young woman reported:

I wouldn't be in school if it wasn't for Amigos. I don't know what I would be doing. I wouldn't be able to handle regular school. They give you so much and when you give so much you get rewarded for it. I like that because it makes you feel good inside. We've all kind of gone through that same stuff and we all kind of understand where

everybody is, so we all support each other. We're like one big family. In Amigos you can spend the whole day working on one subject if you want. If you don't understand something the teacher comes and he sits there and he sits there with you until you actually understand it.

#### Future Dropout Possibilities

One of the interview questions asked if the co-researcher was thinking about leaving school now and what it would take to make him or her leave. Every one of the co-researchers said very emphatically that he or she would not leave the program before graduation. For three co-researchers, the catalyst for leaving would be the same as that which triggered their departure from the regular program. One would leave because of peer pressure, another if the administrators from his previous program took over the Amigos program, and a third, if there were another death among the members of her nuclear family. Two other co-researchers reported that they would only leave the program if they were kicked out and a fifth co-researcher reported that it would take a lot of horses dragging him away to make him leave.

Four co-researchers had reported that the reason they had decided to return to school was for financial benefits which would accrue from employment possibilities with a Grade 12 education. Only two of these four students, however, would leave the Amigos program for financial reasons. One said that he would leave if he had enough money to travel and the other if she won the lotto so that she didn't have to work. One young woman said she would leave the program if her mother became seriously ill and she had to care for her. One young man reported that he would probably leave if he started drinking again. One young woman refused to even entertain the possibility that she might leave the program. When asked what would make her leave she replied, "Nothing. I'm out for Number One.".

#### Perception of Future

One of the interview questions asked the co-researchers how they saw their future unfolding. This category is comprised of their answers to this question.

Prior to dropping out of school, most of the co-researchers believed that they could get a good job, leave home, and be free to do what they wanted to do.



Before they returned to school, most of them had modified their perception of the future to include Grade 12 graduation as the key to their future happiness. Every student interviewed was firmly committed to graduating and each one expressed some long-range career dreams. Only one co-researcher had looked into realizing the career aspirations by checking out the training he would need to pursue the career and the college entrance requirements he would have to meet as part of his graduation program. For the other co-researchers, some had aspirations for professional careers such as becoming a veterinarian, teacher, nurse, social worker, or lawyer while others had dreams of becoming an actor, writer, paramedic, dental hygienist or legal secretary. All of the female co-researchers reported career aspirations in traditionally female careers. Two expressed vague desires to go to college. Several young women expressed their vision of the future in terms of the relationships that they would have such as getting married and having children or raising foster children. Several co-researchers mentioned wanting to travel. One reported wanting to take time to find herself after

she graduated. The one young man who had fairly clear plans for achieving his future career stated:

Actually the one thing is, the thing that is keeping me in school now is the thought of getting on with my life and giving my life meaning. Pull things together and make something of myself and make myself feel good in the long run.

## V DISCUSSION

Several issues arose from the data in this study. The data confirmed and added to results of previous studies indicating the importance of the family, peers, and the school in early school leaving. Of particular importance, however, was how the adolescent developmental changes shaped the co-researcher's perception of the school, family and peers and how this may have contributed to early school leaving. The following discussion will examine the data as they relate to family, peer and school influences on early school leaving from a developmental perspective.

### Developmental Perspectives

Early school leaving can best be understood as a dynamic, rather than a series of isolated events or situations impacting upon an individual. One of the most facilitative milieux for understanding this process is through examining the developmental processes from the point of view of the early school leaver. The data were examined from the perspective of two theoretical models, Erickson's (1963) psychosocial

developmental theory and Kegan's (1982) constructive-developmental theory.

Psychosocial development theory such as that of Erickson (1963) posits that development progresses in a genetically determined sequence toward broader social interactions. Development is orderly, progressing through eight stages, each of which presents the individual with a crisis which involves conflict between new abilities or attitudes and the inclinations that oppose them. Resolution of conflict results in the development of a sense of competence concerning a primarily social capability. The conflict or crisis at any stage may be resolved positively in which case the crisis of the next stage is likely to be resolved in the same positive manner. If the crisis is resolved negatively, then the next stage crisis is more likely to be resolved in an unsuccessful manner.

According to Erickson, the adolescent developmental crisis is that of developing an ego identity. If the crisis is resolved unsuccessfully identity diffusion may result. Adolescents are torn between quickly accepting a clearly defined sense of self and experimenting with a wide variety of roles. Unsuccessful resolution of this crisis may be

exemplified in the inability to make a firm choice of occupational identity. This often results because of insecurity about skills, sexual identity or personal value, the consequence of unsuccessful resolution of earlier developmental crises.

### Identity Issues

At the time of the interview for this study the co-researchers were between 15 and 20 years of age. Only one of these young people had any clearly planned career path. The others had vague dreams or aspirations but had not formulated any plans for achieving them beyond passing Grade 12. As one co-researcher said, "I'm not really setting any goals in case it doesn't work out and I would feel disappointed about it." Three of the co-researchers expressed actively seeking or planning to search for their own identity or sense of self but this search was also not clearly planned. Typical of the general vagueness of their search is one young woman who reported, " I am going to take a few years off to find myself. I can save money to go to college if I decide to go. I'd like to be a foster parent. I don't want to get married because you see so many whose lives go straight down after that and I don't want to be like that."

The median age of the co-researchers at the time of interview was 17.5 years. Only four of these young people indicated during the interview that they were even at the very onset of resolving their adolescent identity crisis. The remaining co-researchers did not indicate in any way that they had yet become engaged in this adolescent task with the possible exception of experimenting with negative identities which Erickson suggests is a retention of negative aspects of earlier crises.

The co-researchers' statements indicated that the resolution of prior developmental tasks was frequently unfavorable. This became particularly evident when they spoke about what was going on for them when they first thought about dropping out. Two co-researchers reported that they were lazy and another that she wasn't smart enough. According to Erickson's (1968) theory these statements suggest that the co-researchers had resolved unfavorably the late childhood crisis of industry versus inferiority and that their subsequent search for identity during their adolescent years would be unfavorably resolved at least to some degree as well.

It would appear then that these young people are somewhat delayed in their psychosocial development and according to Erickson, their chances of favorably resolving their identity crisis are significantly reduced because they have not resolved favorably the crises of earlier developmental stages.

#### Social Isolation Issues

At first glance it would not be evident that these young people were experiencing psychosocial developmental delays or difficulties. According to Egan and Cowan (Egan, 1979), who elaborated upon Erickson's adolescent crises model, the task of early adolescence, from the age of 13 to 17, is to resolve the crisis of belonging or social isolation. At the time when the young women were first thinking of dropping out one of the most important elements in their lives was their peer group, which Egan and Cowan suggest is one of the key systems for resolving this adolescent crisis. At the same time, all of the young men reported being actively involved in a peer group as well. As outlined in the results section of this study the young men and the young women differed in the way they participated in their peer groups. Simply stated, the young women looked for relationships within the

groups and the young men looked for affiliation or a sense of belonging from their peer group. More, however, may be learned about the experience of early school leaving by examining the meaning that the individual attaches to the group affiliation which is paramount at that time of their lives.

### Constructive-Developmental Perspectives

In order to understand the meaning an individual attaches to any event, it would be helpful to understand this person as in the process of development rather than "being" at a particular developmental stage. The constructive-developmental theory of Kegan (1982) provides such a framework. According to Kegan the self is in constant evolution moving through a series of stages or balances defined by the meaning-making that the individual is engaged in at that time. This meaning-making is self-construction through a process of subject-object differentiation and reintegration. The self evolves or develops from being all 'subject' by throwing off parts which then become 'object' to be reintegrated in the new meaning-making system of the individual. For example, a very young



infant has limited understanding of the 'objective' world outside of itself. According to Piaget (1969) the process of the first eighteen months of life is that of developing object relations. The infant's moving and sensing, the basic structure of its personal organization, get "thrown from" or become the object of attention of a newly evolved structure. Kegan (1982, whose theory incorporates and builds upon that of Piaget states:

This is the new subjectivity. For the very first time, this creates a world separate from me, the first qualitative transformation in the history of guaranteeing the world its distinct integrity, of having it to relate to, rather than to be embedded in (p. 66).

The self is embedded in an environment which functions to hold and affirm it and at the same time to challenge the self to let go of certain deeply embedded self concepts which then become object rather than subject and are re-integrated into the meaning-makings system in a new way. From this perspective, to understand the individual's developmental process is to understand his or her meaning-making system - to see the world through the co-researcher's eyes.

### Developmental Stage at Early School Leaving

In light of the prominence of the peer group in the co-researchers narratives in the time period prior to dropping out of school, it would be particularly important to understand how the individual makes meaning out of his or her relationship with peers and peer groups at that time. The young women in this study appeared to enter into a peer group for the personal relationships and the young men for general affiliation which promoted their autonomy from the authority of their parents and the school. What is important from the perspective of early school leaving is the meaning that the individual makes of the relationships and of the autonomy.

In the time period leading up to dropping out of school, the young women appeared to be completely embedded in their peer group relationships. They defined themselves by these relationships and appeared inseparable from them without a loss of self. That is not to say that these young women could not differentiate between themselves and the other members of their peer group, but rather that in Kegan's terms, those 'objects', the peer group, are subject to the individual's perception of them. The individual cannot

separate herself from her perceptions. Kegan (1982) refers to this as being subject to "needs, interests and wishes" (p. 88). Kegan characterizes these "needs" as an enduring disposition rather than content; what one is rather than qualities that one has. One young woman reported:

When I got to high school it was a little better because I had friends that cared about me. They helped me a lot because they understood me and helped me with anything I had. If I had a problem they would talk to me and they knew how I lived and they understood me.

At the time she first began thinking about dropping out of school, this co-researcher was embedded in her needs for security, understanding and sense of personal value. She constituted her friends or her peer group as those who functioned to help her meet her needs. That was the meaning she attached to her peer group. Similarly, the young woman who ran away from an abusive home reported that on the streets she met "a group of people that would take care of me." This group was constituted to meet her need for security. Other young women constituted the peer group to meet their needs for a sense of value.

During the process of dropping out of school the young men were making meaning of the group affiliation in a similar way. They too "were" their needs which in their case was autonomy and independence. Through affiliation with a group of heavy drug and alcohol users one young man was enabled to leave his abusive home. Another young man used a similar group of older peers to feel grown up and independent of his family.

Two of the male co-researchers used group affiliation to meet their needs for independence or autonomy from the authority of the school system. One of these young men was caught smoking marijuana outside the school by the administrators and after the ensuing discussion, he withdrew from school. As he reported the incident during the interview, his tone and choice of words indicated that he felt perfectly justified in using drugs when and where he wanted. In his words, "(the vice-principals) came out and they were pretty rough and throwing a lot of insults and stuff and so I threw my own and they spazzed out and so I said, all right, I'll leave." His justification for leaving did not lie in the morality of using drugs but rather in the concept of his own individuality or autonomy. He was in a conflict or contest with the administration, a

test of strength which was very important for him to win. His identity formation involved separation from "that which I am not". Smoking marijuana outside the school where he was almost certain to be caught, proved to him he was "not" subject to the rules and regulations established by institutions such as the school or the justice system and provided a convenient justification for leaving the school system under his own volition rather than for the failing grades he was achieving. He really felt that he did not belong in high school because the rules he was subject to, such as answering only when asked to and obeying other class behavioral rules reflected the teacher's desire to "look down on him". As he reported:

On the first day of classes the teachers treat you like you are about nine years old. "This is my classroom. This is your desk. Do not speak unless spoken to. Do not write when I say do not write." And I look at it if I know the answer to a question, I don't need to listen to you. I will write the answer when I think it is appropriate.

Smoking marijuana outside the school was his way of getting away from a situation which inhibited his concept of autonomy and power.

The second of these young men chose to leave school rather than submit to the school authority and reveal knowledge about incidents he and his group were associated with. His loyalty to the group provided him with the autonomy he needed to resist the power of the school administration.

Neither the young men nor the young women reported any feelings of guilt concerning their actions at the time of dropping out. According to Kegan (1982), that is a limit or boundary for those who are at what he describes as the "Imperial balance". While the individual may be concerned about the consequences of certain actions, such as being caught for drug use, and may understand that others may feel angry or hurt because of his or her act of shoplifting, the individual does not make how someone else may feel any part of his or her own feeling or meaning-making. For example, one young man stated that he had gone back to selling drugs after a job loss shortly after dropping out. He reported no exceptional emotion around selling drugs. In his words, "It doesn't make you feel any particular way. It's just money in your pocket. You had to eat, right." He reported no guilt at the time of the drug sales and no sense of guilt at the time of

the interview. How others might feel about the sale of drugs had no part in his feeling or meaning-making around the situation. Similarly, the young man who was involved with a group that set off a military smoke bomb in the school felt no sense of guilt around the endangerment of other students or interfering with their right to uninterrupted learning in a safe environment. At the time of the interview this young man reported that he felt he had been pushed out of school. He went on to say, "But they (the administrators) also wanted me to stay in there so they could like blame stuff on me." His meaning-making could not take into consideration the feelings or the needs of the administrators to attend to the safety of all of the students in the school. At the time of school leaving and at the time of the interview both of these co-researchers were clearly embedded in their own needs at what Kegan calls the Imperial Balance and had not moved significantly toward the Interpersonal stage, the next evolutionary balance.

#### Developmental Stage at Return to School

Other than the two previously mentioned young people, the co-researchers gave indications that their developmental stage as evidenced in their meaning-

making had changed since the time of dropping out. For some, the feelings of others had become a part of their meaning-making. One young man reported that since he had returned to school, "everybody is pleased. I'm pleased with myself too." A female co-researcher stated:

I've sort of got my own mind. It's better now because I'm me. I'm my own self and nobody else tells me how to be. Except my dad. I do what I want, right. And it's not going to affect anybody except me. In a way I guess it does affect my dad because he wants me to be very independent on my own without any guy's help."

Her statement reflects the first tentative steps toward integrating another's needs perspective with her own which reflects not only a new level of social perspective but also a reorganization of her internal meaning-making. Another young woman reported that since her mother had a baby she is more responsible for herself, her home, her friends and her family. She felt "grown up" because her meaning-making was able to integrate the feelings of her mother. Both of these young women indicated that they had integrated another's feelings into their meaning-making.



According to Kegan's constructive developmental model, this indicates that they were making the first tenuous movement toward achieving an "Interpersonal balance", the third stage of meaning-making.

There are indications from some co-researchers that this change in meaning-making was a key factor in their decision to return to school. For one young woman her decision to return to school was made when her meaning-making took in the feelings of her family and the poverty they lived with in another country. She said, "I got to thinking differently when I went and saw how much they suffer there." Other co-researchers attempted to return resume their education in other alternate programs before this level of meaning-making was reached. One young man reported:

At first I did expect myself to give it a good try, but after I got into it (the adult education program) it just kinda, that whole thing just went out of my mind. It was just like, well, I'll come (to school). I might as well do something. No. Let's go out and have a smoke. And then I'd go out and do something else too.

This young man was still completely embedded in his own needs.

### Development and the Family

According to Kegan, the culture of embeddedness at the Imperial balance, the meaning-making which the co-researchers appeared to be functioning with at the time of early school leaving, is supported by the family, the school as well as the peer group. One of the functions that each of these units serves is to provide a medium or culture for role-taking. Nowhere is this more evident than in the relationship the individual is evolving with his or her family. The Imperial self comes into being usually around the time the child first starts school, at about five years of age. At this time the individual becomes differentiated from his or her family and takes on the role of "child" relative to "parents" in lieu of the undifferentiated adhesion to the adults with whom the infant lived.

The father is very important in this new role differentiation in that he provides a modifying influence to the mother who traditionally has been the primary care-giver up until this time. Only four of the co-researchers in this study appeared to have the influence of a steady family and in particular a male figure to balance the mother's influence as the child

role emerged. Four of the co-researchers had negative male influences during this period of time. For two of them, the male parent was alcoholic. Another had an abusive stepfather and the fourth young person's father was brain damaged in an accident when the young man was nine years old. The remaining four of these young people had no regular male influence during this time of emerging independence and role differentiation.

It might be suggested that for the eight young people with negative or no regular male influence that the family culture was less confirming of the individual's emergence from the highly integrated state of early childhood and that the highly differentiated state which Kegan calls the Imperial balance would therefore be delayed.

#### Development and the School

The school system is designed to support the child at the Imperial stage. It recognizes roles and respects ritual and order. It provides positive feedback for the developing independent child. The school, however, does not provide for a child who has not yet reached this stage of evolutionary balance.

Kegan (1982) stated, "If the child is not ready to begin the exercises of the Imperial balance, not ready to play a role and take a role, then the school is left holding the child-to-come rather than the child-who-is, a situation costly for both and in need of intervention" (p. 166). Similarly, if a teenage girl is physically well developed and has reached an age where social freedoms are accepted but she is not able to function at the Interpersonal meaning-making stage expected of her, she will experience frustration and anger at the unfair demands put upon her and the school and the family will also experience frustration and anger when she does not meet their expectations.

Examination of the experience of developmental delay longitudinally through the perspective of one of the co-researchers could shed some light early school leaving. One young woman reported screaming matches with her elementary school teachers because they did not help her exactly when she needed or wanted help. She had not evolved a sense of role, of taking turns for mutual benefit. The others in her life expected her to behave in an age-appropriate way and she did not. It could be inferred that she was developmentally delayed at that time and had continued to function at a

meaning-making level two to three years junior to her classmates.

This young woman appeared vaguely aware that her unsatisfactory relationship with the school system and to some extent her peers had persisted for a long time. She reported that the school "just kept on passing me through when I shouldn't have passed the grades. They just wanted me out of the school basically." This same young woman ran away from home and dropped out of school to live on the streets. The reason she gave for this action was that on the streets "I had complete freedom. I didn't have to be in on time. I didn't have to do what anybody said. I could just be my own person." It would appear that she had experienced anger and resentment over the expectations of others that she take their feelings into account, that she be able to keep agreements, that she behave in a way which respected them. Because of her age and physical development, the others in her life expected her to behave at an Interpersonal level and she did not meet their expectations. Even when she lived on the streets the group she lived with told her to go home because, in her words, "I just didn't fit in." It could be argued that her developmental delay resulted in

alienation from her family, from the school and from  
agemates. Leaving school before graduation would  
comprehensible under those circumstances.

Given the developmental delay evidenced by the  
young people in this study, their negative reports  
concerning the school system take on a new perspective.  
Most of the co-researchers reported that at the time  
when they were first thinking about dropping out of  
school teachers didn't understand them. It could be  
suggested that the teachers had expectations of a level  
or stage of meaning-making that these young people had  
not attained.

The secondary school is not designed to support  
developmentally delayed young people except in the most  
rudimentary way by providing learning assistance. The  
"role" of student attained in elementary school, that  
of relating to a single classroom authority, no longer  
functions in the secondary school where students move  
from class to class and teacher to teacher. For some  
of these young people it appeared that their hard-won  
sense of autonomy was threatened by the bewildering  
array of teachers and classroom rules and they reacted  
by skipping classes.

The secondary school curriculum scope and sequence in most subject areas is consciously designed to reach students at a particular cognitive level and also unconsciously reflects the expectations that the students will function at an Interpersonal meaning-making level. For example, secondary school students would be expected to "interpret" literature. This would involve, at least in part, being able to make meaning of characters involved in interpersonal struggle and through their interaction, come to an understanding of what the author believes is true in the world. A young person who is still completely embedded in his or her own needs could not respond to this challenge and would be frustrated and angry at the teacher who didn't accept an answer which made sense from the student's meaning-making level. If the individual does not respond to the culturing process of the school, if he or she remains firmly imbedded in his or her own needs, then conflict and unhappiness must necessarily follow.

#### Development and Transition.

Several of the young people interviewed for this study referred to the difficulties they experienced when they transferred from the elementary school to the

secondary school. This change is from a primary type context, that of intimate, intense and diffuse relationships to a secondary context, involving impersonal, superficial, discrete and specific relationships. According to Simmons (1987) some students may experience a high degree of discontinuity between their old and new school settings particularly if the secondary school is large as was the case for most of the co-researchers in this study. If the student experiences failure in this new setting, or does less well than age-mates on the tasks highly valued by the key adults, the student may be alienated from school and turn more to peer groups which support them but are denigrating of school standards. This study supports Simmons hypothesis.



## VI SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has described and discussed how young adults who have resumed their education in an alternate program experienced dropping out of and returning to school. With the exception of two co-researchers who left the regular school system abruptly for very specific reasons, the individuals in this study drifted rather than dropped out of school. For the young people involved in this study, early school leaving had its roots deeply embedded in a history of limited school involvement and success, ineffectual parenting, drug and alcohol abuse and economic hardship. The co-researchers did not leave the regular school program for a single reason or simply because they were doing poorly in school. At least two or more non-school related negative situations were present for the co-researchers at the time they were first thinking about leaving school before graduating.

At the time of dropping out the co-researchers in this study did not view going to school as being particularly important either for the present or for their future lives. School was at best irrelevant and at worst hostile. As one young man said, "Why am I

here, and who cares." With little to hold them in school, these young people began absenting themselves from classes and finally from the entire school program.

Among this group of students only one had been previously repeated a grade, Grade 9. This does not support Kaplan & Luck's (1977) findings that up to half of the dropouts had been held back at least once. This may be due at least in part to the increase since 1977 in educational alternatives to repeating a school year. Although this study did not support Roderick's (1991) conclusion that the risk for dropping out of students who were retained at grade was attributable to their being overage for their grade, it did find that 25% of the co-researchers were reluctant to return to the regular school program and chose to continue their education in the alternate program in part because of being overage for their grade level.

This study showed that the individuals who left school early exhibited developmental delay according to several theoretical frameworks. At the time of dropping out of the regular program these individuals showed difficulty in forming a clear identity which according to Erickson (1963) is the critical task of

adolescence. Instead they showed role diffusion in the form of being unable to choose and plan a career. According to Kegan (1982) adolescents must be able to function at the Interpersonal meaning-making level to succeed in secondary school tasks. The young people in this study demonstrated that they were still completely embedded in their own needs at the time of dropping out and therefore experienced anger and frustration at being unable to meet the expectations of their family and the school.

This study also showed that the developmental delay was present for many of these young people in early elementary school. According to Kegan, the role of a father or other male figure is important in early developmental stages to balance the over-integration of the mother-child relationship. In light of the absence of a father or the presence of a negative male influence in 83% of those interviewed for this study, it is suggested that the developmental delay exhibited by the co-researchers might be explained in part by the lack of a positive male influence in the family structure.

The end of the dropout period and the beginning of the return to school process was signaled by a movement

toward a new developmental balance exemplified by a renewed relationship with parents, individual friendships and disengagement from a previously all-important peer group.

#### Implications For The Secondary School System

Many students will enter Grade 8 developmentally delayed. Not much can be done to prevent the delay or to accelerate the rate of development. The school, however, has the opportunity to provide structures which will enable the delay to be experienced in a less destructive way. Transitions studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Simmons, 1987) suggest that movement to a large secondary situation from a small elementary setting may be very difficult for some students. This study corroborated those findings and suggests that the transition difficulty may be exacerbated by developmental delay. Hawkins & Berndt's (1985) research suggested that the individual school could acknowledge and alleviate some of the transition difficulties by creating smaller, stable, intimate subgroup environments within the school. This would also mitigate the developmental delay by acknowledging

the need of the young people at this stage for clearly defined roles and for the young boys opportunities to be autonomous and for the young girls, opportunities to interact in a social environment.

### Implications For Counselling

Counsellors in the secondary school setting have a unique opportunity to observe the potential early school leaver and to design interventions to mitigate against this possibility. If students seek counselling because of relationship problems with teachers and poor achievement, the counsellor should check to see whether this student is experiencing these difficulties because of expectations on the part of the teacher that he or she simply could not meet because of developmental delay. If this is the case then the counsellor is in the position to discuss with the teacher the possibility of modifying the program or the expectations for the student so that the situation might be alleviated.

In a counselling setting outside of the school system, the counsellor might assess the relationship of the client to peers, peer groups and the family in

order to plan an intervention which would be most effective for the individual. If the individual is not at an Interpersonal developmental stage, then using a therapy based on a strong client-therapist relationship may not be effective and other strategies might be better employed.

#### Implications For Employment

The young people in this study had not envisioned a career when they dropped out of school. They viewed employment as a means to make money to support themselves and had no clear idea of what it meant to go to work on a regular basis nor how much money would be needed to meet their needs and desires. Once they had experienced unemployment most of them decided to return to school because they envisioned Grade 12 graduation to be the key which would open up their financial future. These young people still had no clear idea of career and, given their developmental delay, probably would not arrive at any clear idea for some time. The school system, even the alternate program in which these young people were enrolled would function to support them in their quest for a career. If, however,

they should leave the school system again, the immediate needs for financial security and interpersonal relationships would work against establishing a career involving long term goals of training or education.

#### Limitations of the Study

The nature of this study limits the generalizability of the findings. The results of this study are based upon a sample of students who have dropped out from large secondary programs in urban or suburban settings in the lower mainland of British Columbia and returned to school via an academic alternate program. Some of the findings therefore may not be applicable to other regions or rural settings. The study did not involve students from ethnic subgroups such as First Nations, Asian or East Indian populations which make up a large proportion of many British Columbia school populations. Their diverse cultural backgrounds may involve the family, peer and school experiences particularly in a different way than was experienced by the sample interviewed. As well, developmental issues may vary within the different

ethnic populations and the exemplars of developmental delay may differ from the sample used in this study.

#### Implications for Future Research

Given the ethnic similarity of the co-researchers in this study, further research involving ethnic minorities is warranted. As well, longitudinal studies looking at the developmental progress of early school leavers would be particularly beneficial from the point of view of career involvement. Transitional studies which looked at the movement from the alternate school setting to other post secondary training or employment would be beneficial to see what has made these students successful in their career paths. Finally, further studies involving the developmental issues as they are met in junior high school settings and in the Grade 8 to 12 school settings would be warranted. It would be helpful to know whether the junior high school setting was more or less facilitative of developmental growth than the traditional Grade 8 to 12 school and if there were significant differences in the dropout rate or number between those enrolled in the two different settings.



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## Appendix A

Consent Form

I agree to participate in a research project about early school leaving. I also understand that participation in this study is voluntary, that I am free to withdraw at any time or to refuse to answer any question, and that my involvement in no way affects my relationship with the school. I am also aware that the interviewer will answer any questions that I may have at any time concerning this project.

I understand that this project will require me to talk with an interviewer for about one hour about my experience of considering dropping out of school. I also give my permission to have the interview recorded with the understanding that the contents of the interview will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. This interview is to be labeled with a randomly selected number and is to be erased upon completion of the project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone Number

(form continued on next page)

Consent Form  
(continued from previous page)

I have received a copy of this form and I consent / do  
not consent to my child's participation in this study.

---

Signature of Parent or Guardian

---

Connie Arcand, Researcher and Interviewer      Date  
Department of Counselling Psychology      822-5057

Thesis Title:    Experiential Dynamic of Early School  
                         Leaving and Returning to an Alternate Program

Thesis Committee:

Dr. N. Amundson, Department of Counselling Psychology,  
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Dr. W. Borgen,    Department of Counselling Psychology,  
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Dr. R. Chester,    Department of Language Education  
University of British Columbia

## Appendix B

### Pilot Study

The pilot interviewees were not selected from the potential pool of co-researchers but rather from individuals identified by teachers as students who were potential early school leavers. The teachers were not given any criteria by which to select students as possible early school leavers. They were asked only if they knew of any student who they were concerned might drop out of school. The pilot interviewees were selected from among the names of students who had been identified by two or more teachers. Following the first interview the pilot co-researcher was asked the following questions:

1. Were the questions I asked clear?
2. Were there any questions you expected me to ask that I didn't?
3. Did you feel that I understood your story?

In response to the first question, the co-researcher indicated that he had some difficulty figuring out what was wanted from the first interview question; it didn't seem to relate to what he wanted to say. He felt that I had neither left out any

questions nor had misunderstood his responses. He added, however, in a burst of honesty, that he had been nervous at the beginning of the interview and that the interviewer's non-directive responses, such as "uh huh", had made him feel unsure about whether to continue or not. The researcher interpreted this response as though the co-researcher had felt she had not really understood his story.

In response to the pilot co-researcher's comments changes were made to simplify the scope and wording of the interview questions. Specifically, the first interview question was revised to allow the co-researcher to become comfortable with the interview process and to provide context for the remaining interview questions. In addition, the researcher modified her responses to indicate more warmth and encouragement by using statements clarifying and summarizing both content and feelings expressed by the co-researcher.

The modified questions and researcher responses were re-piloted and the co-researcher asked the same post-interview questions as the first pilot interviewee. The second pilot interviewee indicated that she found the questions clear and comprehensive



and that the researcher had understood her story. She expressed bewilderment, however, as to why the researcher had selected her for the pilot interview as she had no intention of dropping out. This student was a black female from a single parent, low SES family. Her attendance record was among the worst in the school, her active parent had a long history of mental instability, two of her siblings had been in trouble with the law and had dropped out and she had run away from home twice to the researcher's knowledge. This response to the interview questions was unexpected as the researcher had anticipated that the student would perceive that she was "at risk" as her teachers clearly did, but this was not the case.

## Appendix C

Validity Summary for Co-researcher # 11

Researcher Could you tell me your story about what was going on for you when you first thought about leaving school?

C: April 8, 1988, on my 16th birthday I got into an argument with my step-father over coming home late from a church group. My stepfather beat on me with closed fists and told me to leave if I wanted to. I ran away from home at 3 a.m. and spend that night in a very cold and wet trailer. At that time I left school as well because I could no longer handle being harassed unmercifully by other students and because my step-father would be able to find me if I continued to attend.

Researcher: Could you draw a life-line from just before you thought of leaving school to right now?

C: In 1987 there were a lot of family problems. I was not allowed to go out so I did not have many friends. My step-father was very abusive; he made me kill animals and watch him kill my dog. I was picked on by other kids and really hated myself. Things got

progressively worse and I began to set fires, steal and make people angry with me. I ran away from home and found new ways of escaping from reality, drugs and alcohol, which made me temporarily feel better, particularly as I now had "friends".

I went to Vancouver for a time and lived with my sister. This was not a happy arrangement. I returned to my parents and tried to go back to school but felt I was too weird for school and couldn't handle it. In 1990, after being raped, I turned again to my parents for help. They put me in a detox centre and I began to get treatment and entered A.A. I am now living with my mother and my third step-father in what is a good home environment. I have attended Amigos for one year.

Researcher: Are you considering leaving school right now?

C: No, not until I graduate. I am currently working at the Grade 10 - 11 level and I have finished two courses since I started. I plan to graduate next year at this time.

Researcher: What would have to happen for you to leave school?

C: I would have to start drinking again or have a mental breakdown. I feel supported in this program

because I have friends in the program who like me and who I like.

Researcher: Was there any individual who stand out as being important in your schooling?

C: My Grade 5 teacher because he was strict and had charisma and was intelligent and witty. He inspired me to do some things.

Researcher: How do you see your future unfolding?

C: I hope to become an actor but I am not completely set on this as a career. I want to be happy in what I do. I am staying in "today", handling one day at a time.

Researcher: What do you think it is important that I understand about what went on for you when you were thinking of leaving school?

C: I feel strongly that it wasn't anyone else's fault. Kids should care about themselves and their future more so that they would not be victimized as I was. I found that I couldn't run away or hide from my problems with drugs and alcohol. I also think that the high school system would be better if the students all had assigned teachers as they did in elementary grades so that the student would have a more personal relationship with the teacher and be able to talk about his problems.

This statement was read in a telephone conversation to C. (co-researcher # 11), July 2, 1991. He found that the statement was accurate and complete.



## Appendix E

### Checked Category Rating Sheet

Co-researcher Number 48

<u>Statement Number</u>	<u>Age/Grade</u>	<u>Family</u>	<u>Peers</u>	<u>School Personnel</u>	<u>Attendance School Performance</u>	<u>Drugs/Alcohol Finances/Employment Perception of Future</u>	<u>Law Physical Activities</u>	<u>Medical/Mental Reason for Leaving Reason for Return Influential Person Leaving/Returning Home</u>	<u>Other Adults Abuse</u>
1	10				X	X	X		
2					X				
3		✓		X	X			X	
4		X	X	X	X				
5			X		X	X			
6					X	✓			X
7						X			✓
8				X	X				
9		X			✓				
10			X		X	X			
R 11					✓	✓			
12			X			X			X

**R**