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## **Running Water Cuts Deep: An Action Research Study of At-Risk Students in a Rural High School**

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Running Water Cuts Deep: An Action Research Study of At-Risk Students  
in a Rural High School

Thesis submitted to  
The College of Education and Human Services of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
Secondary Education

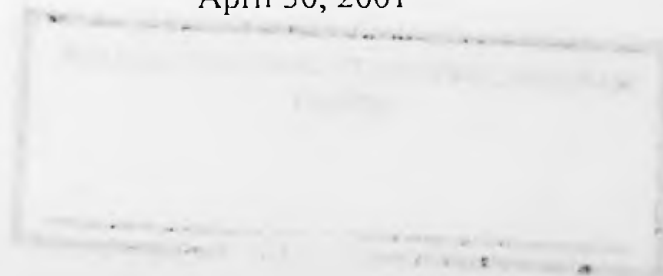
by

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This thesis was accepted on April 19, 2001 as meeting the  
research requirements for the master's degree.

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## Running Water Cuts Deep: An Action Research Study of At-Risk Students in a Rural High School

*"It's like water running—if it runs long enough, it cuts a deep hole."*

*-Elizabeth, a high school dropout*

I've heard it all my life: if you tell someone something long enough, they'll start to believe it. Elizabeth, a high school dropout, worded it quite eloquently in the above quote. Tristan, a student at-risk of dropping out, told me, "Whenever everyone sees you that way, you turn out that way." Such is the plight of at-risk students in the rural high school where I teach. Such is the motivation behind this study of at-risk high school students at Midwest High School<sup>1</sup>.

### Research Purpose and Definitions

As a high school teacher, I have formulated a standing comeback for the complaints of my students who whine, "That's not fair!" My retort is the very cliché, "Life's not fair." I tell my students they might as well get used to things that are unfair because they simply cannot go through the rest of their lives whining about it. If life is indeed unfair, students who choose to drop out of school are reducing the chance that they will experience their fair portion of "the good life." While it is true that the dropout rate in the United States has been steadily decreasing over the last several decades, the fact remains that a student who chooses to drop out of school has a rough road ahead. Why should these at-risk students make their lives any more difficult in such an unfair world? What follows is a description of action research conducted in an attempt to understand at-risk high school students. I am especially interested in the reasons they feel alienated

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the high school and the names of participants and others interviewed for this study have been changed.

from and sometimes drop out of high school, and what the school could do to lessen the likelihood of these students dropping out.

At-risk students are those students who could potentially drop out of high school, or who may not graduate within four years of entering ninth grade. In addition, "A dropout is generally defined as a person who has not graduated from and is not currently enrolled in a full-time, state-approved secondary education program" (Kaminski, 1993, p. 532). Researchers have found that students at-risk of dropping out are likely to be alienated and disconnected from school life (Lunenberg, 2000). They often have friends outside of school and are rarely involved in extracurricular activities (Ellenbogen & Chamberland, 1997; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). Often, at-risk students even feel pushed out of school by authoritarian figures (Tanner, 1990). In order to keep students in school, schools need to make the at-risk students feel a sense of integration with the school and strengthen student bonds with classmates and school staff members (Lunenberg, 2000; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988). Strategies employed to keep students in school, including alternative programs, intervention programs, and social work programs (Carley, 1994; Franklin & McNeil, 1990; Groves, 1998), have had varying degrees of success.

In light of these research findings, and because of the lack of dropout prevention programs at Midwest High School, I studied at-risk students at this location. My goals were to discover the reasons they consider dropping out and to try to decrease their sense of alienation from the school. In order to accomplish these goals, I selected a small sample of these students, met with them regularly, and included them in making long-term plans to implement a dropout prevention program at our school. By including them



in the planning process, I hoped to give them a stronger sense of identity with the school, thereby helping them reach graduation.

### School Profile

Midwest High School sits in a small town in Southern Ohio. The school system itself has an enrollment of approximately 1,800 students. Approximately 540 students attend the high school, although over 100 of the students are not in the building full time, as they either attend the county vocational school full time or are known as full time College Options students and attend the local branch of a state university. The school has a very low number of minority students. In 1999 only 1.3% of students in the entire Midwest District were categorized as minorities.

The area that Midwest High School serves is largely a middle class community. The average income in the school district in 1996 was \$30,832. The system is currently in the process of building a new high school with state funds and a tax levy funded by the area's taxpayers. Approximately 29.6% of the students in the high school receive free or reduced lunch (Statistics from the Midwest Board of Education).

Ohio schools are evaluated using a State Report Card. This report card "grades" schools based on a scale with a possible 27 points. The 27 points come from proficiency test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates. The state proficiency tests are given annually to fourth, sixth, ninth, and twelfth grade students. Five areas are tested: reading, writing, math, science, and citizenship. When a certain percentage of students pass each test, a point is given. For example, 75% of students taking the ninth grade science test must pass before the school can receive a point for that subject area and grade level. In order to get the attendance rate point, the school system must have an attendance

rate of 93%. Furthermore, in order to receive a point for the graduation rate, 90% of the enrolled freshmen must graduate within four years of entering high school.

According to the Ohio Department of Education's formula for graduation rate, presently Midwest has a graduation rate of 85.6%. Because this is below the state goal of 90%, the Midwest School District does not receive the point on the State Report Card. Midwest has *never* received the graduation rate point in the three years the report card has existed. The 1999 graduation rate was 84.7%, and in 1998, when the dropout rate was considered, Midwest had a 17.8% dropout rate, far from the state goal of 3% or less during that year.

In the year 2000 the Midwest School District participated in a grant known as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Communities Center Grant. This grant awards over \$170,000 to Midwest High School each year for the next three years to develop and run an after-school program. Because the district's goal is to raise its state report card score, a large portion of the program will be geared toward ideas that may help improve Midwest's State Report Card score.

#### Personal Reason for Research

My first heartbreak in the education field came during my student teaching when I watched a 15 year old eighth grader try to fit in. I worked with this student, tutoring him and offering him any wisdom that I could about his situation. Abused, lonely, alienated, and, as he felt, targeted by the school authorities, he had little hope for himself. I moved on to the next stage of my student teaching at a different school, and as soon as he turned 16, he dropped out. I struggled with the loss and took it personally. As I began teaching high school I saw it happen more often. I listened as educators with much more

experience told me that it just happens; that kids fall through the cracks; that some just don't fit in; that they'll probably be better off. I refused to accept it. I've even gone so far as to stand in front of office doors until a student sat down with me to talk things out. Although he left that day, he was back the next. And yes, I took that personally, too.

I still refuse to accept the idea that we'll lose some students to dropout statistics. However, even though I hate the numbers, they are there. Even in middle class, mostly white, high schools like Midwest High School, the numbers are still there. Therefore, my study is personal and on-going. The students in my study come from stressful family situations to a school environment that alienates them. However, I have found that it is within my power to empower these at-risk students by giving them a sense of connection with the school. Therefore, despite the fact that I stopped collecting data for this study, my research will continue far beyond this thesis, and hopefully, will have lasting impact on dropout prevention strategies in Midwest High School.

## Review of Literature

### Basic Issues

In 1989 six national educational goals were set by the President of the United States and the nation's governors. One of these six goals was aimed at increasing high school graduation rates to 90% by the year 2000 (Frymier, 1996). Each state determines its graduation rate by calculating the number of students enrolled in ninth grade who graduate in four years. According to the Ohio Department of Education (2000), the formula the state of Ohio used to factor the 1999 graduation rate divided the total number of graduates in 1999 by the sum of the number of grade nine dropouts in 1996, the number of grade ten dropouts in 1997, the number of grade 11 dropouts in 1998, the number of grade 12 dropouts in 1999, and the number of 1999 graduates. This is also the formula recommended by the National Center for Education Statistics and the Chief Council of State School Officers.

While the National Center for Education statistics reports that the number of high school dropouts has been decreasing nationally over the last few decades, the fact that schools had not met the goal of a graduation rate of 90% by the year 1997 is troubling (*World Almanac 2000*). Part of the problem may be with the way dropout rates are determined. Although the National Center for Education recommends the above formula for determining graduation rates, this is not a nationally adopted formula. According to Frymier (1996), "There is no standardized set of definitions and procedures currently used to determine the dropout rate in school districts across the country" (p. 5). Frymier also contends that there is overwhelming reluctance on the part of school systems across the country to deal with the dropout problem. He lists a variety of reasons for this reluctance,

including the idea that the dropout problem is so cumbersome that it is intimidating to deal with. Regarding the lack of incentives for school personnel to respond to the dropout problem, Frymier states:

There are no incentives for teachers or administrators who have to work with students at the building level to deal with the problem. If pleasure or pain, punishment or reward, recognition, remuneration, or released time are thought to be motivators, there is nothing at work along those lines to motivate professionals in schools. (p. 8)

Furthermore, Frymier asserts that the only reward people find from dealing with the dropout problem is the warm, fuzzy feeling of helping others. However, he continues, "increasing the graduation rate is a national goal" (p. 8) and because of this, schools and educators should be offered incentives to properly deal with the problem.

According to McNeal (1997), dropouts are usually low achievers, minorities, males, older students, students who have jobs outside of school, or students from low socioeconomic status and/or single-parent households. Of course, school characteristics also affect the likelihood that a student will drop out. Larger pupil/teacher (P/T) ratios may increase the possibility that a student will drop out. According to McNeal (1997), this is probably due to the fact that with larger P/T ratios students may find it more difficult to seek and find help from adults, thereby falling "through the cracks of the administrative appendages" (p. 214). Also McNeal found that schools with a higher percentage of minorities have higher dropout rates.

At-risk students often have a tendency to misbehave. Carley (1994) states, "Whereas dropouts are soon forgotten, hostile 'stay-ins' lurking on the fringe of the school

property are a nagging symbol of transactional failure within the system" (p. 223). These at-risk students are often kept from dropping out by parental pressure and possible legal ramifications. While the system is doing its job by keeping these students in school, the students often make the system wish it weren't so successful.

Alspaugh (1998) attempted to identify factors that can be controlled by schools in regard to reducing dropout rates. Alspaugh found that in small rural high schools with a grade span of 7-12, students were less likely to drop out. Because of the size of these schools, they have more limited course offerings so a higher percentage of their budget goes to extracurricular activities. Alspaugh asserts that, "Bigger may not necessarily be better" (p. 183). The grade spans at 7-12 high schools allow students to be more familiar with staff members, give them the ability to form long-term friendships, and prevent students from being in a fractured school environment with a larger number of course offerings that push students away from each other instead of unifying them. Furthermore, smaller enrollment means that students are able to participate in more sports and other activities that allow them to identify with their school.

### Why Kids Leave

Kaminski (1993) summarizes research concerning why students drop out of school. Kaminski reports that former studies indicated that urban students who dropped out see school as boring. Furthermore, the research shows that the dropouts had insufficient credits to graduate, high absenteeism, bad grades, work responsibilities, pregnancy, family problems, problems with the school environment, and disciplinary problems. Kaminski's study of rural dropouts yielded similar results. Rural males tend to drop out for work reasons and because of disciplinary problems. Over half the rural

females involved in the study dropped out because of pregnancy; Kaminski calls for more comprehensive day care programs for the children of these teen mothers.

Ellickson, Bui, Bell, and McGuigan (1998) found that early cigarette use serves as a warning signal of potential academic failure, even while controlling for some of the above mentioned factors. The reason for this may be that early smoking fosters friendships with children who place little value on education and also that early smoking may "affect cognitive functioning and academic performance by increasing the likelihood of psychoactive drug use" (Ellickson, et al., p. 366).

According to Ellenbogen and Chamberland (1997) at-risk youth often have more friends who are dropouts than not-at-risk youth. Moreover, the friendships of at-risk youth often involve people who are out of school and employed full-time. In fact one-third of those at-risk students studied had an employed close friend, "almost five times the percentage of the not at-risk group" (p. 363). Ellenbogen and Chamberland also found that at-risk youths are more likely to be rejected by their classmates. Although the tendency for rejection was "marginal and only appeared by the end of the school year" (p. 364), this further affirms the idea that at-risk students would be more likely to reach outside of school to form friendships. These friendships (usually with young adults in the workforce) allow a greater attachment to the workforce than to school.

At-risk students are often involved in few aspects of school life. For example, Mahoney and Cairns (1997) found that at-risk students are often excluded from extracurricular activities. The reasons for this exclusion include:

1. Many school activities require expertise in certain areas; for example, music, languages, sports, math, etc.

2. Some school activities use a nomination, selection, or election process, which can maintain school status by exclusion or gatekeeping.

3. Some schools use eligibility requirements; for example, a "C" average to participate in extracurricular activities.

4. Socioeconomic status may influence the kinds of activities in which students choose to participate.

Mahoney and Cairns, as a result of their 1997 study, propose:

In the light of the current results, the functions and goals of extracurricular activities should be reconsidered. The exclusionary processes characteristic of some activities may work against those students who could benefit most directly from involvement. (p. 248)

Whereas extracurricular activities play an important role in schools, those students who most need a feeling of inclusion and a network of peers at school may be left out of these activities. Furthermore, as pointed out by Lunenburg (2000), at-risk students also feel they are "treated differently from high-achieving students" (p. 41).

Tanner (1990) found that some students have no clear reason for leaving school. In fact, one student in Tanner's study says he "just left on a whim" (p. 79). In the study Tanner reveals:

The features of respondents' school experiences that caused them to quit were not themselves of a piece. The respondents objected to particular teachers, teachers in general, specific subjects, the irrelevance of the curriculum as a whole... They complained about childish and unfriendly peers, they reported poor grades and revealed learning difficulties.... (p. 79)



However, academic failure was not a significant ingredient in why kids leave, according to Tanner. Fewer than half of the participants reported performing poorly in school. Of course, students may not be willing to admit to academic problems. For instance, Kaminski (1993) found student grades to be a factor in their decision to drop out.

Another important finding in Tanner's 1990 study was that some did not leave school entirely voluntarily. One student stated, "I missed 98 classes in 2-1/2 months and they finally said, 'If you're not going to come then you might as well go home'" (p. 79). Other students cited expulsion as their reason for leaving. Because of students like this, Tanner argues, "It cannot, therefore, be assumed that dropping-out of school is always a truly voluntary decision...and schools play a more vigorous role in this outcome than is commonly recognized" (p. 80). Furthermore, the students resent being treated like "kids." This dislike for school and its authoritarian atmosphere often becomes a desire for the more adult world of work that further encourages students to leave. Also evident in the Tanner study is the belief on the part of the dropouts that they will not have to be in subordinate positions in their futures. That is, they assume the authoritarian figures in their school lives will not be there in the work world.

In order to "fix" the dropout problem, educators need to first understand what factors play a role in students leaving school. As the literature shows, students need to feel included in school activities. Some schools simply shut kids out by the types of activities they encourage, oftentimes preventing students of low socioeconomic status from participating, or by having strict eligibility requirements, thereby shutting out students who are not high, or even average, in their academic performance. Also because of this need to feel included, some students feel pressured to go to work, often to allow

them into an "adult world" where they can avoid the feeling of exclusion, and perhaps avoid authority figures.

Although these students often show warning signs of dropping out, such as early smoking and friendships with dropouts—factors that are out of the school's control—schools can be held accountable for some students dropping out. Schools seem most guilty of pushing students out of school with strict attendance requirements and the use of suspension and expulsion as disciplinary measures. Furthermore, female students tend to drop out more often because of pregnancy, due, in part, to a failure of schools to provide environments that support these mothers and their children.

#### What Should Be Done and What's Being Done?

Researchers recommend various strategies to prevent at-risk students from dropping out. A number of these strategies involve making the students feel like they are an important part of the school. Miller, Leinhardt, and Zigmond (1988) emphasize the importance of providing students with a sense of integration in school in order to help the students be more successful in school:

[A] sense of integration with the school must be developed in order for students to be willing to stay in high school until graduation...Such students would not typically be viewed as at risk for dropping out, partially because disappointment or failure in one part of the system can be counterbalanced by success or positive connection in other parts of the system. (p. 466)

Miller, et al. further speculate that "there is some relationship between the high levels of accommodation to students that [they] observed and the comparatively lower dropout rate..." (p. 470). The article discusses three kinds of accommodations made by a school

and the possibility of some negative consequences and side effects. However, the researchers found that the more schools recognize and accommodate students who are at-risk, the more likely they are to remain in school. The study, which focused primarily on students with learning disabilities, found that the students' LD teachers were major resources for the students. The LD teachers:

had a personal involvement with and concern for their students, coached them in preparation for tests in other classes, helped them write speeches to read over the P.A. system, helped them fill out job applications, offered advice, listened sympathetically to complaints, and very often, simply chatted with their students.... (p. 478)

These observations made by Miller et al. show that teachers play an important part in a student's integration into school life.

Lunenburg (2000) also recommends that educators try to strengthen student bonds to teachers, peers, and the school. Lunenburg suggests mentoring as one cost-effective way of making schools work for their students. He points out, "The highest rate of growth population in the future will be among the very groups who have been served least by our public school system" (p. 39). Furthermore, according to the Lunenburg's statistics, over half of our nation's children will be served by schools in only nine states—Ohio is one of these nine states.

In addition to recommendations made by the researchers in the above studies, attempts at curbing dropout rates have been recorded nationally. Groves (1998) studied a day and night school in North Carolina and found a successful program for at-risk teens. The alternative school in the study helped students correct behavioral and academic

problems in a transition program. The goal for the students in the program is for them to go back to their home school. This "last chance" program allows students to attend a school that has more flexible attendance policies than their regular home school. The school offers small class sizes and teachers who try non-traditional teaching methods to keep the attention of the students. The school also has a buddy system where staff members are assigned six students with whom they keep in close contact. Groves found that the students "are reaching the once unforeseeable goal of graduation and receiving the same diploma as their peers in the comprehensive high schools" (1998, p. 258).

Another program aimed at helping at-risk students and dropouts is evaluated by Franklin and McNeil (1990). This program combined efforts of an alternative school with a treatment program from the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Texas by offering educational services and treatment services including individual and family therapy, social group work methods, and parents' group therapy. The highly successful program served at-risk students from white and middle to upper-middle class backgrounds—not a typical at-risk population. This program also did not measure the dropout rate of the feeder schools; however, the evaluators reported a success ratio of more than two out of three of the participants being positively affected by the program.

A simpler policy to prevent the rise in dropout rates is explained by Lloyd (1996). This policy, also called the "Anti-Diploma" ("Keep dropouts in school," 1997), was established at North High School in Denver. The highly controversial policy requires that, in order to drop out of school, students must first sign a statement that says, "I realize that I will not have the necessary skills to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." The disclaimer lists skills students will lack and a chart comparing wages of dropouts versus

wages of someone with a high school diploma. In addition to this anti-diploma, students must be accompanied by their parents when they meet with the principal to withdraw from school. The program also includes individual counseling, emphasis on attendance, and a student movement to put across a "Don't Drop Out" message. The program has been criticized as a "quick fix for a complex problem" (Lloyd, 1996, p. 12); however, within the first month of implementation, four students decided to stay in school when faced with the anti-diploma.

In an intervention program in a regular high school described by Carley (1994), a five-stage process was implemented to give alienated students more of a sense of belonging, especially where school authority figures are concerned. The intervention included working with these students as a group. The students were recruited and met once a week for 75 minutes. They participated in gym activities, cooking, and discussion sessions. By stage three, the students were interacting with administrators and teachers in the group discussions in an attempt to harbor better relationships between students and school authorities. By stage five, the students were helping to recruit new candidates and keeping in touch with the group's co-leaders. Carley emphasizes the importance of such intervention:

Students like those discussed in this article are stuck on the threshold of not knowing if they want to leave school or if they want to stay. Few of them had ever established a rapport with teachers. They did not feel liked. Their sense of alienation was real. This struggle to belong or not belong was acted out in the relationship between the students and authority figures in the high school. (p. 228)

Although this program's goal was not necessarily reducing the dropout rate, the students involved in the program reported an improved reputation at school, which added to their sense of feeling included in school life. By looking at the reasons students drop out, it can be surmised that these students, who now feel they are an important part of the school, will be more likely to finish school. Furthermore, the program was deemed successful by most of the students involved and by the teachers and administrators asked to evaluate the program. According to Carley, the program shows:

Work can be done in the schools to identify the hostile stay-in on the threshold of dropping out and to create opportunities for these young people to reenter school life through a restoration of educator-student relationships and opportunities for contribution. (p. 230)

### Summary of Literature

Although the nation has set a goal graduation rate for high school students of 90% by the year 2000, our numbers are still lagging. As of the year 2000, North Dakota had the highest graduation rate of 86.9% (*World Almanac 2000*). My first inclination is to say that we are setting our goals too high. The state of Ohio demands a 90% graduation rate from its high schools, yet, according to the *World Almanac 2000*, the state as a whole only has a 69.7% rate. Midwest High School is well above average with its 85.6% rate. Expecting 90% of our high school students to graduate in four years is certainly not a bad goal, and it is not completely out of reach.

Potential dropouts are easily recognized within a school. Research shows that at-risk students are generally low achievers, of low socioeconomic status, males, minorities, older than other high school students, employed outside of school, and from single parent

households. These students are often "swallowed up" in large schools with high pupil/teacher ratios. At-risk students have little connection with their school, often due to their lack of participation in extracurricular activities.

Students who drop out do so for a variety of reasons. They may have problems with academics, family life, the school environment (including disciplinary and absenteeism problems), or they may have work responsibilities that influence them to drop out. Schools play a major role in the final decision of students to drop out. Feelings of alienation from school life often result from strict eligibility standards to participate in extracurricular activities, causing students to feel they are being treated differently from other students. Students sometimes leave school on a whim, bringing into question what measures schools have in place to prevent this. Furthermore, and unfortunately, schools often push students out through their atmosphere or climate and even feel relieved to "get rid of" these problem students.

The majority of strategies to keep students in school revolve around a few simple goals: to increase students' connection to the school, to be flexible with at-risk students, to provide them with opportunities to contribute at school, and to make them aware of the value of a high school diploma. By focusing on these goals, common sense strategies to helping at-risk students, perhaps schools can exceed the nation's goal of 90%. By acquainting themselves with their own at-risk students and, especially, their policies regarding these students, schools can turn this "numbers game" into really seeing these students as valuable individuals. The 1994 Carley study showed that involving at-risk students helped to lessen alienation and allowed the students the opportunity to contribute to the school.

Midwest High School has an 85.6% graduation rate that may decrease this year.

Why is such a small school in a relatively comfortable community losing so many students? More importantly, what can be done to save these teenagers?



## Research Methods

### Action Research: Definition

Action research is a type of research "which pursue[s] action (or change) and research (or understanding) at the same time" (Dick, 1999, What is action research? p. 1). The research proposed in this thesis is a combination of participatory action research and practitioner research. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1998), participatory action research allows researchers and participants to collaborate on research in order to improve a program or policy. Practitioner research is performed by someone who is either a practitioner (such as a teacher or administrator) or someone close to the practice who wants to improve what he or she does (Bogdan & Biklen 1998). In either case, the goal is to improve a policy or means of performance.

The critical perspective of action research is also worth noting. According to Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001), "Knowledge gained through action research can liberate students, teachers, and administrators and enhance learning, teaching, and policy making" (p. 9). Critical theory-based action research provides a problem-solving approach to those areas of school life that are taken for granted. It tends to go beyond traditional school practices to find ideas for reform.

### Action Research: The Process

Arhar, Holly, and Kasten (2001) identify four elements of action research: ethical commitment, cycle of reflective practice, public character, and collaboration. Ethical commitment means, according to John Dewey (in Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001), that individuals must be in a democratic learning environment where they are valued. This implies a respect for alternative perspectives, negotiating these perspectives, and

deliberating and discussing ideas. The cycle of reflective practice is simply following a plan, collecting information, analyzing it, and writing up the findings. A cycle of acting, observing, and reflecting is involved in this process. Looking at an intriguing subject, developing a plan to learn more about it, and following that plan is educational in itself. In order to be fully educational for the teacher-researcher, the teacher must be involved in this process by taking action and constantly analyzing the action for consequences. Furthermore, the research must be shared with others, thereby leading to an element called public character. Finally, in sharing with others, the researcher is led to collaborating with others to find solutions (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001). In order to successfully conduct participatory action research, the researcher must gain the trust of the participants, especially by respecting their values. The participants must be involved in every aspect of the process from planning to analyzing results (Schubert, 1996).

My research methodology falls within this structure. I began with a research question about why students drop out of high school and then went through a process of finding answers. In order to find answers through this form of qualitative research, I documented the process of data collection from observations, interviews, and by examining documents, all the while involving at-risk students in the process. I interpreted the data, and constantly reflected on my process. Interpretation is a key component to this process and must be ongoing. Because action research involves actively trying to gain understanding, part of the discovery process includes trying out ideas and evaluating them for effectiveness (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2000). As part of this analysis, Arhar, Holly, and Kasten propose seven strategies to keep it truly "ongoing":

1. Narrow the focus of your study as needed.
2. Use what you learn from your data to plan further data collection and action.
3. Record your thought and feelings.
4. Write analytic memos.
5. Make creative comparisons with data.
6. Visualize.
7. Check out your insights with participants. (p. 191)

Analyzing the data involves a process called *synthesis*, in which the researcher searches for patterns in the data and looks for data that either confirm ideas about the patterns that are seen emerging, or disconfirm such patterns.

Finally, the researcher must make assertions about the findings and verify the judgements. In action research the assertions "can be statements that direct action" (Arhar, Holly, & Kasten, 2001, p. 200). However, these assertions must also be generated in ways that allow multiple interpretations. For example, making proposals for dropout prevention programs based on research data must be done in light of the perspectives of a variety of interested parties such as the at-risk students, their parents, the teachers, and the administration of a school.

### Why Action Research?

I chose action research for a variety of reasons. Bob Dick (1999) explains that action research can be done as part of one's normal activities. Furthermore, he explains that this form of research "has the potential to increase the amount [I] learn consciously from [my] experience" (1999, You want to do an action research thesis? p. 3). Action research allows for conscious reflection of everyday practices in the classroom and school

building. In addition, Dick points out that because of the implied partnership that participatory research creates, "You may find this more ethically satisfying. For some purposes it may also be more occupationally relevant" (1999, You want to do an action research thesis? p. 3).

Likewise, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) discuss the reasons for doing action research by indicating that:

1. This systematic collection of data can help point out people and groups that make the lives of some people intolerable.

2. It provides genuine information and understanding that make plans more credible for proposals.

3. It can show areas in the system that can be challenged, both through legal means and through the activities of the community.

4. It gives firsthand facts that help people become more aware of problems, which, in turn, raises their commitment to the issues.

5. This type of research can be in itself a means of organizing people to get involved.

6. The data gathering involved can help the researcher devise a strategy and develop confidence because the strategy has hard data on which to rely (229-230).

Reasons like the preceding all support my choice of this method of research. The school I am studying is the school where I also teach. I truly want to make a difference in my school. I see an opportunity with the 21<sup>st</sup> Century grant to influence the lives of at-risk students at Midwest High School, and if it helps raise the graduation rate, so much the better. By using the action research approach, I hope to discover how Midwest High

School alienates some students and why some of these students leave, or even want to leave. This type of research can be done most effectively by working with the students who have been alienated by the system.

Following action research guidelines discussed above, I naturally included the students involved in the study in the research process. From the beginning of the study, they knew what I was doing and why I was doing it. Interviewing the students, writing up observation notes, and asking them for their insight and opinion on what I was uncovering may have contributed to their sense of empowerment and facilitated an increased connection to the school. Because we were so active throughout the process, our research gave them the opportunity to be involved in some aspect of school outside of the classroom.

In addition, action research was beneficial to me as a teacher. The Accelerated Schools Project, studied by McCarthy and Rine (1996), used action research to guide school restructuring, including a high concentration of at-risk students. By involving teachers in the research and allowing involvement of the entire school community, teachers gained a sense of empowerment. Also known as collaborative action research, according to McCarthy and Rine, this form of action research "has come to be viewed as a tool for staff development and an opportunity for teachers and university researchers to work together to investigate and solve school and classroom challenges" (224). Furthermore, McCarthy and Rine remark that as a result of action research processes, schools have seen real academic growth. Therefore, not only will the research benefit the at-risk students in my study, but I hoped to benefit as well, by gaining a sense that I have some impact on school policy.

## Action Research at Midwest High School: Data Collection

My research began in the summer of 2000 and is ongoing. For the purposes of the thesis, I am drawing on data collected through February 2001. I personally collected all data for this study. I began my research of at-risk students at Midwest High School in the summer of 2000. Following literature searches on at-risk students, the reasons they drop out, drop out prevention, and existing programs aimed at drop out prevention, I interviewed two at-risk students, one of whom had dropped out the previous school year, and one who dropped out at the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year.

At the beginning of the 2000-2001 school year, I intended to set up a small group (about five) of at-risk students from various grade levels whom I would study. During the summer I attended a conference with a few administrators from my school system regarding the 21<sup>st</sup> Century grant. When I voiced my desire to work with at-risk students in order to bring up the graduation rate, I was met with great enthusiasm on the part of the board office administrators and was told that I could work with this group through funding from the grant.

I first wanted to understand the experiences of the at-risk students at Midwest High School. I wanted to discover their perceptions of their situation. Then, I wanted to help these five students in any way I could to prevent them from dropping out. Ideally, I wanted to involve them in proposing and implementing school reform. After conferring with one of the guidance counselors and the assistant principal and taking into consideration the literature I had read, I picked five students and invited them to attend a meeting to discuss problems they were having at school. I started with an older student with whom I'd had a good relationship. I told him I wanted to study at-risk students at the

school and, as a fifth year senior, I knew he would be more knowledgeable about how the school ticks than anyone else. He was very agreeable and showed approval of the other four students I was considering for the group. I invited them to the meeting, and he also encouraged them to attend. Four students attended the first meeting: the senior male I mentioned above, a sophomore male, a female junior who is supposed to be a senior but is short of credits, and a sophomore female, all of whom are Caucasian. (One student's attendance was sporadic from the beginning, and she is now no longer part of the group.) Another male sophomore moved, but I selected another sophomore young man to take his place. The group now has four active members.

We started with group meetings once a week, and I wrote observation notes after each meeting. By February 2001, we had met weekly for an hour each week for approximately 18 weeks. I actively led the group meetings at first by asking them questions about problems they were having at school, but later became more of a participant observer and allowed the students to bring up issues on their own. I also took three of them to the local art museum and wrote observation notes after the trip. In addition, I tape recorded formal, semi-structured individual interviews with three members of the group and one of the school guidance counselors. However, a large amount of the data for this study consists of fieldnotes generated as a result of over 200 hours of fieldwork including observations of group meetings held in my classroom, informal one-on-one conversations with students, observations of some of them in my classes, conversational meetings with teachers and parents, and other daily interactions with the students and school staff. Some of my most important data come from conversations in the hallways of Midwest High School. I found that remaining available

to the students at all times and making my classroom a comfortable area for them, encouraged them to come to me frequently with problems or concerns.

### Action Research at Midwest High School: Data Analysis

In order to understand the plight of these at-risk students, I inductively analyzed the observation and interview data for patterns that answered my questions about who these students are and why they dropped out or were considering dropping out. Throughout the analysis process, I talked to the group about trends I was finding and asked their views on the extent to which my conclusions were valid. Often the students were surprised at the conclusions I was drawing because they had not realized the problems they had were experienced by other students as well. Furthermore, by analyzing my data inductively, I was able to pinpoint problem areas in the lives of these students and finally break them down into two categories: family problems and alienation from school. I also analyzed the role I played in the lives of these students. In the following section I present my findings by first describing family and school problems these students experience and how they relate to the student's completion of school. I also discuss my role in the project.



## Findings

### Introduction

In this section, I first briefly describe the research participants. Following this description is an account of family situations that may cause participants to consider dropping out of high school. Following the discussion of family situations, I describe the alienating school experiences of these teenagers. I end with a reflection of the various roles the participants and I played in the project.

### My Posse

During our fourth meeting, the group that I half-jokingly, mostly lovingly call "my posse" decided to name themselves SHOUT, an acronym for Students Helping Our Underestimated Teens. The name fits because these teenagers truly want to shout out for help and to help.

SHOUT started out with five members, one of whom was sporadic from the start and now no longer attends meetings. The group now has four members, three of whom are original members. The members discussed in this study are Tristan, Gabriella, and Brandi, the three original members; Paul, an original member who recently moved to a different state; and Seth, a new member who is still blending into the group. The five teenagers have several things in common: all are high school students attending Midwest High School full time; they all have discipline problems in school; they all are ineligible for extra-curricular activities because their grade point average falls below a 2.0; they all have attendance problems; all of their parents are divorced; they all have struggled through other stressful family situations in addition to divorce; they all smoke; and all but one of them admits to smoking marijuana.

### Family Situations

One of the school guidance counselors points out that a key to helping at-risk students is to increase parental involvement. She believes that the school does not have enough contact with the parents, however, she also points out that the parents are too easy on their children, as well:

I think they become accustomed to their kids not being high achievers and, you know, the kid wakes up and they're like, "I don't really feel like going to school." "Okay." You know, because the parent doesn't require them to stay.

A variety of problems within the families of the SHOUT students have affected their school lives. Within this section, I will discuss marital problems between the parents of these students as well as other conflicts between family members that have increased student stress. I will also discuss the lack of information and flexibility the parents have when it comes to intervening in the students' school problems. Their lack of resources leads to their lack of parental involvement at school.

### Family Stressors.

All the students who are members of SHOUT come from families with divorced parents. Often, conflicts within the families leading to divorce were followed by difficulties that led to the students' problems in school. As Gabriella explains:

Before her and my dad got divorced...nobody in the family talked. It was just like she (her mom) always had to do what my dad told her to do and then...she was off in bed and I'd just lock myself in my room all day cause I didn't want to deal with it.

These problems occurred during her sophomore year, the same year she became involved with drugs:

I was getting into all kinds of trouble and bad stuff. It was just like, that was my way of not having to deal with anything...And it was just like, you know, "Well, I'll leave school and go smoke a joint" or whatever. I'd leave school and go take some Zanax or whatever, just like I would just be incapacitated to that point where I'd be like, blah, and wouldn't have to deal with it.

Seth was aware of his mother's infidelity while she was married to his father, and Tristan had a strained relationship with his father while his parents were married. Both of these students blame their temperament on these problems:

My dad was really strict and he was just obnoxious. He kept telling me I was going to be a failure if I kept going down the path I was going on. That really kind of got in my head....It was really bad since my dad was sarcastic; I guess that's why I'm like that.

However, despite the strained relationship with parents they seem to have, the two older students realize the importance of their relationship with their parents, and stress this. Gabriella states, "So she finally got up enough nerve to ask him for a divorce and...ever since then, me and her have been like best friends."

Brandi also had family stress; in her case, it resulted from being moved from home to home. During the course of my interaction with her, Brandi was living with her grandmother. However, in February, Brandi got into an argument with her grandmother. According to Brandi, her father had not been sending the grandmother the child support check. Brandi felt that her grandmother was holding her responsible, and they began to

argue. As Brandi described to me, her grandmother pushed her and told her to get her things, that she was going back to her mother's. At this point, Brandi is living with her mother and is traveling approximately 40 miles to school each morning. Her brother (who still lives with their grandmother) drops her off at a friend's house and her mother picks her up there. Because of these arrangements, Brandi's school attendance has been sporadic and her participation in SHOUT has dramatically decreased.

#### Family Resources.

The family resources of these students do not seem terribly limited as far as finances go. In fact, one SHOUT student lives in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in the area. The other students live in small, but nice homes in areas where property values are relatively high. However, the parents rarely intervene on behalf of their children at school. Tristan, Gabriella, Brandi, and Paul have said that their parents simply do not come to school when they have problems. I met Gabriella's mother at a 504 Plan meeting when Gabriella was threatened with suspension after an argument with a teacher. Gabriella came to me quite upset over the possible suspension. If suspended from school, she would receive zeros on all the assignments she missed during her suspension. Since Gabriella had previously had a 504 Plan, I knew that she could opt to go to the alternative school for the length of time of the suspension in lieu of losing points in classes due to missing school. She was not aware of this, and later, her mother indicated that she had not been able to get the yearly 504 Plan updated by the school as required. I contacted the guidance counselor and special education coordinator to make arrangements for the meeting to update the plan. Without my intervention, Gabriella's mother would not have known to intervene because Gabriella would have just taken the suspension.

I have talked briefly on the phone with Tristan's mother, but have never met her. Because he is 19 years old, the school is not required to contact his mother when problems occur with him, so he is her only link to the school. She works very early in the morning and often has to call to wake him up to go to school. Her lack of flexibility with work hours hinders her ability to intervene in situations at school. The only time I have spoken to her on the phone was in the evening.

I met Seth's parents on parent/teacher conference night. They requested that I not let him know they had talked to me because he had informed them that his involvement with me was none of their business. Likewise, he had told me not to talk to his parents, saying that his involvement in the group would just give his "mom another reason to nag" at him. It seems Seth may be alienating his parents from the school. He gets frustrated with them when they come to the school to discuss issues with administrators or teachers. He expressed this and said that they were divorced, "that means they are supposed to be apart." The unification of his divorced parents in school involvement is a source of confusion for him. Being from an upper class family, Seth's parents have the resources to intervene in his school problems, but he prefers to handle the problems himself. I have not researched how much the administration contacts the parents. Since Seth is a minor, they are required to notify parents regarding attendance, but there is no requirement regarding notifying them of disciplinary actions.

I have not had the opportunity to speak to Paul or Brandi's families. Paul mentioned that his parents used to come to school all the time because of his sister, but after she dropped out, they stopped coming. I have not met Brandi's parents or grandmother either.

## School Alienation

"I hate this place," is a pretty common comment overheard in the halls of Midwest High School—it is even more commonly heard among the at-risk students. Tristan states, "I hate this place. It's a poor excuse for a popularity contest. Not just with the students, I think it has to do with the parents and the teachers." According to Gabriella, "High school is supposed to be the best time of your life and here it's just like, 'Good Lord, why do I have to wake up to come into this crap?'" This sense of dislike for the school is only a symptom of the alienation from school these students feel. In this section, I discuss the students' academic problems, their disciplinary problems, social concerns they have, and actions the school has taken that cause these students to feel further alienated.

### Academic Problems: Falling Short of Credits.

Tristan and Gabriella could be considered the leaders of the group as they are the oldest and seem to be the most outspoken in the group. Tristan, a 19 year old repeating his senior year of high school, needs all seven credits he is attempting this year in order to graduate. Three of his classes are English because of his previous failures in the subject. However, he is a talented writer and interprets literature very well. He blames his previous failures on his lack of motivation to do homework. Similarly, Gabriella blames her lack of academic achievement on herself. She will be a fifth year senior next year if she chooses to return to school in the fall. All of the students I've worked with and interviewed were on the ineligible list. This means that they are ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities because their grade point average falls below a 2.0.

The other three group members, Brandi, Seth, and Paul, are underclass students. I have not gotten as close to these three as I have to Tristan and Gabriella, although Paul

and I were forging a closer bond before he moved. Paul seemed to be improving academically before he moved. He had asserted that he would start bringing home all A's. He said he knew he could; he had just been absent too much to catch up. Seth and Brandi both struggle in their classes. Seth takes college preparatory classes, which he doesn't want to take, but his mother enrolled him anyway. His older sister was an honor student at the school. He says that part of the reason he does so poorly is that he simply does not want to do well. Apparently his rebellion against his parents flows over into his classroom performance. When one of the school guidance counselors described what detours students, she also articulated what probably happened to Seth's academic performance as well:

For one reason or another, they're not usually used to academic success and what I have seen is that then turns into sometimes an act and sometimes it's for real. It develops into they really don't care about academic success.

Part of Seth's problem is that his "act" (because he was academically successful before high school) has caused him to fall behind in his studies.

Brandi also struggles academically, especially in math class. However, she says that she has difficulty understanding the subject and the teacher doesn't explain it well to her. In addition, most of her discipline problems occur in her math class.

#### Disciplinary Problems: Learning to "Play the Game."

As the student with the fewest discipline problems, it's safe to say that Tristan has learned to "play the game." He had only five disciplinary interventions as of early February 2001, all of which were trancies or tardies. Gabriella has had a variety of infractions, 12 total, ranging from tardies and truancy to smoking and using inappropriate

language. However, both Gabriella and Tristan claim to have come to a point in their lives where they know they have to play along in order to complete school. Teachers have frequently commented on their change in classroom behavior this year, albeit they both still have serious attendance problems.

Brandi and Seth have had a large number of disciplinary problems at school ranging from smoking to classroom disruption, defiance of authority, profanity, and truancy. Although Brandi mentions being unhappy at the school, she generally keeps a smile on her face. Seth, on the other hand, has been referred to the school social worker for involvement in an anger management course that he refused to attend. Gabriella, Tristan, and I spent an entire group session talking with Seth about his inability to control his temper. Although a great deal of his anger is directed at his parents, he tends to act out in class and against authority at school, which causes teachers and administrators to frequently complain about him. He and Brandi have the largest number of discipline reports. Tristan and Gabriella say it's because they haven't learned to play the game yet.

#### Social Problems: Isolation.

Both grades and disciplinary problems keep these students from being active in extracurricular activities. The school ineligibility list continues to haunt these students in their school life. Because all of them are ineligible to participate in extracurricular activities due to grades, they are not members of clubs or athletic teams. Furthermore, several of them have numerous hours of detention hall for various disciplinary infractions. Although the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Grant afforded the school the capability to provide after school projects, the students find it difficult to participate in the activities because of



detention. Gabriella states, "There's so many things I'd like to do but I can't cause I have detention for all the tardies."

In addition to school policies regarding school participation, social alienation at the school poses a problem for these students. Tristan's alienation is even more evident than that of the other students. He states, "I feel extremely alienated just because I'm a fifth year senior." He also points out that that some of the problems with at-risk students comes from social alienation among the students:

They want to fit in so bad they would do anything to feel like they are part of the group or whatever. People who are isolated from the main groups, I notice they are shut in, won't talk to other people and are isolated.

The counselor points out that because they live in a small community, many of the children have been together since grade school so:

the groups of friends are very tight and so if there is someone that comes in that is a little different than they are even if they're just making a decision based on appearance, it makes it a little rough on that kid.

According to the counselor, the interpretations of the various groups often cause them to alienate each other. These students also have many friends who are not in school.

Tristan points out that is part of his sense of alienation from school: "...when I'm around friends who have graduated, then I feel really stupid."

School Actions: Backing Them into a Corner.

One of the key problems in the sense of alienation these students feel is their interactions with the adults at the school. The counselor states:

Another real significant obstacle is the way adults treat them and respond to them because if you have a, you know, loser type kid, real often within a short period of time, teachers will make up their minds...and it makes it really hard for [the students].

Although the members of SHOUT say that they do have teachers who readily help them, they also have problems with the same teachers. The same teachers' names show up on each of their disciplinary reports. Generally, when one SHOUT member is failing one teacher's class, the other members are either failing, or have failed, the same teacher's class. This is not just isolated to difficult subjects, but is more reflective of personality conflicts the students have with some of the teachers. However, the number of these teachers is small. For the most part, the students do not cast blame on the teachers for their problems. They tend to blame their own laziness or lack of motivation and remain positive about the teachers.

On the other hand, each of the students voices dislike for the school principal. Gabriella states, "It's like he thinks he's king of the world because he's principal." Elizabeth, a former Midwest student who was administratively withdrawn from the school last year, states, "He was not a very nice person...He says a lot of things to kids that he should not say." Jim, another Midwest dropout, explained that when he started school at the beginning of the year, the principal told him, "One false move and you're out of here." Tristan states that the principal would "go out of his way just to make sure we'd have it rough."

A prime example of administrative action in alienating the students began in early December. After Tristan had been absent for several days, the assistant principal called

me to the office and informed me that Tristan planned to drop out. His mother had also spoken to the assistant principal and asked if there was anything I could do. I called Tristan and spoke with him for about 10 – 15 minutes. He thought he had missed too much school and that there was no way he could pass at that point. I told him that was nonsense, but he had pretty much made up his mind. I coaxed him into coming to school and talking to me. The next day he showed up with his books to turn in. When I spoke with him in the hallway, he said that he "just hate[s] this place" and that he "can't take it anymore." I told him I understood, that it gets to a lot of people, even me, but he said it was too late. He told me he appreciates how much I care about him, but he had made up his mind. He said, "Mrs. Dial, if you had been around four years ago, things would be very different for me. If someone had cared before, it would have been easier." I told him he simply wasn't aware of how much people would work with him. But he still insisted it was too late.

I had made it perfectly clear to the school administrators that I was working with Tristan and the other members of SHOUT and that I wanted to be notified if there were any problems. The assistant principal and I had discussed Tristan at the beginning of the year when I asked him for references to start the at-risk group. After Tristan went to turn in his withdrawal papers, the assistant principal called me to the office. We met with Tristan and one of the guidance counselors. The assistant principal let me explain what I thought Tristan was thinking, and I told him that I thought that he felt he was backed into a corner and was just very discontented with the school. The assistant principal asked Tristan what he intended to do without a high school diploma, and he said he eventually wanted to go to college. The counselor commented that Tristan could always learn a

trade. I was not happy with the counselor's remark, because I felt that he wasn't discouraging Tristan's decision to leave high school. Eventually I told Tristan that he didn't have to make his decision that minute, that he could take the weekend to think it over. At the end of the day, Tristan came to my room and said that he decided to think it over. He went to all of his teachers to make sure he wasn't too far behind to pass the class, and seemed relieved to learn that he could still pass all of them. He was back in school on Monday.

Unfortunately, Tristan developed mononucleosis later that month. He had a doctor's excuse and planned to return to school after the holiday break. I went to all of his teachers, collected his assignments and delivered them to his house. After the break, he attended school for a couple of days, then he missed school one morning. I received a note from the assistant principal that the school was going to administratively withdraw him from school. Because Tristan is 19, the school was within its rights. The assistant principal told me that if I was able to get in touch with Tristan and get him to school that day he would be able to stop the withdrawal. I knew that Gabriella was going home at lunch that day so I asked her to call Tristan and tell him what was going on. He showed up before lunch. He said he was ready to walk out the door when Gabriella called—he had to drive someone to the airport that morning. Recently, Tristan missed a day of school because he was sick. He called me at home that night to make sure he could still go to school the next day. He was afraid they had withdrawn him. The impact that scare made on him was astounding. It has kept his attendance high. But the fact remains that he was an hour away from dropping out without even knowing it.

### My Role: Getting Attached

When I first heard that Tristan was going to drop out, my tears made me question this whole project. Maybe I was getting too attached. Maybe I was getting too involved with these kids. But now, when he walks in my room, with a grin on his face, I feel an incredible sense of accomplishment. I have invested so many hours in working with these students; however, it pales in comparison to the amount of my *self* that I have poured in.

### Being an Advocate.

In a faculty meeting last October, I announced to the entire faculty of Midwest High School the names of the students with whom I was working. Ever since that announcement, several teachers have come to me with concerns. The assistant principal has also been key to helping me work with these kids. He notifies me of concerns about their attendance or discipline. I can't say that I always solve the problems, but I at least serve as a link. I have helped the students get schedule changes, such as moving Gabriella from a class she was going to fail into a semester course in which she could at least get half a credit. I have gotten them makeup work, made teachers aware of problems the students were having that could affect their coursework (always with the student's permission), and have made my classroom a safe haven for students with personality conflicts with teachers—just stop by and cool off. I also help the students see things from the point of view of the teachers and administrators. I am the advocate that these students need to get through this place that they claim to hate so much.

I often wonder if the other teachers see me as siding with students against faculty members. Have I, to an extent, alienated myself from some of the faculty members? I have no real evidence that this is a problem. However, I am often concerned when I discuss these students with some of the faculty members, that I have become like the students in SHOUT. One teacher apologized to me because Tristan is not going to pass her class, and therefore, will not graduate. She offered to let me "look at the numbers" as if I needed proof. I've never given any indication that I expect these students to pass, only that I want help getting them to hang in there. At times, I feel a bit alienated, too. My advocacy for them has attached me to them more than just emotionally—I'm suddenly more empathetic.

#### Changes in Myself.

I've become an advocate for students who used to drive me out of my mind. The classes I teach are primarily college preparatory. I have the highest ranked students in the school in most of my classes. I work well with them and have always shown a great deal of pride in what they accomplish academically. Now, I've found a different group of students with whom I actually have a bond. I beam at their accomplishments. I give them "wake up calls" in the morning and warn them that they are going to get lung cancer if they don't quit smoking. I listen to their stories about skateboarding, completely ignorant of the topic, but suddenly, I want to go watch them "mountainboard" instead of watching a school basketball game. Sometimes they succeed academically as well. Tristan took honorable mention at a local academic competition with a poem I entered for him. Gabriella has become a strong Humanities student, contributing insightful comments to class discussions. I recently learned that she has poetic talent as well.

These students aren't on the honor roll, but their accomplishments come, not in Trigonometry or Physics, but in areas that are often overlooked in school. I've started looking for these qualities in other students like my posse.

I suppose it all boils down to how much these students have changed my life. It seems crazy because I set out to change their lives and here I am, astounded at the impact they have had on me. The pivotal moment was when Tristan told me that if I had been there four years ago, things would be very different for him now. I realized that I had, indeed, touched his life. Gabriella often "hangs out" in my room after school and fills me in on everything that happens in her life. I really enjoy our conversations. She shows real enthusiasm when we discuss next year, and I find myself quite hopeful that she will be back. Seth has started to open up. He loses his scowl when he walks in my room now. His smile lights me up because I rarely see it when he is interacting with others.

I've been told that my job is not to become friends with my students, but to teach them. That's fine, but first, I must reach them. At-risk students have built very thick shells around themselves. They trust few people. To break through that shell, I must become human to them. If that means listening to their stories of woe regarding their love life, then so be it. And I've learned that I enjoy that. I like that Gabriella tells me about her arguments with her best friends. I like that Seth bursts out my name when he sees me in the hallway. I like that Tristan shares his private writings with me. I've actually started to understand "teenage angst," if that's possible.

A few years ago, the school valedictorian thanked me during her graduation speech. I once said that moment alone would make my career worthwhile. Although I still treasure that experience, I've found something better in SHOUT. The school

valedictorian was going to succeed anyway. She's well on her way to a summa cum laude graduation from college. But there's something better in Gabriella's statement, "Mrs. Dial, you have to hear this because I tell you *everything*." There's something remarkable about Tristan asking me to write in his book of poetry. The sense of responsibility is sometimes burdensome—Tristan is referred to as "your guy" and Gabriella as "your girl" by the assistant principal—but the reality of it is true beauty. The idea that I am having a positive effect on someone's life who really needs it keeps me going.

### Summary of Findings

The at-risk students in this study come from stressful family situations including single parent homes and homes where family members are in conflict with one another. Because of various circumstances, these parents often do not intervene in the student's school life, thereby leaving the student to fend for him or her self if problems arise at school. As a result, I have had to become an advocate for these students, in order to give them someone to help them through the system.

While these at-risk students come from stressful home environments, they find themselves in an alienating school environment as well. The students' problems at school include both academic and discipline difficulties leading to their sense of isolation in the school. Unfortunately, their academic and disciplinary struggles prohibit them from participation in extracurricular activities, thus excluding them from many social events at school. Furthermore, the administration seems less than willing to accommodate these students, at times even seeming eager to get rid of them. The way these students are treated makes them feel as if they are a burden on the system. The SHOUT program has



finally given students who have nobody to turn to at school a voice and an advocate, better connecting them to the school.

Finally, I have learned what it feels like to fight for students who are not used to having someone on their side. It does not take a research study to show that at-risk students need someone to care for them at school. What this study does show is that this role can be filled by a teacher. Although risks are involved, such as the teacher feeling a sense of isolation herself, one teacher can indeed make a difference in the lives of students, especially those whom the system has tired of tolerating. The teacher as an advocate can make life at school a little more fair for at-risk students.

## Conclusions

### Connections to Literature

I often gasped when I talked to my "posse" about their lives—not because I was surprised at what they said, but because it tied so closely to previously published research. Frymier's 1996 study, for example, is consistent with my experience working with these students. The dropout problem *is* intimidating; my experiences with Tristan taught me that, clearly. Frymier's comment on the lack of incentives for school personnel to deal with the problem is reinforced by one of Midwest's guidance counselors' comments about the size of the school limiting our opportunities to vary our curriculum to help those at-risk.

However, I was surprised by the degree to which the SHOUT students were consistent with research. The at-risk students in SHOUT were low achievers from single-parent or divorced-parent households, consistent with McNeal's 1997 study. Furthermore, like the students featured in Kaminski's 1993 study, these at-risk students have insufficient credits, high absenteeism, bad grades, work responsibilities, family problems, and a general sense of alienation from the school. They each smoke cigarettes, as well, which corresponds with the findings of Ellickson, Bui, et al. (1998). Aside from each other, most of the SHOUT students' friends are out of school, coinciding with Ellenbogen and Chamberland's 1997 article. Their often lengthy discipline reports reinforces Carley's 1994 finding that at-risk students have a propensity to misbehave.

The actions of Midwest High School are also reflected in research. Due to eligibility requirements, the members of SHOUT are not involved in any extracurricular activities, thus leading to their sense of alienation from the school. This is consistent with

Mahoney and Cairns' 1997 assertion that at-risk students are often excluded from extracurricular activities. This alienation points to a need for Midwest High School to reconsider the function of its extracurricular activities. Furthermore, Tristan's decision to drop out one morning is a glaring illustration of Tanner's 1990 finding that some students have no clear reason for dropping out of school, that they just do it "on a whim" (p. 79). Tanner also found that students are sometimes forced out of school, as in Tristan's case. The SHOUT students' dislike of many school authoritarians, especially the principal, also reflects Tanner's study.

#### Where Do We Go From Here?

The headline of last year's senior edition of the school newspaper read, "Keep on Truckin'," and that's just what I'm going to do. From the board office I recently received a grant application for school improvement by involving at-risk students. It requires a 15 member group of at-risk students just to apply for the grant. SHOUT is going to help me organize the project. This may be just what we need to take our group from helping a few students to affecting the whole school. By involving SHOUT in organizing the project, their sense of alienation from the school could evolve into them playing a major role in school life. Gabriella is already talking about what we will be doing next year. She has given up thinking about getting her GED this summer and instead has her eyes set on scheduling for next year.

As I've watched Tristan and Gabriella interact with the younger members of the group, I've realized that Midwest High School has a tremendous resource in these older, at-risk students. They have been through the whole gamut of problems teenagers often face and can give insight to younger students who are starting to go through the same

problems. Peer counseling programs are becoming more popular in our area. I'm hoping to provide older at-risk students with training in this area so that they can mentor others, thus better connecting them to the school. While I started out with some research questions, ultimately I was uncertain of any other clear goal aside from finding answers. Now I have a very clear goal because I did find some answers.

### A Call to Action

Midwest High School could implement any of a wide variety of strategies to prevent at-risk students from dropping out. First and foremost, our students must feel more connected to the school. According to Miller, Leinhardt, and Zigmond (1988), students need to feel a sense of integration in order to be more successful in school. The students in my study feel utterly alienated from school life. One way to lessen feelings of alienation, according to Miller et al. (1988), is to accommodate these students more and forge a more personal involvement with the students. Lunenberg (2000) also recommends mentoring as a way of helping the students integrate into school life.

My active involvement in the lives of the SHOUT students has, to this point, prevented them from dropping out, encouraged them to tough it out for another year, and helped them communicate better with school personnel. The apparent success that I have had with these students does not stand alone; studies by Groves (1998) and Carley (1994) show the success of personal involvement with students in reducing rates of dropouts. Further involvement of the faculty of Midwest High School could help. The program in North Carolina, studied by Groves, includes a faculty/student buddy system, much like my involvement with the SHOUT group. Furthermore, my involvement also shows that by working with these students as a group, they will feel they are contributing more to the

school, thus giving them a sense of integration in the school. Midwest High School could expand the SHOUT program to include more students by offering supplemental pay to teachers who are willing to serve as teacher-mentors to at-risk students. Therefore, the school system could not just raise its graduation rate with minimal cost, but also actively combat the sense of alienation experienced by many students at the school.

In addition, Midwest High School may want to reconsider policies that alienate students. One such policy is the eligibility requirement. Having high academic expectations of students is an admirable idea and looks good on paper; however, is the price of this requirement too high? The after school program allows ineligible students to participate in activities, yet, the funding for this program ends in two years, so many students will again be left with little connection to the school. Because eligibility requirements for athletics are mandated by the state, those must remain intact, although they could be lowered to the state minimum allowed grade point average. However, guidelines for clubs and other extracurricular activities could be rewritten for Midwest High School to allow more students to participate.

Furthermore, Midwest High School should examine its policy of administratively withdrawing students. Students who are frequently absent or who have serious disciplinary problems do sometimes hinder the learning process. However, the school is not solving those students' problems by kicking them out of school. Rather, a process could be developed to notify students and parents that such action is being considered. This way all parties can work on alternatives to the student leaving school. The alternatives could include contracts signed by Midwest High School administrators, teachers, parents, and the student. This contract could dictate what that student needs to

do to be successful in high school as well as how the school can better help that student succeed with inclusion in the SHOUT program, peer tutoring, or by communicating problems to parents on a regular basis. This way faculty members will also be notified that this student is at-risk and will be alert to the fact that some flexibility is needed when working with the student.

Midwest High School should also consider notifying the parents or guardians of students 18 years old and older of attendance and disciplinary problems. Even though, by law, these students are adults, they still need help in making decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. Many times the parents simply do not know that their child is struggling to the point that they are considering dropping out of school, or they simply do not know how to help. It is the school's responsibility to not only inform the parents of such problems, but also work with them to help their teenager be successful in school.

The goal is not to drop these students out of school, but provide them with an environment conducive to learning. First and foremost, at-risk students need to feel less alienated at school. Because so many of these students do have friends and peers with whom they fit in, the school is obviously not doing its part to alleviate the sense of alienation the students are feeling. By simply reconsidering some policies and providing students with teacher mentors, Midwest High School could not only raise its graduation rate, but provide students with a strong dropout prevention program to illustrate to students that their education is not only important to the students, but to the community.

### Final Thoughts

The close bond between educator and student is a path that may help at-risk students; however, the teachers can benefit as well. Because I am accustomed to seeing

no immediate gratification from tasks I perform and "thank you"s are few and far between in my life as a teacher, each day that my posse is in school, each high grade they receive, each little accomplishment they achieve, becomes my own.

About a month after I suspended the data collection for my study, Gabriella discovered that she was actually eligible to participate in extracurricular activities for the first time in several years. She didn't bother to get her most recent report card—she is so used to seeing low grades and a grade point average well below the 2.0 eligibility requirement. Several days after report cards were released, Gabriella was reading over the ineligibility list as we discussed who to include in the 15 member group to apply for the grant. We wanted to choose people on the list, so they will be involved in a school activity that does not require eligibility. As she read over the list, she realized that her name is not on it. I think she is still in disbelief and is pretty convinced that something is wrong. However, her eligibility is an accomplishment that I share with her. The look on her face made the day worthwhile. Tristan stepping across the stage and receiving his diploma in May will make the SHOUT program worthwhile. And making the lives of these students a little more bearable at Midwest High School will make all the tears worthwhile. When I work with my posse, I have a sense of fulfillment.

The water that cut away at the self-esteem of Elizabeth holds great power. Through this study I realized that I have the ability to redirect the running water cutting away at the lives of these students. I can use this water to break barriers between teachers and students. The at-risk members of SHOUT have learned they have power in this water, as well. These students who are "helping our underestimated teens" are actively pursuing solutions and have given themselves a purpose at Midwest High School. They

are using their knowledge of the running water to enact change. Together, we have shown that running water doesn't have to cut holes—it can cleanse.



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