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DROP OUT FROM STATE SECONDARY GIRLS'  
SCHOOLS IN NEW ZEALAND: AN ECOLOGICAL  
PERSPECTIVE

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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# DROP OUT FROM STATE SECONDARY GIRLS' SCHOOLS IN NEW ZEALAND: AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*Economic change requiring a more highly skilled workforce prompted worldwide concern over high school drop out. Dropouts are young people who leave school early, often without attaining formal educational qualifications. Much previous research centred on at-risk students and a range of individual, social, family and school factors associated with drop out were identified.*

*This case study of student drop out and retention at three girls' state secondary schools over 2003 suggests that early leaving behaviour cannot be understood outside of the settings in which it occurs. Adopting an ecological perspective facilitated a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between the dropouts and their environment.*

*From a narratives and numbers approach rich stories of early leaving emerged. Patterns of leaving were consistent with national trends: The lower decile school had the highest drop out rate, and dropouts were more likely to be Maori and Pasifika than European. Dropping out was shown to be a complicated and iterative process in which the influence of the environment is very important.*

*Family and school relationships had a major impact but which had the greatest influence was inconclusive because there was a high level of interconnectedness between these proximal settings within the mesosystem and the bigger picture education and welfare systems. The extent of the contribution each level made to early leaving varied across individual stories, between schools and over time.*

*Leaving school is an ecological transition that involves changing roles from high school pupil to that of tertiary student, mother, worker or benefit recipient. The students' stories show drop out to be both an outcome, and an initiator, of developmental change.*

*An important challenge for schools is not necessarily to reduce the number of early leavers but to establish effective transition programmes that assist students to become proactive in navigating the many transitions anticipated over their life course. The implementation of such school programmes needs to be supported by parallel changes in government policy.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants,” Isaac Newton was quoted as saying (Lindgreen, Vallaster, & Vanhamme, 2001, p. 508). Without the incisive critique, the close guidance and encouragement of Professor Richard (Dick) Harker in the final writing stages, the inspiration NorthTec colleague Dr Stanley Frielick provided by suggesting utilisation of the ecological approach as a framework to pull together the complex and inter-related factors which emerged during the data gathering phase, and Professor John O’Neill’s idea to incorporate a baseline intentions survey into the research design, I would not have achieved the level of understanding about secondary school drop out which I am able to share with you here.

I attribute the self knowledge and personal satisfaction I have gained through completing this study to the guidance of my supervisors and to the assistance and support of a great many other people, my family, friends and work colleagues. In particular I need to acknowledge the assistance of my mother, Betty Carding, who transcribed the Face-to-face Interview tapes and provided me with ongoing support and encouragement to complete, and of Colin Small, computing tutor at NorthTec, who assisted with the graphs in Chapter 4. My daughter-in-law Katherine Ansley acted as research assistant, facilitating some of the interviews at the school where I was principal. Coding and entering the data into the computer was a time consuming exercise because of the large number of surveys to process, and I am grateful to Kath and my son who together (to avoid transcription errors) did the majority of data inputting from the Intentions Survey.

I would like to thank the board of trustees and principals of the schools involved, for allowing me to undertake this research, and to the staff for supporting me during this study. In particular I wish to publicly acknowledge the special work of the associate head of English and principal’s nominee, Margie Sunde, at my own school. She carried a large part of the burden associated with the necessary devolvement of survey administration. In retirement, she painstakingly proofread every one of the chapters of this thesis, cross checked by work colleague and friend Lorraine Weber although I take responsibility for any errors or omissions which may have crept into the final document.

Whilst a personal agenda to reduce early leaving from my own school was the prime motivator for this study, I believe that the three schools involved also gained from their participation. To protect the confidentiality of these schools, I cannot publicly

name the many staff that assisted me in this project but I do hope that this is not seen as detracting from the sincerity of my heart-felt thanks. It is worth noting here that staff members were very interested in their students' wellbeing and keen to be part of the project, which they saw as of value to them. The generosity in the time given and their willingness to assist was very much appreciated.

Whilst I was a principal when I commenced this study, I worked at Northland Polytechnic (NorthTec) from 2004 as Executive Dean. I am grateful to Chief Executive, Terry Barnett, for allowing me to continue with the research project whilst employed there; he generously funded my student fees and allowed me to present associated papers at conferences, which facilitated peer review of my work as it progressed.

Lindgreen et al. (2001, p. 507) identified three phases in doctoral research: getting started, surviving the ups and downs and reaching closure. I look back from the final phase hoping that readers will enjoy, as well as learn from, the stories of early leavers which I present here. Typical of many novice researchers, I found the difficulty of deciding how to present my research findings one of the most challenging aspects of this case report. The inertia which resulted was certainly a down period which required a great deal of consideration and consultation to overcome.

Much previous drop out literature described, rather than sought explanations for the so-called "dropout problem" and I was at great pains for this study not to be challenged on the same grounds. Many researchers had identified the family as having a major influence on student achievement and retention at school, and I was fortunate that Professor Roy Nash, my initial supervisor, was a recognised authority on the matter. Unfortunately Roy was not well for a great part of the seven-year period during which I continued my study, and indeed he finally succumbed to the ravages of cancer late in 2006. The death of my father in that same year, of my nephew Hamish the year previously, and the discovery that my close friend and work associate, Derek Colebrook, had cancer, certainly challenged my commitment to the cause. Throughout these traumatic events, and indeed on a day-to-day level, my husband, Graeme Coutts, has been a cornerstone of support, chivvying me along if I was losing focus and assisting me with technical problems associated with computer use. Over the last year of this family marathon he even took over most of the cooking and cleaning duties in an effort to make appropriate time for writing which competed with the heavy commitments of my work role.

My greatest indebtedness is to the young people who so willingly shared their time and their stories with me. I believe that many of them found the storytelling process therapeutic, an aspect I discuss in the conclusion. The rich narratives which emerged are a tribute to their candour: They opened up their hearts in the belief and trust that others might learn from their experiences. Whilst it is up to the reader to decide how applicable the findings from this particular case study are to their own situation, I feel confident that everyone will be able to learn something from the stories these leavers have shared.

## PREFACE

A crucial phase in feminist research and writing is “finding one’s voice” and this occurs when “the researcher understands a phenomenon *and* finds a way of communicating that understanding” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 16). Like many other researchers I experimented with many different ways of writing before I found a way of presenting the voices of the girls who left, and my own experiences. In the same way that theoretical discussion should be traced to the data, so too should researchers describe their own role thoroughly, “so that readers will understand the relationship between the researcher and the participants” (Janesick, 2000, p. 389). It is my hope that the preface will go some way towards facilitating this understanding for the reader.

### **My Role as Researcher: Understanding *is* Interpretation**

*“I want to be all that I am capable of becoming”*

Katherine Mansfield, 1888-1923 (quoted in Exley, 1993, p. 6)

I never really thought of myself as a feminist. I like to call myself “Mrs,” as I am proud to be married and have been to the same very supportive man, Graeme, for more than 30 years. He is my “very best friend” and the father of our only child, Damian, who is married to a wonderful woman, Kath, a teacher like me. They have no children yet but I understand it is in their plans.

However, on reflection I realised that one of the driving forces in becoming a principal of an all girls’ school was to ameliorate, for other young women, the negative and unsupportive school situation I had found myself in as a teenager at an all girls’ school.

I wanted to be a doctor, right through school. I dreamed of being like Albert Schweitzer, a talented musician who had given his life to medicine and helping underprivileged peoples in Africa. I vividly recall the assembly when the principal of the girls’ school I attended asked all the students who wanted to be doctors to meet with her at recess. This was amazing! Someone actually wanted to talk to me about my dreams and aspirations! Well out of a school of 1,200 girls only three of us fronted. And

the principal then proceeded to tell us that we were too dumb, that it would take us seven years to complete and “we would only get married anyway.” Although he was proud of what I had achieved with my life at the point he died in 2006, these remarks were congruent with the thoughts of my father at that time. He also felt that education was a waste of time for girls: “Why don’t you be a secretary, like your mother?”, he said. It was only because my mother insisted that I should be allowed to make my own choices and to aim high in my personal career goals that I was allowed to leave home aged 17 for “further education.”

Of course I never even tried for medical school. By then I had lost confidence in my ability. It was still in the days before the Equal Pay Act of 1972, and even though I worked after school and in the holidays I could not earn enough money to live off as a student. So I took a government studentship. That is how I got into teaching. It is a decision I do not regret as I feel I have made a difference for many young people in both secondary and tertiary education settings in the 35 years I have been involved with “education”. I have been especially interested in assisting students with special learning needs of any kind, whether they are physical or intellectual disabilities, or barriers to learning through family or other circumstances. I have always had a particular interest in the progress and achievement of young Maori women, because it was a young Maori girl who took me under her wing as a seven year old new immigrant and looked after me in the playground when the Pakeha kids gave me heaps. I owe her a debt of gratitude which I am pleased to be able to pay back, if somewhat indirectly, through the work I have done with Maori in Wanganui, and more recently in Northland.

I began this research when I was a principal of a girls’ secondary school out of a sense of social justice, as well as from a practical concern for my school’s declining roll. I was interested in the reasons why some senior students left school before the course of study they had enrolled in for the year was complete. Although I felt that the inquiry would be assisted by the insider information being a principal would bring, this concept provided many challenges for the Massey University College of Education Ethics Committee. My original proposal reflected the positivist paradigm I was influenced by at the time: it included a list of strategies aimed at avoiding researcher effects, minimizing bias and reducing ethical concerns. One of these was the employment of a research assistant to follow up the students who left from my own school, although disappointingly few Face-to-face Interviews resulted. However, being a principal had other advantages, and it did facilitate access to both staff and students at

the other two school sites which form part of this case study.

Before that I had worked in two other polytechnics<sup>1</sup> and I had always been interested in equity issues, about making sure students who were in some ways disadvantaged were given every opportunity to make the best of their ability and the opportunities available. I had done some work on drop out from Wanganui Polytechnic in 1995, and this interest continued in my role as Executive Dean at NorthTec (Northland Polytechnic).

Laurel Richardson considered “writing as a *method of inquiry*, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic....a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis” (2000, p. 923). And so it was with me. It was not until the writing up stage that I came to the realisation that this research is predominantly about women. It is about the girls who left school, their teachers and their mothers. It is about the women who tried to help them along the way, the principals, deputy principals, deans, the careers and guidance counsellors. And it is also about the special relationship I developed with the participants, the girls who dropped out of school, which has privileged such amazing stories. There are some things I know which cannot become part of the formal record but which have moved me to tears.

When I was reading Shulamit Reinharz’s book I realised that I was one of those women she had identified, who intended to study other people’s experience but who in the process recognise they are part of the group studied and use this identification to deepen the study (1992, p. 235). Reinharz made some wonderful links, through Andrée Collard, with the ecological conception I have chosen as the best way to portray my findings. She maintained that feminist researchers are housed in particular academic disciplines and theories but simultaneously connected to feminist scholarship, living in the house of their body and personal relationships.

Ecology is woman-based almost by definition. Eco means house, logos means word, speech, thought. Thus ecology is the language of the house. Defined more formally, ecology is the study of the interconnectedness between all organisms and their surroundings—the house. (Collard, 1989, p. 137, quoted in Reinharz, 1992, p. 241)

In accordance with both philosophical hermeneutics (Schwandt, 2000, p. 194) and accepted feminist practice, I bring my own experiences, as both a principal and a past

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<sup>1</sup> I worked at Hawke’s Bay Community College as the Head of Science and Technology in the decade prior.

pupil of an all girls' school, into the interpretation and analysis of the stories of the young women who left school early in 2003. Analysis and interpretation are coloured by these experiences and those of the research journey, for “understanding *is* interpretation” (emphasis in original, *ibid.*).

My hope in sharing my own story, alongside those of the leavers, is to contribute to an improved understanding of the way these young women come to leave school at that time.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Moving on and up” was the headline in *The Dominion Post* of April 7, 2006, claiming “a school in one of Wellington’s poorest suburbs has beaten the odds with its national examination results” (Quirke, 2006, p. 1). The article explained that “up to half of Porirua College’s senior pupils left school without any formal qualifications” in the past but that now only about 11 per cent do so. This school’s National Certificate of Educational Achievement<sup>2</sup> (NCEA) Level one pass rate had more than tripled since 2003, rising from 13 to 43 per cent in the period up to 2005. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority claimed that other low decile schools (where most pupils come from low socioeconomic groups) were also achieving higher NCEA pass rates, although it was acknowledged that “those rates are a long way behind decile 10 schools in wealthier communities” (ibid.).

This article reflects continuing worldwide concern over the issue of young people leaving school without qualifications. In American literature this outcome was usually referred to as school drop out, a term used by the United States Department of Education to refer to students who have “not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved education programme” (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002, p. 2). In New Zealand this group was represented by young people who leave school early, often without attaining formal educational qualifications.

Driven largely by a focus on the needs of the economy, much of the international research has centred on the concern to identify potential dropouts so preventative strategies could be put in place to support individual students and increase retention and achievement levels. A dominant theme has been the investigation of individual, social, family and school factors that placed students *at-risk* of drop out (Wells, 1990, p. 10, Appendix A) but more recent work has also considered the extent to which leaving school without qualifications may place young people at increased psychological risk (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> Part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the National Certificates of Educational Achievement are New Zealand’s national qualifications for secondary school students.

The problem is that as our society changes and becomes a more technological one it will be impossible for the dropout to blend into the larger social order. There are few, if any, jobs for these youth....[They] create problems not only for themselves but for society also. (Farmer & Payne, 1992, p. v)

Failure of at-risk youth to become integrated into the accepted patterns of social responsibility is indicated by health problems, drug abuse, crime and early pregnancy (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation [CERI], 1995, p. 5). Governments have less concern if students drop out into employment but in times of economic recession it is clearly cheaper to encourage senior school retention than to pay out unemployment benefits.

In New Zealand recent government emphasis on the development of a skilled labour force, a push associated with the perceived need for economic growth in an increasingly competitive global environment, has seen policies implemented to encourage students to stay on at school longer. As part of this enterprise culture continuing education for all has been emphasised, with the result that there has been a rise in industry training<sup>3</sup>, growth in participation in tertiary education<sup>4</sup> and increased length of stay<sup>5</sup> at high school, with most students completing five years of secondary schooling. Senior students who leave school before completing qualifications are today outside the norm.

In a political environment focused on outputs and outcomes, where schools compete for students on the basis of their academic reputation, some principals have resorted to less than ethical strategies<sup>6</sup> to achieve results. This is the context in which, as principal of a state secondary school, I decided to look into retention and drop out. This thesis is the result, and it aims to share with other educators the understandings I have developed of the so-called “problem” in New Zealand secondary schools.

Schools as “places which bring together people who have nothing in common and force them to live together, either in mutual ignorance and incomprehension or else

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<sup>3</sup> A total of 126,870 people undertook industry training during 2003, a 56% increase from the number studying in 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2005b).

<sup>4</sup> There has been increasing participation in tertiary education, with 66 per cent more students enrolling between 1998 and 2005 (Education Counts, 2006, p. 2). The number of domestic students completing a tertiary qualification at a New Zealand provider has increased by 70 per cent (from 68,800 to 116,600) between 2000 and 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Beyond age 16, the age of compulsory attendance.

<sup>6</sup> The case of Alison Annan, Principal of Cambridge High School is probably one of the best known illustrations of this point, as evidenced by *The New Zealand Herald* article (J. Middleton & McCurdy, 2004) and others cited in a media analysis of the time (Ward & Butler, 2004, p. 16).

in latent or open conflict—with all the suffering this entails” are “*difficult to describe and think about*” Pierre Bourdieu maintained (emphasis in original, Bourdieu, 1999d, p. 3). To understand what happens in schools there is a need to work with “multiple perspectives which correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, and sometimes directly competing, points of view” (ibid.). This study of high school drop out therefore draws on leavers’ stories, as well as gaining the perspectives of parents, friends, teachers, and other staff from three girls’ state secondary schools over 2003.

In the follow-up Face-to-face Interviews with students after they left, former students reported frankly on their experiences at school, and also on the powerful influence that their parents, particularly mothers, exercised. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, Bourdieu’s translation editor, explained that the “sociologist must learn how to listen to discern the sociological relevance in conversations that are resolutely individual and personal” (Bourdieu, 1999f, p. ix). So, whilst the stories of dropping out provided little evidence of rational decision-making (some students were not even sure why they had left!), it was interesting to reflect how “the everyday lives of ordinary people [gave] an understanding of the social world in which they, and we, live” (ibid.). Leavers’ stories could generally be interpreted as supporting the contention that social inequalities are perpetuated by the ineffectiveness of schools to influence the classed dispositions students bring with them from their home backgrounds and previous school experiences (Nash & Harker, 1998, p. 159).

A family resource framework (ibid., p. 3), calling on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and cultural capital, provided a starting point to discuss why drop out rates were found to vary between schools. This variance suggested that the behaviour of students who dropped out from high school could not be understood outside of the settings in which it occurred. These settings are both the immediate settings (school, home, friends and so on) with which a person interacts, as well as bigger picture political influences and overarching educational, economic, employment and welfare systems. This ecological perspective, derived from Urie Bronfenbrenner’s model of human development, provided the greater emphasis on context which the complexity of the data suggested was required.

The Intentions Survey, completed by all students at the commencement of 2003, and leavers’ data later collected by Telephone and Face-to-face Interviews, provided

evidence of students' psychological development, supporting the notion of drop out as an "ecological transition", as both a "consequence and an instigator of developmental processes" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27). The bringing together of psychological and sociological viewpoints in this study facilitates consideration of the interplay between the individual and the environment, and also poses questions about agency within the taken-for-granted ways of living.

This study consists of two parts divided into a number of chapters. **Part 1** sets out the main field of enquiry in a review of significant literature associated with drop out in education. Introduced as part of this overview, Bronfenbrenner's (ibid.) ecological perspective has been adapted to provide a deeper understanding of the complex interactions between students who leave school early and their environment. In this first part, the wider environmental influences affecting retention and drop out, the big picture geographical, historical, economic, political, educational, employment and health and welfare relations in place at the time of the study are established.

This research began with a much narrower conceptualisation of the so-called "*dropout problem*." Initially it had aimed to identify those students at-risk of leaving school early so that preventative strategies could be put in place to increase retention rates. As **Chapter 1** reveals, this was a commonly adopted approach to investigations into high school drop out, even though a lack of consensus around definitions and measurement posed difficulties in making comparisons to determine the magnitude and extent of drop out.

What became very evident from this review was the politically constructed nature of the problem. A fascinating finding was that drop out became an issue of general community concern at a time when more students were staying on at high school than at any other time in history.

For the individual student, leaving school at a particular time may seem to be part of a life journey with many possible destinations. Yet a pattern of high school drop out emerges in this study, suggesting that social structures both enable and constrain the actions of individual students. **Chapter 1** indicates how the work of Bourdieu assists us in better understanding how family advantage is passed on, perpetuating inequalities in educational opportunity, such as that arising from early school leaving. The review of research into this area showed, though, that there are many other factors which also

appear to influence drop out behaviour. The central contention of this thesis is that these are inter-related.

This holistic view builds on a store of previous understandings about dropouts and dropping out, and about interrelationships between people, including relationships with their physical and social environment. In **Chapter 2** the work on familial advantage and sociocultural influence is situated within the ecological framework adopted to gain a greater understanding of dropping out. In this approach, developed from McIntyre's (1998) adaptation of the ecological human development model, drop out is theorised as both the "product and producer of developmental change" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26), a "function of the interplay between person and environment" (op. cit. p.16).

Frielick (2004, p. 78) maintained that "to be effective theories should be derived from the settings to which they are to be applied." In this study of student drop out, then, it was important to develop some notion of the settings in which these adolescents developed, studied, worked and played, and of their home environments. How these microsystems interrelate with the wider macro systems within New Zealand society, and act to influence drop out behaviour, is constructed through leavers' stories and my own knowledge of the environment as principal of a girls' high school at that time.

**Part 2** outlines the methods utilized to collect data, and presents an analysis of the findings from this multi-site case study. **Chapter 3** explains how the three state secondary girls' school sites were selected to provide a range of settings, large urban to smaller provincial, and a diversity of student backgrounds as indicated by school decile ratings. It outlines the "narratives and numbers" (Nash, 2002b) approach adopted to gather information about proximal settings from school visits, documents, questionnaires, and interviews with leavers and selected associates.

In **Chapter 4** the focus is on the physical and social contexts of the three institutional settings, from which an analysis of the quantitative data follows. This chapter establishes who left, when and why, reporting on patterns in drop out behaviour observed across the cohort and between schools. That many students who had planned to stay on at school subsequently left is of particular interest. It foreshadows later discussion about the issue of serendipity in career development and the role of futures planning in keeping students at school.

The effects of the school site, and the influence of other proximal settings, are explored through “Leavers’ Portraits” (accounts from individual students selected to illustrate the complexity of early leaving behaviour) supported by selected extracts from other leavers who agreed to participate in the study. These narrative segments are pieced together in a patchwork to show significant relationships and to foreground the salient issues.

**Chapter 5** explores the two main influences on student leaving behaviour, the family and the school. The reciprocal interaction individuals have with their immediate (proximal) settings of home and school assists in explaining why it is that some students leave whilst others, facing similar circumstances, are retained at school.

*Mum and Me* is a sub-section of this chapter which focuses on the family setting. The role of parents, particularly mothers, emerges as of paramount importance in determining educational outcomes for students. A subsequent sub-section, *The Snow Job*, illustrates the effects which schools have on dropping out, particularly how teachers shape students’ expectations and aspirations through their day-to-day practices. This section also illuminates the tensions adolescents experience in seeking their own identity whilst being expected to conform to the sometimes differing school and home expectations.

The concluding chapter, **Chapter 6**, summarises the extent to which this case study has been able to address the original research questions. It evaluates the usefulness of the ecological framework and the form of narrative inquiry used in gaining an understanding of the complexity of retention and drop out. Drop out as an ecological transition has implications for educational policy and school transition programmes are considered here.

## PART 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The international research literature in education was found to be widely dispersed in educational journals and specific to particular topics, research designs and located within particular paradigms, Alton-Lee found when assisting the Ministry of Education to strengthen the accessibility and use of rigorous evidence-based research in education policy development (2004, p. 4). The “siloing” apparent in international literature, particularly with respect to educational psychology and the sociology of education, was also evident in New Zealand educational research (op. cit., p. 5). Access to the work of previous researchers in the field of education is further hampered in this country by the fact that much of the work by practicing educators takes the form of masters and doctoral research which is held by individual university libraries and subject to librarian supervision, Alton-Lee discovered. In conducting this literature review for the study of student drop out and retention in New Zealand secondary schools similar problems were experienced, exacerbated by the fact that public interest in drop out had been stimulated more by economic and labour market drivers than by educational concerns. Teachers are concerned by early school leaving at a school level but their interest generated different types of outputs which were not always available in the public domain.

The knowledge gained about drop out through studies of individual students, and at the school and national levels, are the result of a diversity of approaches—each underpinned by its own assumptions. Much of the literature responded to the needs of teachers and school staff concerned to identify potential dropouts so preventative strategies could be put in place to support individual students and increase retention and achievement levels (Kerr & Legters, 2004; Kronick & Hargis, 1998; Smink & Schargel, 2004; Wells, 1990). Data generated at both national and school level tended to be descriptive of the background, past experience and environments of dropouts. Although variables such as socioeconomic status, gender and ethnicity “often have predictive power” (Wells, 1990, p. 12), these are of “extremely limited value when the majority of a school’s student population is associated with these variables” (ibid.) such studies found. This approach viewed dropping out as caused by student problems and failed to

take into account system or school problems. Analysis of data collected using this approach also resulted in a questioning of the assumption that drop out and retention are different sides of the same coin. While statistics on retention are available from the Ministry of Education, there is a dearth of recent New Zealand research on either aspect.

Because of the incredibly high dropout rates reported, and the subsequent impact on the viability of small institutions, a greater development of theories to account for drop out from *tertiary education* has occurred. Whilst there are problems associated with comparing the post-compulsory sector with schools, there seemed enough parallels to warrant giving some attention to findings from the tertiary sector in New Zealand (Coutts, 1995, 2004a, 2004d). A dominant theme in drop out literature associated with the tertiary sector was the investigation of individual, social, family and institutional factors that placed students at-risk of dropping out. Similarly, as a result of a review of research into at-risk youth, Wells collated the raft of characteristics thought to indicate which secondary school students may be potential dropouts (1990, p. 10), categorising them as school-related, family-related, student-related, community-related, and demographic (Appendix A). She concluded that, whilst alienation from the values of the school and disadvantage caused by the effects of economic deprivation and racial discrimination differentiated dropouts from those who persisted in school, the “process of becoming a dropout is complex and long term” (1990, p. 3).

Chapter 1 commences with an overview of the extent and nature of the so-called dropout problem. It then considers the differing levels of analysis of the subject, from policy through to the individual school leaver. After a careful consideration of drop out literature, the ecological perspective emerges as the most appropriate to capture the complex interactions between students, their immediate settings and the wider environment. Using Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of human development as a basis, an ecological framework that conceptualises secondary school drop out within context is proposed in Chapter 2. An overview of the bigger picture macrosystem and exosystem features of the environment, which have their own associated literature, completes Part 1.

## CHAPTER 1: RETENTION AND DROP OUT—CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH

There is continuing worldwide concern over the issue of young people leaving school without qualifications but most international research focused not on retention but on drop out. The various definitions of drop out and the differing minimum leaving ages around the world (14-18 years) necessitate some caution in comparisons of international literature. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1998) has identified a range of measures of drop out used in member countries. These include the proportion of students not participating

- at the expected year of secondary completion;
- at age 17, when upper secondary education might normally be underway; and
- during the period of compulsory education.

Because readers may wish to make comparisons between the findings in this study and those of other researchers, the following section clarifies terms used in the New Zealand context:

- *Retention* generally refers to the number of students entering in Year 9 who persist in their studies until the expected year of secondary completion in Year 13<sup>7</sup>.
- *Dropping out* is the act of leaving a programme of study for which a student was enrolled in a given year.
- A *dropout* is any student who leaves in this way. This term includes both those who formally indicate their intention to leave (the *withdrawers*) as well as those lost by way of *attrition*.
- *Attrition* describes the process whereby an enrolled student ceases to attend classes and fails to respond to follow-up procedures initiated by the school.

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<sup>7</sup> Form 3 was the nomenclature used previously to refer to the first year of high school in New Zealand, but it has now become common to refer to this level as Year 9. Year levels roughly equate to age, with students in Year 13 being 17 or 18 years old, whereas the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Levels 1, 2 and 3 are academic levels. Because of social progression, it is possible that a student in Year 13 could be studying subjects at Level 1 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The New Zealand qualifications system is discussed in Chapter 2.

- *Pushouts* are those who do not follow the school rules or who are involved in crimes either inside or outside the school: “Rebellious, disruptive, alienated, these students don’t fit the system, and they are encouraged or told to leave” (Schargel, 2004b, p. 47). This group does not leave the school voluntarily. This term includes students who are *stood down, suspended, excluded, or expelled*<sup>8</sup>.
- In New Zealand students near age 16 who can show they have been accepted into further training, or accepted into full-time employment, can apply to the Ministry of Education for an *exemption* from the requirements to attend school until age 16. This must have the full support of the school and meet other stringent regulations.
- *Truancy* (wagging) or failure to attend school up until age 16 leads to close scrutiny by officialdom, with the intervention of NETS<sup>9</sup> workers who seek to encourage the student’s return to school, culminating in a court order to do so if this intervention fails.

New Zealand Ministry of Education (MOE) data do not generally take into account *transfers*—students moving to another school or institution to continue studies. The retention figures produced by the MOE can thus be misleading. Indeed, this topic is fraught with definitional, measurement and data collection issues. The effects of these have been minimised in this research by limiting the study to senior students in selected girls’ secondary schools. *Senior* is defined as students aged 16 and above at the time of leaving school. The decision to focus on senior school drop out also overcame ethical considerations associated with parental consent. Further discussion on these aspects is reserved for Part 2.

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<sup>8</sup> In New Zealand *exclusion* is the formal removal of a student aged under 16 from the school with the requirement that the student enrolls elsewhere; *Expulsion* means the formal removal of a student aged 16 or over from school. *Exclusion* and *expulsion* refer to institution-initiated leaving, usually because of serious behaviour problems. *Stand-down* is the formal removal of a student from school for a specified period. Student stand-downs can total no more than five school days in any term, or ten days in a school year. Following stand-down, students return automatically to school. *Suspension* is the formal removal of a student from school until the board of trustees decides the outcome at a suspension meeting. Following a suspension the board may decide to lift the suspension with or without conditions, to extend the suspension, or in the most serious cases, to exclude or expel the student.

<sup>9</sup> NETS stands for Non-Enrolment Truancy Service.

## The Dropout Problem

Helen Clark's opening speech at the Secondary Principals' Annual Conference (2001) highlighted, as the Prime Minister of New Zealand, the need to develop high level skills in as many young people as possible in order to maintain and enhance employment and productivity levels. Stemming from interests in social justice and the desire for economic prosperity, the challenges presented by at-risk youth had become key policy issues not just in New Zealand but also worldwide.

In many countries nationwide surveys, such as that conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCER) in the United States (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000), monitored high school completion rates to determine the effectiveness of government policies to redress the dropout problem. The emotive language associated with the interpretation of many such national surveys is of particular interest: Orfield spoke of a "catastrophe ignored" (2004, p. 3) and of the need to confront the low graduation rate crisis. Balfanz and Legters warned that "until the nation's dropout factories are reformed or replaced, the promise of the American high school as an engine of economic growth and social transformation will not be met" (2004, p. 72). The economic focus inherent in drop out concerns was reflected by Jasinski (2000, p. 276), troubled by the prospect of "businesses...being faced with a workforce that is undereducated and without the necessary skills to succeed in the changing job market." Arguments for government level intervention rest on both the direct costs to the economy and indirect social costs:

Employers today are no longer willing to hire youth who do not have the skills....society cannot afford to support the costs of lost revenue, welfare, unemployment, crime prevention, criminal proceedings, and incarceration often associated with students who drop out of school. (Llehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005, p. xi)

By way of example, Smink and Schargel reported that in the United States only 60 per cent of dropouts had been able to find work one year after leaving school: "High school dropouts cost the nation about \$944 billion in lost revenue while increasing welfare and crime-related spending by \$24 billion (NMBEE)" (2004, p. 15). Similarly in Canada, Youth Minister Pierre Cadieux told of the 300 students who dropped out from Canadian

high schools each day in 1991, yielding a 30 per cent drop out rate, “making it one of the highest in the industrial world...[and] seriously affecting Canada’s ability to compete internationally” (quoted in Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995, p. 1). The Youth Minister subsequently claimed that the estimated 137,000 early school leavers in 1989 alone would cost Canada \$4 billion in lost earnings, lost taxes and social service expenditure over the course of their working lives (ibid.).

Economic competition in Europe led Prais (1981, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 169) to consider skills shortages in Britain. Compared with Britain’s economic competitor, West Germany, Prais found that the general skill levels of the British labour force were considerably lower and that there was a lack of training in skills related to the workplace. This was attributed to dropping out, because nearly 70 per cent of students left school at 16 and few took up further education opportunities post-school. Further, Ashton and Maguire noted that employment opportunities for young people leaving school with only a basic level of education had declined<sup>10</sup> (1983, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 169), a trend which has continued. A longitudinal New Zealand study of 1265 Christchurch born children concluded that young people who left school without qualifications were at “increased risk of adverse outcomes including substance abuse, juvenile offending and receiving a benefit” (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002, p. 21), as well as being at increased psychological risk (ibid. p. 3). This conclusion was congruent with earlier research which showed that school behaviour problems were good predictors of school drop out and later signs of disturbance in early adult years, including: being fired from jobs, unwed pregnancy, substance abuse, behaviour that led to police contacts, using mental health services and suicidal behaviour including talking about suicide, threatening suicide, attempting suicide or deliberately harming self (Achenbach, Howell, & McConaughy, 1998, p. 3).

These reports indicate the depth of public concern about early school leaving. For both social and economic reasons, drop out appeared to be a problem which attracted wide attention in many industrialised countries. This leads to the question of how this concern developed and whether the problem is of the magnitude suggested by

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<sup>10</sup>In 1974, 61 per cent of 16 year olds were in employment, but 10 years later this had dropped to 18 per cent, Ashton and Maguire reported (op. cit.).

the popular press. The issues associated with drop out were summarised well by members of the Australian *Students Completing Schooling Project*:

Our reading of the extensive international research literature suggests that the issues go much deeper than locality: they are global, pervasive and protracted in nature, they are poorly understood, and they are invariably mischievously constructed to serve certain interests while denying others. (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 3)

Universal high school education is a recent phenomenon, and consequently the idea that failure to complete high school, or dropping out, is indeed a problem is similarly recent, as the following summary of the historical origins illustrates.

## Historical Origins

The dropout problem “did not blossom until the 1960s” in America (Dorn, 1996, p. 4), a time when drop out rates may actually have been on the decrease. Indeed the notion of universal secondary education, of a high school education for all young people, appeared to be a relatively recent phenomenon: one that is more prevalent in western industrialised countries than elsewhere. In the nineteenth century very few people went on to study beyond elementary level and these were mainly young men destined for leadership roles and the professions.

Tanner, Krahn, and Hartnagel (1995, p. 2) drew attention to the fact that, whilst concern about drop out has been longstanding amongst educators, it is only recently that drop out has been viewed as a problem by the wider community. That there has been rising widespread public concern, especially at government level, was reflected in policy initiatives such as Canada’s *Stay-In-School Initiative*, America’s *Dropout Prevention and Re-entry Act* (1986), *America 2000* and by the business community, through their critiques of schools.<sup>11</sup>

This mismatch between data which showed students are staying on longer at school and community concerns over early school leaving suggests that the dropout

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<sup>11</sup> The Economic Council of Canada linked Canada’s economic problems with a poorly functioning education system (indicated by high dropout rates) in *A Lot to Learn* (1992, cited in Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995, p. 3). New Zealand education reforms have been shaped by several influences, initiated originally by the New Zealand Treasury but also “strongly promoted by other groups such as the Business Round Table (and its educational arm, the Education Forum)” (Codd & Openshaw, 2005, p. 176).

problem is politically constructed. An explanation for this rather strange phenomenon has been offered by Tanner, Krahn, and Hartnagel who claimed that legitimate concerns can grow into “‘moral panics’ as the media, social-science experts, and public policy-makers rattle statistics, trade adjectives, and point fingers at those groups or individuals who might be seen as responsible for the problem (Cohen, 1972:9)” (1995, p. 2).

There were many social changes experienced internationally after World War 2. These were largely the result of differences in child-bearing patterns and pressures on labour markets caused by the introduction of pensions encouraging the retirement of older workers, more women working, and restrictions on child labour. The intergenerational nature of these widespread changes led Dorn (1996) to question why these issues have been spotlighted on adolescents through teenage pregnancy and drop out, when they had wide reaching effects on society in general. He explained that fertility rates for teenagers had been declining for a decade prior to the 1960s when the “hysteria over teenage pregnancy” appeared and, similarly, that high school attendance had actually been increasing “in the first half of the twentieth century matched [by] the simultaneous reduction in child labour” (op. cit., p. 7). That societal concern had been focused on adolescents Dorn attributed to “a deep-rooted obsession about transitions between dependence and independence in American society....Teenagers should go to school, people agreed, so that they could be productive as adults” (ibid.). Similarly Hargreaves’ British study found that employment was seen as a natural next step for students leaving school at sixteen: These early school leavers looked forward eagerly to the prospect of employment, with the greater independence and adult status that having a job conferred (1967, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 168).

Young people’s passage to adulthood is inextricably linked to the world of work. Work not only provides the resources and finances to be an independent agent, to be mobile, to start making real choices but also confers status, structures one’s daily life, assembles a ready-made group of peers, and other adults with whom to interact. (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 163)

One consequence of the way concerns about economic productivity, dependency and criminality were channelled through the drop out problem was the changed expectations of education, which saw teachers being increasingly expected to take on a

greater socialisation role. Principals of New Zealand secondary schools are, like their overseas colleagues, expected to assist in combating delinquency and ameliorating poverty. My own experience is that a large proportion of time is taken up with such issues, including dealing with thefts and assaults, drug and alcohol abuse and parents' lack of finances and inadequate agency support for their at-home problems. Principals of lower decile, smaller and rural schools are more likely to feel the workload pressure and stress as a result of needing to maintain their role of instructional leader whilst satisfying compliance and community demands on their time. These principals have less support to call on than their colleagues in bigger schools. This contention is supported by a survey of principals' reasons for leaving which suggested that "the job is just too big, and it is hard to live in the community that you are trying to change" (Monagle, 2004, p. 18).

So it can be seen that, as high school attendance became an age norm and universal high school attendance an expectation, schools shifted from being sorting institutions, which served to fulfil the aspirations of a small minority of select students destined to go to university, to mass youth socialising establishments, whose job it is to prevent delinquency and dependency. Dorn summarised the situation well:

High schools are a special type of warehousing institution because they are attached to age-related expectations, or age norms. We use high schools as part of our justification for why certain people are not working and are dependant. Teenagers are in school, supposedly to prepare for jobs and adult life...The assumed functions of high schools ease our minds about dependency and appeal to us with the notion that these institutions will take care of dependency, prevent delinquency and urban chaos, and so forth. The truth of the matter is that twelve or more years of schooling is itself a rationalised form of dependency in our society, and schooling cannot solve real problems poor people face, including violence. (1996, p. 5)

That the requirements of the economic and social structure conflict with the needs of young adolescents to develop and assert their individuality was an argument put forward by Maizels (cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 181). Indeed, it is interesting to reflect on how the reconceptualisation of the purpose of schooling has been paralleled by changes in the way human developmentalists came to understand the transition phase

between childhood and adulthood, as shown later in this chapter.

Research on school failure and drop out conducted in OECD countries evidenced common themes (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation [CERI], 1995), with poor retention<sup>12</sup> evidenced in schools with high proportions of ethnic minorities (Evans, Cicchelli, Cohen, & Shapiro, 1995). Schools that served the concentrations of urban poor were faced with problems highly correlated with both socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 30), suggesting that the influences associated with students' backgrounds required further investigation. However, the very large urban schools situated in poorer parts of big cities were those that reported particularly high drop out rates, suggesting that other factors, such as those associated with the school, warrant consideration.

The term *drop out* implies that students exercise a clear choice to leave school but this was not the experience of many, some of whom were either pushed out or faded away, according to Kelly (1993, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 14). The dominant model of career decision-making is still that of rational choice theory in which students are perceived to “calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do (Scott, 2000, p. 1): Many of the studies which focused at the level of the individual examined leavers' experiences on this supposition. However, in-depth interviews with students in a recent study of student choice from six educational institutions in the United Kingdom (Reay, David, & Ball, 2005) showed decision-making to be a messy process in which intuition, emotion and serendipity play greater roles than rational evaluation. Self-agency, that is the student's ability to effect real choice, appears to be limited not only by deep seated dispositions reflecting school and home socialisation but also by the consequences of sex, race and class stereotyping and in some cases, harassment.

Whilst Nash (1993, p. 202) maintained that “the school practices that result from the stereotypical labelling habits of teachers account for very little of the gross social differences in school attainment,” the effects of stereotyping on the students themselves cannot be discounted so easily. Stereotyping associated with drop out represents those students who leave school early as “depressed, helpless, and without

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<sup>12</sup> OECD (1998) reports that up to 50 per cent of students drop out without completing four years at high school.

options...as losers” according to Fine (1991, pp. 4-5, quoted in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 15). Many young people interviewed by Smyth and Hattam (*ibid.*) reported having to deal with the negative connotations associated with the term “dropout.” This led to their preference for the use of the term “early school leavers,” although Smyth and Hattam acknowledged the implicit judgment here, which was challenged by Dorn (1996), that all young people should be encouraged to stay at school to successfully complete the post-compulsory years of secondary schooling. However, the Australian schooling system’s minimum requirement is for students to commence formal schooling at age six, whereas in New Zealand it is age five, illustrating some of the problems inherent in interpreting drop out literature. Rates of dropping out vary within some countries, as well as internationally, attributable in part to differing policies, such as the minimum age of leaving school but also to variation in operational definitions and under-reporting of the numbers of students dropping out in certain locations.

Students’ attendance at school tended to drop off after the minimum school leaving age had been reached. In countries where the minimum age of attendance was higher, greater success in retaining students until the end of upper secondary was reported (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1998). However, when legislation in New Zealand raised the minimum age of attendance from 15 to 16 in 1993, this was congruent with a previously identifiable trend for increased senior school retention<sup>13</sup>, indicating that there may be a more complex relationship underpinning these statistics. The New Zealand experience showed that, although there were seemingly small differences in the retention rates of various groups in the senior school, major differences between ethnic groups were apparent when the highest qualifications gained by leavers were analysed. More than one third of all Maori students (35%) were found to leave school with no qualifications at all, a situation less common for students of European or Asian descent.

In summary, it appears that school drop out became a major community concern because it was feared these early school leavers would become the “near certain ‘hoodlums’ of the future” (Dorn, 1996, p. 78). With shrinking economies and

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<sup>13</sup> Statistics for 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2001) indicated increasing retention rates in the late 1980s and early 1990s, stabilizing over the last 5 years to an average length of stay at secondary school of 4.5 years overall. The average length of stay at secondary school over this same period was slightly lower (4.2 years) for Maori students.

labour market changes in many western countries, concerns to avoid the wastage of youth potential were reflected in the wealth of international research on school failure and drop out.

The following section seeks not to provide a meta-analysis of the entire literature associated with drop out and retention internationally. Rather it analyses what is known about the process of dropping out and develops an understanding of the many factors identified as influential through detailed reference to one country. The United States of America was selected to illustrate international trends because of the prodigious amount of literature available there and the demographic profile, which showed some similarities with the New Zealand situation: Both countries have a predominantly European population but with lower high school retention for indigenous and other ethnic minority students. This review calls on an eclectic range of literature derived from sociology, psychology and biology and it is organised around the perspectives of the policymakers, the schools and the teachers and, most importantly, of the students who left—the high school dropouts.

## **What the Policymakers Say**

Many governments have formalised their concerns through policies aimed at redressing the dropout problem. In America the National Center for Education Statistics (NCER) has been monitoring the situation on a national level since the mid-1980s. As a consequence the association of high school drop out with educational and economic deprivation, minority status and family disruption is well documented. The American experience reflects global trends, with drop out rates in general declining since the 1970s (Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2004, p. 85).

### ***Drop Out in the United States of America***

Ten years ago, one of the six goals of official education policy in the United States was to achieve a 90 per cent graduation rate by the year 2000 (U. S. Department of Education, 1991). However, Dorn (1996, p. 1) maintained this target was not far off the officially reported graduation rates of the time. So this raised the question of why policymakers chose this specific goal and why they selected a target which was only

marginally above officially reported rates. The high level of priority ascribed to this goal revealed federal government thinking about education and the role of schooling in the “information age”. The information age is one of many terms<sup>14</sup> used to refer to the impact of rapid social change associated with the application of technology to society, to people’s work and lifestyles, in the twenty-first century.

Only since World War II has the majority of teenagers graduated from high school and a diploma become required for most jobs (Dorn, 1996, p. 2). Education was linked to social mobility, and the diploma was seen as the ticket to a successful life journey. Widespread graduation was an American ideal which appeared to rest on beliefs about the contribution educated citizens can make to a democratic society. However, as the industrial age gave rise to the information age and many repetitious tasks were mechanised, the attitudes and abilities valued in employment and in society changed (Hipkins, 2004, pp. 3-4, after Riegle, 2004). It is within the context of such beliefs and political agendas that recent research into drop out in America has been conducted.

The context in which this particular goal was developed was very interesting. Variance in drop out prior to graduation had been reported at rates ranging from 25 per cent to 40 per cent (Donnelly, 1987, p. 1) but this goal did not focus on issues of equity. The decision not to focus on differences in achievement between various groups may have reflected the strong economic drivers underpinning education reforms. Low rates of school completion were possibly seen as an inevitable consequence of the push for higher standards amongst graduates. This push was underpinned by America’s drive to remain competitive in world markets with the advent of the information age and the consequential need for more highly skilled labour. Some researchers felt it was too early to assess the “costs and benefits of tradeoffs between the quality and quantity of high school graduates” (Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2004, p. 86), whereas others were quite sure that the implementation of higher standards and expectations of eventual failure would accelerate marginal students’ decisions to leave school.

Higher standards in the public schools have affected millions of minority and disadvantaged students who are “at-risk.” Education reform has changed the

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<sup>14</sup>Knowledge society, information economy, information age, information society, knowledge economy, knowledge-intensive era, are “near synonyms” (Hipkins, 2004, pp. 1-2).

rules before the system has had a chance to accommodate to an increasing number of students who are dropping out and becoming a burden on society. (Donnelly, 1987, p. 1)

By implication, the national goal suggested that high schools should graduate most of their students. The goal was in direct conflict with other priorities of educational reform which focused on the need to raise educational standards and to ensure the graduation diploma had standing in the marketplace. Consequently there was an inherent tension within American education policies which was felt most acutely by the school administrators required to implement them. This led some schools to push out students and to contrive ways not to count leavers as dropouts, including fraudulent reporting (Haney et al., 2005, p. 42).

State and national grade enrolment and graduation data between 1970 and 2000 suggest that over this thirty year period attrition between Grade 9 and 10 tripled, rising from less than 4 per cent to nearly 12 per cent. Whilst Haney et al. (2005, p. 38) acknowledged that “it is often difficult to make cause-and-effect inferences about complex systems, be they social or physical, with absolute certainty,” they thought that the “constriction in the high school pipeline” to graduation (ibid., p. 39) was largely a consequence of greater grade retention<sup>15</sup>. Many students were held back as part of minimum competency testing in the 1970s, the academic standards movement in the 1980s and the standards based reform and high-stakes testing in the 1990s (ibid., pp. 43-44). Repeating a grade was found to be a strong predictor of later drop out, and so it was no surprise to see that graduation rates over this period had fallen.

Policymakers were concerned that drop out rates were increasing but reports conducted by the Business Roundtable and the Manhattan Institute convey the inaccuracy of official statistics and suggest that rates were even higher than reported by the U.S. Department of Education (Schargel, 2004a, p. 12). In some states, for example, drop out data excluded students who intended to study for an alternative education credential (Graduate Equivalency Degree or GED<sup>16</sup>), and five per cent of the Hispanic students leaving early cited this reason.

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<sup>15</sup> Other reasons included death, transfer out of the state or country or from public to non-public schooling, or to home-schooling, but none of these was found to account for the substantial loss of students at this point.

<sup>16</sup> Even though the GED examination was made more difficult, it still required less proficiency than getting a high school diploma. Holders of GED certificates are not paid as much, suggesting it is not valued as highly by employers (NES, 1999, cited in Schargel, 2004b, p. 33).

In addition, changes in the way drop out data were collected over time made for difficulties in comparisons between years (Kaufman, 2004, p. 111). Because most American high schools reported annual enrolments, rather than tracking individual students over time, the exact number of students dropping out was unknown, Orfield maintained (2004, p. 4). There seemed to be local interpretations of regulations requiring reporting of absences but neither state nor federal offices checked the data so it was difficult to gain a comprehensive picture of the situation.

The problems are summarised succinctly by Smink and Schargel who explained that states differed in their definition of dropouts; they used different time periods, different data collection methods, different ways of tracking students no longer attending school, and different methods of calculating drop out and graduation rates (2004, p. 11). The “severe underestimation” of the magnitude of the dropout problem for all categories of students was a “pressing problem” (Juenke, 2004, p. 9). Because of federal emphasis on test scores, a school “can be honoured and praised for raising its test scores even when it is pushing low-achieving students out of school in order to raise average scores” (Orfield, 2004, p. 4).

According to Kaufman et al. (2000, p. 25) the goal of reducing the drop out rate was to “increase the percentage of young adults who complete a high school education,” yet they reported similar drop out and completion rates in the United States over the 10 year period through until 1999, despite the alleged increased value of a high school education in the labour market and the implementation of strategies to improve retention. Implicit in this reporting was the assumption that drop out and school completions equate: “Most Americans think...if you didn’t dropout, then you must have graduated. This is almost never true in official statistics. In some districts it is just assumed that the missing student just enrolled somewhere else” (Orfield, 2004, p. 4).

On average, 5 per cent of the high school students enrolled in any year left without successfully completing a high school programme and 11.2 per cent of all those aged 16-24 were high school dropouts, Kaufman et al. reported (2000, p. 25). The risk of dropping out was found to increase with age. The effect of age is very important, Hauser, Simmons, and Pager explained, as “grade retention is the major influence on low grade placement of older students. That is, students who have been retained are over age for grade and thus more likely to dropout” (2004, p. 98).

It was found that increasing numbers of high school dropouts were using alternative methods to gain the equivalence of high school qualifications. Further, analysis of these national data by background characteristics such as race/ethnicity<sup>17</sup>, age, gender/sex<sup>18</sup>, family income and region and state, revealed a wide disparity in drop out, retention and completion rates, especially for those of Hispanic<sup>19</sup> origin. It became evident that many researchers considered the national picture presented by the National Center for Educational Statistics (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000) under-reported the magnitude of the dropout problem for minority groups. For example, Juenke (2004, p. 2) and Jasinski (2000, p. 276) both maintained that the Hispanic drop out rate was almost double that of Anglos.

Sometimes statistical groupings which emerge, like the association of ethnicity with drop out, are artificial but further analysis showed that the schools with the most severe dropout problems were located in inner city areas serving predominantly low socioeconomic and minority ethnic groups (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. 64) and that these trends were associated with differing levels of influence, beliefs, values and educational achievement between the groups. "The main system of social stratification in Western economies is generally agreed to be social class, although people are also ranked on the basis of their gender, ethnicity and age and other characteristics," Adams and Hamer maintained (2005, p. 47). They explained that social class systems are based fundamentally on birth (heredity) and individual achievement (meritocracy), and that a person's location in a social class is related to her/his educational achievement and understood by the wealth, prestige, and power held. The defining nature of being in a socially stratified group is that there is some commonly understood means of self-identification with the group, common patterns of meaningful behaviour for the group and a system of social ranking, with inequality frequently observed between the groups

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<sup>17</sup> Whilst the terms race and ethnicity are frequently used interchangeably, the term ethnicity is preferred, because it refers to groups with a shared national origin, cultural heritage, and language without the "baggage" associated historically with race, which has been used as a way of justifying privilege and dominance and defending prejudice and discrimination (Waitere-Ang & Adams, 2005, p. 103).

<sup>18</sup> Similarly O'Neill (2005, p. 65) spoke of the collapse of the terms sex and gender, the former referring to biological differences, the physiological characteristics of being male or female, and the latter to "the social and cultural construction of gender roles or a gendered identity...the social attributes, qualities and meanings popularly understood to be male or female in that context" (p. 67).

<sup>19</sup> The term Hispanic and Latino are collective terms which appear to be used indiscriminately in American research on drop out of ethnic minorities. The term "Black American" refers to people of American African derivation and Anglos to those of European derivation.

(*ibid.*, p. 49).

Discussion of national drop out trends was characteristically devoid of reference to any theoretical framework. However, there appeared to be linkages between the background characteristics selected for measurement by the United States Department of Education and probable power relationships in wider American society. As an example, there was a claim that Black American student completion rates had improved and were at that time more similar to the average (Kaufman et al., 2000, p. v), reflecting a rise in social standing of these folk, with the introduction of immigrant labour which formed a new underclass.

Earlier work by Cairns, Cairns, and Neckerman (1989, p. 1451) also revealed that the Black American teenagers in their nonurban, largely southern, sample did not have higher drop out rates than their white peers. They suggested that this may be because employment was less available to Black American dropouts than white dropouts and that there were stronger beliefs by Black American students that “continued education is a reliable route for economic and social advance.” Similarly Ensminger and Slusarcick (1992, p. 110) found “family protective factors,” including mother’s high school education and strict rules regarding school, helped urban Black American students, who were at high risk of dropping out, to compensate for early poor performance, a factor frequently correlated with drop out prior to graduation.

Some improvements in the drop out rates for all ethnicities (relative to the white majority) were reported but still Hispanic students remained more likely than white students to leave without completing high school (Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2004, p. 91). Consequently Hispanics were the least likely to graduate and also the least likely to go on to college. So why was this? “Few studies have explored the determining factors that influence such behaviour within this population,” according to Velez (1989, p. 119), who went on to establish that within the heterogeneous group described as Hispanic, the three largest national-origin groups of Chicanos, Cubans and Puerto Ricans had different motives for immigrating<sup>20</sup> and varying ease of institutional

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<sup>20</sup> Together these three groups constitute four-fifths of Hispanic Americans. The Chicanos and Puerto Ricans were “forcibly incorporated into the United States by military conquest,” but Cuban immigrants came voluntarily because of dissatisfaction with the communist regime in Cuba (Moore & Pachon, cited in Velez, 1989, p. 119). All Hispanics have been subjected to the prejudices associated with being a racial/ethnic minority, but “the experiences of Cubans are sufficiently different to have important consequences for predicting the causes of their dropping out of school” (*ibid.*). The Cubans, in contrast to the other groups, received considerable help in relocation and “quickly acquired

adaptation which affected both drop out rates and their reasons for dropping out.

Fry was one researcher who claimed that the rising Hispanic drop out was a function of immigration and labour policies, combined with natural population<sup>21</sup> increases stemming from high birth rates. He explained that many Hispanic immigrants “never ‘dropped in’ after coming to this country” (2003, p. 5).

An influx of young immigrants, who left school before coming to the United States has swollen the ranks of those counted as Hispanic dropouts....their level of completion does not reflect the quality of U.S. schools or of Latino achievement. (ibid., p. v)

These differential rates for minority youth drop out were attributed to varying English language skills between the ethnic groups: “Unlike most white and African Americans, Latino dropouts overall are not proficient English speakers” (ibid., p. 8).

The danger of homogenizing data was illustrated by further investigation into the underachievement of minority groups. Jasinski (2000, p. 276) argued against “ethnic lumping,” and Velez (1989, p. 121) also warned of the dangers of homogenizing data from national–origin groups. Mexicans, Central and South American, Cubans and Puerto Ricans are separated by class and generation, have different immigration experiences and bring different human capital, such as job skills and educational achievement, which affect their integration into American society. For example, Mexican immigrants, who constitute 54 per cent of Hispanic immigrants, experience nearly twice the drop out rate of other Hispanics (Schargel, 2004b, p. 38). In an effort to get Mexican students to speak more English, some schools had banned the speaking of Mexican. This, and other school practices, contributed to a lessening of cultural identity with an associated deterioration in social standing (Valenzuela, 2005, p. 89). Valenzuela claimed that the “de-Mexicanization” or “subtraction” of students’ culture and language is at the heart of the issue of underachievement of these youth: “De-Mexicanization erodes students’ social capital...by making it difficult for constructive social ties to develop between immigrant and U.S.-born youth” (ibid., p. 83). Her definition of social

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considerable political clout in the Miami area” (ibid.). They were more representative of the socioeconomic background of Cuban society than the other two groups. Students who spent most of their lives outside America were more likely to dropout because of difficulties experienced with the English language, although this was not true in all cases, according to Suarez-Orozco (1987, cited in Velez, 1989, p. 121).

<sup>21</sup> Fry (2003, p. 5) reported the number of Latino 16 to 19 year old dropouts grew from 347,000 to 529,000 between 1990 and 2000. However, the dropout rate of American born Latinos declined over that period from 15.2 per cent to 14.0 per cent.

capital includes the social ties that connect students to each other, as well as the levels of resources, such as academic skills and knowledge, that characterize friendship groups. As a result Valenzuela maintained that American-born Mexican youth are characterised by weaker achievement orientations than either their immigrant peers or other American born classmates.

That English language proficiency may be a barrier to high school completion was also acknowledged by Schargel (2004b, p. 39), although he maintained that some issues associated with learning English and achieving in school are situated in cultural differences. He found that Hispanic children were less likely than white or Black American children to be read to or to visit a library. This may be because oral language skills predominate in Hispanic families, where adults do not talk directly to children and generally children do not participate in family communication until they are older (Wells, 1990, p. 8). Wells pointed out that learning traditionally takes place verbally for Hispanics, through storytelling, apprenticeships and experiences. Reading is an unfamiliar learning experience. Another difference which requires adjustment is the competitive nature of the American education system, which contrasts with the co-operative nature of Hispanic society. “Since the school culture relies on direct communication and encourages competition, Hispanic students may find themselves at disadvantage in school” (ibid.).

Low teacher expectations can also have a negative effect, Wells claimed, noting that Hispanic students “lose self-esteem when they sense that teachers expect them to fail, and counsellors do not push them into academic courses or encourage them to go to college (Enda, 1986)” (ibid.). The relationships between teachers and students were also identified by Valenzuela (op. cit.) as significant factors in the underachievement of Mexican students. Being educated in Mexican society involves more than book knowledge. It is about lived responsibility in the world as a caring human being, about being respectful of the individual and the dignity of others, and authentic learning experiences which relate to the real world are better for Mexican students, she claimed. Attendance data showed students skipped classes regularly, with the exception of perhaps one or two subjects, and invariably it was the teacher rather than the subject that made the difference: “In contrast to their teachers’ expectations, [Mexican] youth prefer to be *cared for* before they *care about* school, especially when the curriculum is

impersonal, irrelevant, and test driven” (emphasis in original *ibid.*, p. 92).

The American schooling system’s aims to assimilate ethnic minority students is a process which results in a loss of cultural identity and is threatening to students’ sense of self. Mexican youth’s resistance to schooling should thus not be seen as resistance to being educated but to the dismissal of their definition of education. It takes the form of “cultural inversion,” a conscious or unconscious opposition to the culture and cognitive styles associated with the dominant group (a concept coined by Ogbu and cited by Valenzuela, 2005, p. 92). It is thus not surprising to note that many families actively strive to maintain cultural identity by use of the home language, adherence to traditional values, and maintenance of customary practices. Schargel (2004b, p. 38) provided evidence to show that those Hispanics who spoke a language other than English in the home had higher drop out rates than their countrymen. He and Velez (1989, p. 121) both concluded that this problem had been exacerbated by migration from large urban centres to small town and rural districts which lacked the money, staffing and programmes to assist students to adapt to schools and overcome language barriers. Residential mobility was associated with “unstable economic opportunities” (Velez, *ibid.*), and it resulted in difficulties for the children who had to adapt to new sets of teachers, make new friends and adjust to new school rules. Small rural schools often had inadequate resourcing, high pupil/teacher ratios, and lack of appropriate language programmes. So it seems that a major factor in lower levels of Hispanic retention and achievement has been English proficiency. Juenke drew attention to the role district education policy could play in redressing this problem through monitoring education quality, increasing expenditure on bilingual education, and the implementation of more favourable student/teacher ratios (2004, p. 9). However, minority schools have difficulties attracting experienced teachers and may suffer from lack of appropriate role models for students. Lack of parental involvement in schools was also a problem among Hispanic families, Wells claimed, noting that negative interactions with teachers and school may result because “Hispanic students in predominantly Spanish speaking homes may feel a strong cultural pressure to maintain Spanish language usage (Steinberg, Blinde, and Chan, 1982)” (1990, p. 9), whereas teachers know that language problems are a critical barrier to school completion and they may be encouraging parents to speak English at home with their children.

Hispanics form approximately 12 per cent<sup>22</sup> of the total population of America, and yet they comprise 21 per cent of those living in poverty (Schargel, 2004b, p. 36). They generally attend schools where minorities form the majority of the student body. Much has been written about class/ethnicity and the relationship with drop out but “class has replaced race as the most critical factor in determining the economic status of Black Americans” (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992, p. 95). Poverty poses serious challenges to children’s access to quality learning opportunities and their potential to succeed in school, Schargel (op. cit. p. 34) maintained. Thus it was not surprising to learn that students from low-income families were three times more likely to drop out of school than those from more affluent homes (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1993, cited in Schargel, 2004b, p. 34). Nationwide, students from families with incomes in the lowest 20 per cent of all family incomes were five times as likely as their peers in the top 20 per cent of incomes to drop out of high school (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000, p. 8). So, children from low-income families are more likely to drop out and therefore more likely to remain poor themselves. High school dropouts have lower earnings, experience more unemployment, and are more likely to end up on welfare and in prison than their peers who complete, Schargel (op. cit. p. 34) maintained. About a quarter of both white and Hispanic dropouts reside in poverty. This finding was unexpected because only 9 per cent of white children reside in poverty compared to 27 per cent of Hispanic children (Fry, 2003, p. 12). A possible explanation is that many more Hispanic students live independently of their parents and consequently there were likely to be more earners and fewer dependent siblings in a Hispanic household.

Home ownership is a fairly crude measure of wealth, and so it was not surprising to find that it was associated with a 30 per cent decline in the odds of dropping out across every racial and ethnic group and a 46 per cent decline among whites (Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2004, pp. 100-101). Home ownership effects may also reflect greater social stability. Certainly high drop out rates for migrant children appeared to be associated with high levels of family mobility, as parents sought work (chapter 11, Kronick & Hargis, 1998). As well as the effect which mobility had on parental relations with schools and the community, it also reduced the opportunity to form strong networks with other parents and restricted the channels of information: “When the

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<sup>22</sup> Hispanics are expected to account for half of the population growth between now and 2050 in the USA.

school's parents have a dense set of associations, they can develop a strong set of norms and sanctions to promote schooling (and to prevent dropping out)" (Velez, 1989, p. 121).

The national data showed females were less likely to drop out and more likely to have completed high school than their male peers (Kaufman et al., 2000, p. 19). The inclusion in drop out data of the high number of young male immigrants who come to the United States for work opportunities was one explanation put forward to account for this (Fry, 2003, p. 12). As a result, the Hispanic dropout population was significantly more male than the Anglo or Black American dropout populations.

In contrast, other studies (Velez, 1989, p. 126) found that girls were more likely to drop out than boys. Matute-Bianchi (1986, cited in Velez, 1989, p. 121) suggested that this was because Hispanic parents are less supportive of their daughters' education. Velez (ibid. p. 126) concluded that role conflict arising because of school expectations (regular attendance and homework completion) and parental pressure to meet family obligations (looking after younger siblings and doing household chores) created social pressure which increased the likelihood of girls leaving school earlier than their male counterparts. Teenage pregnancy rates for Hispanics who drop out were found to be higher<sup>23</sup> (Fry, 2003, p. 12) than for other ethnic groups, and this may have been a factor in the high female drop out for this group.

Interestingly "accelerated role taking (dating)" (Velez, 1989, p. 120), or what Pallas (1984, cited in Velez, op. cit.) described as accelerated transition, was identified as a factor in dropping out for both sexes.

By engaging in behaviour, such as parenthood, that is more appropriate for an adult, the youth take on roles that conflict with that of a student and thus increases his or her chances of dropping out. The heavy dating of members of the opposite sex suggests an early commitment to marriage or a less-formal relationship and to forming a family. (Velez, 1989, p. 120)

Both early marriage (amongst boys and girls) and teenage pregnancy were factors associated with increased incidence of dropping out of school, Gadwa and

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<sup>23</sup> Many factors contributed, including lack of knowledge about contraception, differing family values, and lack of availability of parental advice and support if students were not living at home with their families.

Griggs (1985, cited in Velez, 1989, p. 125) found. This was linked to a differing sense of family values which was reflected in the reasons all Hispanics gave for leaving school: Hispanics were more likely to cite “home responsibilities” and, in times of high unemployment, to leave school to supplement the family income, Juenke (2004, p. 1) found. A socioeconomic link was also seen by Jasinski (2000, p. 280): “Children may have to drop out of school in order to work and help support the family.” This could be related to the fact that on average Hispanics had larger family sizes (Valdiviesa & Davis, 1988, cited in Jasinski, 2000, p. 281). Further the lack of good jobs, or other evidence of the benefits of education within poorer communities, gave these students no reason to continue their schooling.

Because Hispanic parents are not conversant with the school system of their adopted country, and indeed may not be well educated themselves, they may not be able to provide the level of support required for homework. Jasinski also noted the evidence connecting parental level of education with children’s attainment levels (op. cit., p. 280). Each year of a mother’s post-secondary schooling was found to be associated with a 10 per cent decline in chances of dropping out, Hauser, Simmons and Pager found (2004, p. 100).

A puzzling situation was that, as well as leaving in times of high unemployment, Hispanics were also found to leave school when employment opportunities were abundant. These seemingly contradictory findings are explained by Juenke (2004, p. 12), who suggested that the significantly higher drop out rates of Hispanics reported by Rees and Mocan, (1997, quoted in Juenke, op. cit.) are attributable to differences in their reaction to *changes* in labour markets. Macro-economic level research conducted by Card and Lemieux (2000, p. 3) of the National Bureau of Economic Research applied the “human capital investment model”<sup>24</sup> to analyse American educational outcomes over a 30 year period. They suggested (following work by Gustman and Steinmeier, 1981, and Light, 1995) that students stay at school longer in a temporarily depressed labour market. In times of “temporary boom,” school leaving rates were accelerated for those “close to completing their optimal<sup>25</sup> schooling, with little or no effect on those who would have otherwise completed substantially more education”

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<sup>24</sup> After Becker, 1967; Mincer, 1974.

<sup>25</sup> Family education background was a strong factor in determining this.

(*ibid.*, p. 17). The expected limited economic return for an additional year of school was thought to be a factor in lower school retention and achievement rates for the significantly larger ‘baby-boom’ cohorts. Another possibility is that the inability of the schooling system to adjust rapidly to population fluctuations may result in poorer quality education for all students because of higher student-to-teacher ratios. Thus contextual factors, such as cohort size and labour market fluctuations, were identified as influential in changing high school retention and achievement patterns.

Drop out rates were found to be higher in central cities. The effects of location on Black American’s likelihood of dropping out of school were particularly large, according to Hauser, Simmons, and Pager (2004, p. 98). Black Americans in smaller provincial cities and in suburbs were less likely to drop out than those in major cities. There was also some regionality evident (Kaufman et al., 2000, p. 15) with the northeast and midwest areas showing lower drop out and higher completion than states in the south and west, although data were not available from all states so no attempt had been made by the Department of Education to analyse any links with other factors. High schools with “weak promoting power”<sup>26</sup> were found to be located in northern and western cities and throughout the southern states by Balfanz and Legters (2004, p. 64). America’s three largest cities (New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles) had schools with particularly weak promoting power (50% or less), and were found to educate mostly minority students. Thus the association between race/ethnicity and high school drop out rates can be explained partly by differences in residential location (Hauser, Simmons, & Pager, 2004, p. 97). In every racial and ethnic group, drop out rates were consistently greater in the midwest, south and west, than in the east, (*op. cit.*, p. 98). Differentials in drop out rates were largest between Hispanics and whites but also large between Black Americans and whites, although these effects were reduced when metropolitan and regional location factors were controlled. Family and socioeconomic background were also considerations; when these factors were controlled the effects of minority status were reversed, Hauser et al. found: That is, among people of equivalent social origins, minorities were less likely to drop out than whites (*ibid.*). As already mentioned, some writers thought that minorities stay on at school longer than whites because they lack

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<sup>26</sup> Promoting power is a measure which compares the number of students entering high school with the number of seniors four years later. This ratio is seen as providing a “reliable indicator of the extent to which a high school is succeeding in its core mission of graduating its students” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. 59).

attractive opportunities outside of school (op. cit., p. 98), although this notion which links back to economic factors was untested.

Similarly Swanson (2004, p. 21) identified the lowest performing states as being in the south, and noted the association with predominantly minority and socio-economically disadvantaged student populations. He found the majority of Asian, Hispanic and Black American students attended schools in districts that were much larger than those attended by whites. Most of these schools were in urban areas. He also was one of the few writers to mention the indigenous peoples, American Indians, whom he found were more likely to attend schools in smaller towns or rural districts. These impoverished rural school systems were found to share many of the same problems facing large urban districts, leading him to conclude that these contextual factors were not likely to be major explanations of observed differences in graduation rates across racial/ethnic groups (ibid., p. 28). Indeed, after modelling a full set of district characteristics, the relationship of socioeconomic disadvantage with graduation rates remained the most powerful predictor of dropping out, Swanson found. Segregation and district size also showed strong correlation. High poverty districts attract less qualified teachers which results in less effective and less engaging instruction, producing lower levels of academic achievement, which in turn may lead students to drop out of high school at higher rates, Swanson maintained (op. cit., p. 32).

The very low graduation rates evident in some regions raised concerns about the ability of dropouts to fully participate in civic life, and highlighted the importance of this problem beyond that of the school: “For many people in these and other areas, the only real and lasting pipeline out of poverty in modern America, a solid high school education followed by postsecondary schooling or training, is cracked and leaking” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004, p. 57). Orfield stressed that the drop out situation is of nation-wide concern (2004, p. 1): “Every year...a dangerously high percentage of students—mostly poor and minority—disappear from the educational pipeline before graduating from high school.” Orfield was highly critical of national reports, such as that produced by NCER, arguing that they mask the true extent of the drop out problem. “Because of misleading and inaccurate reporting of drop out and graduation rates, the public remains largely unaware of this educational and civil rights crisis” (ibid.). He claimed that most state and local drop out statistics are flawed to the point of being

worthless, a situation that has arisen because of the low financial investment made in drop out prevention and in obtaining valid data to accurately monitor the situation.

Kaufman (2004, p. 108), who prepared many federal drop out reports in the United States, acknowledged the limitations of such reports, saying they “provide more heat than light on some rather basic questions on high school completion—how many students drop out in any given year and how many students complete high school.” In America there were two main types of drop out data: *event drop out rates*, which measure the proportion of students aged 15 to 24 that leave school each year without completing a high school programme and *status drop out rates*, which are larger because they record the total number of dropouts aged 16 to 24, regardless of when they last attended school. Kaufman explained that the uncertainty as to the extent and cause of the drop out problem was because the rates are derived by different methods, using different populations, and because of high sampling errors in the surveys conducted (ibid.).

Despite these concerns about the validity of drop out data and the difficulties in both developing appropriate policy and monitoring it, the overarching picture of drop out as the result of a complex interaction of many inter-related factors emerges very clearly in this focus on American high schools. As Balfanz and Legters explained: “It is hard to find a critical social or economic issue that does not ultimately intersect with the American high school” (2004, p. 57). To what degree social and economic background differences amongst and between groups account for their different chances of dropping out was a key question American policymakers were attempting to grapple with.

## ***Discussion***

In many countries' nationwide surveys, such as that conducted by the NCER in the United States (Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000), high school drop out and completion data were collated to monitor the effectiveness of government policies aimed at redressing the drop out problem. Much of this research was only descriptive: it mentioned who dropped out with some of the associated factors identified. International literature suggested that high drop out rates are associated with large urban schools that have populations with high proportions of ethnic minorities. But it was the socioeconomic status of the family which was thought to be associated most strongly with drop out, rather than a student's ethnic background.

The American drop out research evidenced disproportionately large numbers of students from low-income families leaving school without qualifications. This is despite an ideology of alleged classlessness which results in both a general reluctance of Americans to define themselves as working class or upper class and in the lack of reference to class divisions in political debate (Lareau, 1989, pp. 1-2). Such themes were also apparent in the international literature, which revealed differences in the power which sociologists (seeking to provide explanations for inequalities in achievement) and educationists (trying to change social behaviour) ascribed to social class in influencing children's life chances. The concept of social class<sup>27</sup>(Adams & Hamer, 2005), as gendered and racialised, is central to feminist explanations of how educational differences, such as achievement and drop out, are maintained and perpetuated, and social inequalities reproduced (Reay, 1998).

Students from minority cultures were also identified internationally as at-high-risk of leaving secondary school earlier than their peers. A major factor was thought to be their lack of fluency in English, which was not their first language, leading to poor academic achievement and subsequent drop out. Such students were considered victims of labour and immigration policies which had not been supported by parallel educational provision to assist with the process of social and academic integration.

Whilst lack of fluency in English may have been a major factor for children of

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<sup>27</sup> Giddens (1997, quoted in Adams & Hamer, 2005, p. 45) "defines social stratification as 'structured inequalities between different groupings of people.'" The main system in Western economies is social class which is based on birth and individual achievement and is associated with wealth, prestige and power (op. cit., p. 47).

recent immigrants, and those of subsequent generations, the underachievement of minority groups as a whole was shown to be a much more complex situation associated with structural racism<sup>28</sup>. Although the research “identifies a number of reasons for this underachievement, the discussion flails around looking for someone or something to blame. This is usually the children themselves or the parents” (Crozier, 2005, pp. 39-40). The stereotyping associated with the educational achievement of minority groups has been challenged by feminist researchers (Reay & Safia Mirza, 2005) who described the considerable efforts members of minority groups expend to fill gaps in state provision through supplemental education. In Britain supplemental education was found to run parallel with existing education provision, operating outside school hours, in church halls and people’s dining rooms. Volunteers, or the parents themselves, addressed literacy and numeracy needs and provided specialised subject support to enable students to pass examinations and move into tertiary education. Parents’ stories revealed that the educational system was not operating to a high enough standard to enable children of minority groups “to realise their full potential” (“Maxine’s” narrative from Reay & Safia Mirza, 2005, p. 139). These stories highlighted the difference which members of minority group communities can make. Mothers in particular, were found to invest considerable emotional energy in trying to ensure their children’s needs were met, attempting to compensate for the inadequacies of the education system and “protecting or rescuing their children from a negative or educationally damning and damaging experience” (Crozier, 2005, p. 54). Such initiatives challenge public perception of minority groups as complacent and uncaring about their children’s lack of achievement.

Why was it that, despite increasing knowledge about many of the factors associated with early leaving, and cases of exemplary practice documented in the research, at policy level a simplistic presentation of the dropout problem persisted internationally? The policies implemented to respond to the dropout problem were too limited in their approach and scale, “too small and isolated to have much influence on larger demographic trends” according to Dorn (1996, p. 3). This was one reason given for the fact that the dominant construction of the dropout problem avoided confronting issues of gender, ethnicity, and class disparities in educational achievement.

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<sup>28</sup> Ethnic prejudice and discrimination are forms of racism (Waitere-Ang & Adams, 2005, p. 121).

Tensions within the education system created by the implementation of labour, immigration and education policies aimed at increasing both the quantity of available labour and the skill level of the workforce provided another reason. Strategies to increase high school retention rates (such as raising the age of compulsory attendance at school) were driven by economic considerations as well as social concerns linked to the poor outcomes predicted for dropouts. The introduction of the concept of a universal high school education reduced the potential level of youth unemployment but increased the length of financial dependency on parents. These policy changes have also had some unanticipated effects on the students themselves, intersecting with adolescence, a critical transition period in their development—a point explored later in this chapter.

The American example illustrated that whilst the overall retention rates have indeed been rising this “improvement” has not been experienced equally across all sectors, with lower retention rates evident for students from lower socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups and (overall) for males. These retention and drop out problems tended to be concentrated in particular locations and were thought to be associated with particular schools and types of teachers.

## **Schools and Teachers**

The school level is where education policy is implemented, where the reality of confronting the dropout problem occurs. School-based interventions focusing on adolescent tasks can prevent signs of disturbance, such as drop out, that are “otherwise predicted by unaggressive conduct problems and poor school functioning,” Allen, Philliber, Herrling, and Kupermine (1997, quoted in Achenbach, Howell, & McConaughy, 1998, p. 10) found. Thus, much research centred on a concern to identify potential dropouts so that preventative strategies could be put in place to support individual students and to increase retention levels.

Like many researchers during the 1980s, Donnelly (1987, p. 1) considered that the identification of *at-risk* students and the implementation of preventative programmes were essential components of educational reform. She defined at-risk students as those potential dropouts not experiencing success in school and as characterised by poor academic performance, low self-esteem, and behaviour problems. At-risk students were generally males from low socioeconomic status

families. Whilst drop out rates varied across ethnic groups, these differences appeared to stem from parental education levels and expectations for their children's schooling. Similarly Slavin and Madden described at-risk students as those in danger of failing to complete their education with an adequate level of skills (1989, cited in Smink & Schargel, 2004, p. 2).

One of the most interesting products of this type of secondary school research, which focused on dropout characteristics and probability of leaving, was the development of at-risk profiles. The Iowa Department of Education, for example, produced a checklist of 30 specific indicators that were thought to place students at-risk with the aim of getting local schools to identify and implement intervention strategies to increase student academic achievement levels (1996, cited in Smink & Schargel, 2004, p. 3). These have remained popular as planning aids for teachers to target students for extra support, despite their limitations. Flude's typology of theories of differential attainment (1974, cited in Nash, 2001a, p. 56) was critical of the "deficit" theories which underpin such at-risk assessments, which Nash explained blame the victim—"focusing only on practices and ignoring the structural conditions of their production" (2001a, p. 66). Identification became big business<sup>29</sup> with the development of a whole raft of evaluation instruments. Donnelly (1987, p. 1) mentions the Elementary School Pupil Adjustment Scale, the Dropout Alert Scale, and the Student Sensitivity Index for specific grade levels and associated resources and references, which promised a "quick-fix" to the retention problem.

A dominant theme was the investigation of individual, social, family and school factors that increased the likelihood of at-risk students dropping out. Children at-risk of future academic failure, early withdrawal and poor adult outcomes have been identified in New Zealand as low educational achievers who are not reaching their optimal social and personal development (Ministry of Education, 1998). However, lack of academic progress is not the only school-related factor involved in high school drop out, as the studies selected for discussion in the next section illustrate: A feeling of belonging and good relationships with teachers and other students are seen to be of paramount importance in dropping out.

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<sup>29</sup> Within 10 seconds a Google Scholar search revealed 22, 700, 700 articles on the identification of at-risk students.

## ***Socialisation into the School***

Studies which revealed the similarity of students who dropped out and those who stayed on at school (Greene, 1966) suggested that “fit” with the school culture might warrant serious consideration as a possible explanation. Simply put, culture is “the way we do things around here” (Bower, 1996, quoted in Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 3). It is about values and beliefs.

The central element [of culture] is the belief system which embodies the tacit assumptions and understandings of the group. This influences the group value system, an expression of common judgments about the relative importance of issues and matters of concern. The group value system influences the development of norms that express behavioural expectations and associated standards which set the limits for consequent behaviour. (after Maxwell and Thomas, 1991, cited in Cavanaugh & Dellar, 1997, p. 6)

School culture, and its near relative school climate<sup>30</sup>, are areas “largely neglected in the literature and debates about early school leaving” (Carspecken & Apple, 1992, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 156). This may be because these are notions derived from the business field (Sackney, 1988, chap. 1), and the validity of utilizing instruments adapted from business models to measure school climate can be questioned.

Longitudinal studies, which follow a particular cohort over their time at school, allow a more in-depth exploration of many factors, including those less easily measurable such as the beliefs and values which underpin a school’s culture. Such studies allow consideration of factors affecting early leaving at the very time they are exerting their effects, providing a “clearer view of the complex interaction of factors that influence the student to withdraw” (Jex & Merrill, cited in Pantages & Creedon, 1978, p. 50). Probably because of the commitment of time, resourcing and personnel required, there are fewer such studies in the drop out literature. However, it is through these contextual studies that the true complexity of leaving behaviour is appreciated. A classic study which gave an insight into socialisation as an important influence on drop out was conducted by Hargreaves (1967).

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<sup>30</sup>Owens (1987, quoted in Sackney, 1988, chap. 1) explained that “organizational climate is related to, and subsumed under, organisational culture inasmuch as the perceptions of individuals in the organization reflect the values and belief systems in the environment of the organization.”

Acting as a participant observer at a British boys' secondary modern school, Hargreaves gained an insight into the powerful influence played by peer groups in the social system of the school. He observed that most students became part of the school social system; they were members of age-mates groups with similar "values, norms and status hierarchies" (1967, p. 185). Hargreaves saw the students as being educated and socialised "to fit certain preconceived social strata of life" (ibid., p. 192). However, those who had trouble adapting, due to lack of motivation and poor study skills, developed negative attitudes towards school. Work by Vygotsky (Rieber & Robinson, 2004) stressed the importance of teachers in facilitating learning but from my experience teachers can also make a difference to student engagement with school by providing support and encouragement. This opinion is shared by Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, and Tiakiwai (2003b, pp. 97, 102) and by Hill and Hawk (2000, p. 16).

In the British study the cultural gap between working class students from the neighbourhood and their middle class teachers, who lived outside the district, formed a barrier to positive teacher/pupil relationships. Hargreaves found adolescence to be a time when students rejected the authority of their parents and teachers and turned to peers in their search for affirmation of their developing sense of identity: "For boys in the low streams the onset of the adolescent syndrome is concomitant with the perception of status deprivation within school and its extension into their future careers" (1967, p. 183). A surprising finding was that boys from middle status forms had the poorest attendance. Poor attendance was taken as a symptom of lack of engagement with the school social order, and was attributed to the fact that these students were unable to gain satisfaction from belonging to either the high status "delinquent" group or the low-status "academic" group. Hargreaves argued that drop out resulted because there was little to attract these boys to stay at school.

This work highlighted the notion of social integration within the school as a major factor in student achievement and retention. Based on the sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1961) study of suicide, Tinto (1975) developed a theory around the concept of social and academic integration as a framework with which to understand why students disengage from tertiary study and eventually come to leave early. In this model, drop out from the institution is seen to be the result of a lack of belonging. Integration models incorporated this concept to portray drop out as a product of

individual characteristics and family background, interacting with the social and academic environment of the institution (Kember, 1989; Tinto, 1975). Friendship, support, and a feeling of belonging were a part of the evaluation students made about their study commitment (Roderick, 1993). Roberts, Boyton, Buete, and Dawson (1991) maintained that individuals direct their energies into activities which maximize the ratio of benefits to costs so that students will drop out if they perceive an alternative (e.g. employment) will give them greater benefits than continuing with study. Although developed for the tertiary sector, these integration models seemed to tie together many of the factors identified as significant in school drop out, particularly the main role of institutional factors. The compulsory nature of attendance is just one of many important ways in which high school differs from higher education but Roderick argued that:

Despite these differences, the qualitative literature on early school leaving provides evidence that Tinto's [tertiary education] framework applies equally well to the case of high school dropout....In particular, qualitative research on school dropout allows us to develop an understanding of the interactive process by which difficulty in school, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, would lead youths to leave a community which they have decided they are not members. (Roderick, 1993, p. 37)

Incongruence—defined as a lack of fit or a mismatch between the needs, interests and goals of the student and those of the institution—is central to understanding the process of student withdrawal, according to Tinto's (1987) theory. Applying this notion to schools would suggest that drop out arises when students feel alienated socially or academically, or when they experience role conflicts between the expectations of the school and those of the home. Tinto argued that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are most likely to experience the biggest mismatch between home and school role expectations, and this explains why they are more likely to drop out when they encounter academic problems. That similar processes are at play in New Zealand was suggested by Hawk and Hill (1997, p. 10). They talked about strategies students use to “cope” with the pressures of their conflicting worlds: Lateness and truancy, alcohol and other substance abuse, are known predisposing factors to leaving school without qualifications.

A major critique of this approach is the deficit discourse and assimilationist<sup>31</sup> perspective implied within the notion of integration (Zepke & Leach, 2005, p. 47). Retention strategies based on this conceptualisation suggested the need to assist students to find ways of fitting in better, such as attending orientation days, rather than the institution changing its learning environment to better facilitate meeting the needs of the diversity of students' interests and abilities, as suggested by Tierney (2000, quoted in Zepke & Leach, 2006, p. 52), Hawk and Hill (2001, pp. 3-4), Calder and Henley (2004, p. 1), and exemplified by America's *School Transitional Environment* and *Check and Connect* Projects (Llehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005, pp. 114-115).

Assimilationist theories based on the notion of cultural deprivation have been dismissed as explanations for the low academic achievement and high drop out rates of poor and ethnic minority groups in the United States (Banks, 1999, p. 81). There is now recognition that these students have "rich and elaborate cultures" (ibid.), evidenced by different language, behaviour, and values.

Speaking specifically about the educational needs of indigenous people in the New Zealand context, Bishop and Glynn went further, suggesting that "the existing pattern of dominance and subordination, and its constituent classroom interaction patterns, perpetuate the non-participation of many young Maori people...the idea that addressing cultural diversity means identifying ways of acknowledging and celebrating cultural differences only perpetuates this pattern" (2000, p. 4). A more holistic approach is required, involving all learners and the wider school community. Based on research by Smith (1992, 1997, cited in op. cit., pp. 4-5), they suggested that mainstream education should be based on six principles of self determination: learner and parent involvement (as "tino rangatiratanga"); cultural aspirations ("taonga tuku iho": using Maori values, knowledge, language and culture as a guide for classroom practices); reciprocal learning and teaching ("ako" which implies the adoption of active learning approaches); "kia piki ake i nga raruraru o te kainga" or the mediation of socioeconomic and home difficulties (involving parents and families into school activities ensures problems can be dealt with in culturally appropriate ways); the adoption of "whanau" or extended family type relationships into the classroom (to establish a pattern of

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<sup>31</sup> However, in discussion at the Bridging Educators Conference in 2005, Tinto acknowledged the need for institutions to consider how they can adjust to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse higher education population (Tinto, 2005).

interconnectedness and sense of commitment), and the application of the collective philosophy, or “kaupapa.” Through the adoption of common goals and principles this vision seeks to achieve excellence in world languages and cultures. In a local context these principles place a strong focus on relationships between school and home, with the aim of ensuring that “all children will benefit from education” (ibid). The adoption of these power sharing principles would have major implications for teaching practice and for all learners.

The conclusion that the school environment needs to be “reformed substantially” (Banks, 1999, p. 82) is based on emerging recognition of the diverse cognitive, learning and motivational styles of students from different ethnic backgrounds. For example Mexican–American children were identified by Ramirez and Castaneda (1976, quoted in Banks, 1999, p. 86) as being more “field sensitive learners”—that is, learners who are sensitive to the feelings and opinions of others and who prefer to work in a group to achieve a common goal. However, they found that teachers usually preferred field-independent students. They assigned higher grades to those who were task oriented and “inattentive to their social environment when working” (ibid.). The school curriculum and the teaching styles of most teachers tended to reflect the characteristics of field independent students, Banks maintained. This international research may provide a useful platform to enhance our understanding of the difficulties which some of our Maori and Pacific Island students encounter.

In taking account of ethnic variation in learning styles, however, there is a danger of overlooking the wide intra-group variations related to age, gender, social class and region.

Social class is often conceptualized and measured differently in studies that include class as a variable; this makes it difficult to compare results of different studies. Researchers frequently use different scales and instruments to measure variables related to cognitive, learning, and motivational styles. To operationally define social class, especially across different ethnic and cultural groups, is one of the most difficult tasks facing social scientists today. (Banks, 1999, p. 83)

## ***Socioeconomic Status and Ethnicity of Dropouts***

Researchers in other parts of the world have also been struggling to unpack the relationship between socioeconomic status and early leaving behaviour. A New Zealand ethnographic study (Nash, 1997b) of 83 Year 12 (16-17 year old) students in a multicultural coeducational urban secondary school found that only 57 students completed the course and, of these, 26 did not display the at-risk characteristics expected. Several students of above average ability and with supportive families lost the desire to put the energy required into schoolwork, and subsequently left early, raising questions about student motivation. How teachers shape students' expectations and aspirations by "cooling out" and other day-to-day practices is illustrated by Jones' (1991, pp. 171, 178-179) study of Pakeha and Pacific Island students in a New Zealand girls' school.

Nash's study was part of a more extensive, longitudinal project (Nash & Harker, 1998; Nash & Harker, 1997) which investigated progress at high school within a "family resource framework" influenced by the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The aim of the overall project was to investigate school effects on the progress of the 5383 students who began high school as third formers (Year 9) in 37 schools in 1991. Nash and Harker found few differences in student attainment that could be attributed to any of the schools attended but this study did highlight the relationship between aspiration, attainment, and social class:

Progress at school...is associated with certain personal dispositions of which the most significant are aspiration and academic self concept....there is evidence that middle class students are more likely than working class students, even when level of attainment is controlled, to aspire to higher education. (Nash & Harker, 1997, p. 6)

Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" (quoted in Nash, 1997a, p. 34) forms the basis for understanding these relationships: It assists in explaining why working class students do not achieve as well as their middle class counterparts, and why the attainments of Pacific Island and Maori students are lower than the attainments of students of European descent. According to Bourdieu the day-to-day socialisation which

occurs as part of taken-for-granted, day-to-day family practices, is the way in which children acquired a certain “disposition” or frame of mind, which affected their choices. This family socialisation process provided a “hidden subsidy” for middle class children, by creating a physical and psychological environment which facilitated learning at school (Bernstein, 1975, cited in Nash, 1999a, p. 141). Children with values which differed from those of the school did not achieve as well as their academic potential might have indicated and, in this way, students come to “internalise their statistical fate” (Nash, 2000, p. 70). Many middle class children can already read before they go to school: They have knowledge of the system and its expectations (Nash, 1999a, p. 147). Timeliness, neatness, orderliness and being able to talk to adults are values of the school which correspond with the values taught in middle class homes (Meehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996, cited by Nash, 1999b, p. 268).

Bourdieu recognises all family assets as forms of capital that have value (Nash, 2002c, p. 275). These include financial assets, as well as cultural capital, the intergenerational knowledge transmitted in the home. Cultural capital is thought to give white middle class children a head start at school. However, Nash’s study revealed that some “working class Pacific Island and Maori girls of more or less ‘average ability’ were also able to succeed where many of them had failed” (1997b, p. 2). Similarly, Jones found that some working class Pasifika students did well, “despite the obstacles—due perhaps to their particular individual circumstances” (1991, p. 180). Some individuals are able to “struggle successfully against the usual patterns of social privilege,” she concluded, adding that “the education system is not so monolithic that privilege is neatly reproduced along ethnic and class lines, for all individuals” (*ibid.*). Indeed the correlation between academic attainment and social class was only moderate (Nash, 1999b, p. 268), leading Nash to conclude that the “real key to success at school, particularly at this level, is wanting to succeed” (*ibid.*, p. 273). “Those who make relative progress at school are those who have formed high ambitions, who have learned the necessary skills of successful application, and who are able to accommodate themselves to the order of the school,” Nash and Harker concluded (1998, p. 87).

This conclusion can be linked to the construct of locus of control, the perceived relationship between an action and its consequences. Individuals who believe that consequences are the direct result of their actions are said to have an internal locus of

control or internality; whereas those who believe that there is little or no relationship between their behaviour and its consequences are said to have an external locus of control. Leftcourt (1982), Vasquez (1979) and Garner and Cole (1986, all cited in Banks, 1999, p. 87) argued that there is a relationship between social status, *internality* and academic achievement, which has its roots in family socialisation processes: Higher socioeconomic status students tend to have a more internal orientation whereas ethnic minority students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to believe that their future is determined by external forces (luck, fate, or the actions of others).

Social class and ethnicity do not determine levels of achievement or drop out behaviour for individual students but they indicate the likelihood of such events.

### ***Transitions***

Transitions appear to generate critical periods, whether the transition is from school to work or further study, between schools, or even from level to level within a school. Several studies suggested that there are declines in student progress “*within-school transitions and between-school transitions*” (emphasis in original; Wylie, Hodgen, & Ferral, 2006, p. 82, drawing on the work of Galton et al., 1999). Studies measuring self-esteem have reported a general rise during adolescence, with the exception of a (usually temporary) decline associated with school transitions (Berk, 2001, p. 391). Catterall found that both academic progress and student confidence improved where there was active engagement in learning, participation in extracurricular activities, high levels of teacher responsiveness, fair discipline and family support (1998, cited in Wylie, Hodgen, & Ferral, 2006, p. 82).

However, failure to make the adjustment from one educational environment to another may result in a setback from which some students do not recover. For many students this is because they are insufficiently prepared for the scale of academic and social change expected of them when a change of school occurs but in other cases students move schools more frequently which causes the problem.

These points are well made by an interesting longitudinal study which tracked the divergent school career paths of 1000 students from Middle School in Fall River city, Massachusetts (Roderick, 1993). Roderick found substantial differences between early and later dropouts. Of those students who were in seventh grade in 1981, 35 per

cent dropped out of school before receiving a high school diploma, 38 per cent graduated, and 22 per cent transferred to another school. Those who dropped out early, in their first year of high school, had significantly lower grades than their peers and they already had a history of repeating classes. After they moved to high school their academic performance deteriorated rapidly.

The attendance and overall grades of later dropouts were not much different initially from those who persisted. Indeed, attendance for all students generally declined over adolescence and, after transitions between schools, the grades of all students similarly fell. However, school disengagement, indicated by attendance, accelerated at a faster rate for the later dropouts: “What were periods of moderate declines in school performance and engagement for some students, were *critical points* for dropouts” (Roderick, 1993, p. xix). Early school leavers experienced much bigger drops in performance at that time, and they never recovered. Later dropouts experienced greater difficulty in coping with the stress of academic and developmental hurdles experienced by all students during adolescence. However, poor attendance was generally thought not to be the cause but to be “symptomatic of the potential dropout” (Greene, 1966, p. 27).

The transition from school to work is another critical period for young people: “It marks the passage from adolescence to adulthood, from ‘being cared for’ to ‘caring for oneself’” (Ashton, Cutforth, Hudson, & Reed, 2002, p. 1). Ashton et al. went on to declare that “unsuccessful transitions carry huge costs to the country” (ibid.). Besides direct costs of health care and welfare support, the “‘disconnection’ from society” (ibid.) experienced by unemployed youth results in significant social costs for the individuals, their families and for the infrastructure of the country they live in. As well as contributing to future employability, successful transitions from school provide a strengthened sense of identity and self-worth (ibid.).

Hargreaves (1967) identified the search for identity in adolescence as a major problem for the boys in his study. Despite the fact that most students experience some stressors in the period of adolescence, “if one thing jumps out at us in our study of dropouts, pushouts, and at-risk children, it is that so much has happened to them at such an early age,” Kronick and Hargis maintained (1998, p. 153). There was no question in their view that there are significant differences between those students who persist at school and those who leave but “the differences run far beyond their respective

performances in school” (ibid.). Wylie, Hodgen, and Ferral suggested that some of these differences are the result of “transition points in individuals’ personal lives, rather than changes in their school structure” (2006, p. 82). Considering the extent to which the problems of adolescence contribute to high school drop out is the focus of the next section.

## **Students**

### ***Problems in Adolescence***

Senior students who drop out of New Zealand high schools do so during adolescence, a developmental period characterised traditionally as “*a turbulent time charged with conflict and mood swings*” by the “*Father of the Scientific Study of Adolescence*” (G. Stanley Hall, 1904, cited in Santrock, 2001, p. 7; emphasis in original). Adolescence is the transition between childhood and adulthood, which usually begins at about 10 to 13 years of age and ends between the ages of 18 and 22 years for most individuals. Adolescence is both a time of change and consolidation during which major physical, cognitive and emotional developments are interwoven. These carry with them a change in body image and sense of self: “The biological, cognitive, and socioemotional changes of adolescence range from the development of sexual functions to abstract thinking processes to independence” (Santrock, 2001, p. 17).

Puberty, commonly associated with the onset of menstruation in girls and the emergence of pubic hair in boys, involves changes not only in the reproductive system and in the secondary sexual characteristics of the individual but also in the functioning of the cardiovascular, respiratory and musculatory systems. An accelerated period of growth in height and weight is also associated with puberty, although the changes radically altering body size and shape do not occur all at once and are generally earlier in girls than boys. The variation in maturation rates prompts awareness of being separate and different from others for even the most well adjusted adolescent. As a result of media promulgation of ideal norms for male and female attractiveness, many teenagers feel inadequate if they do not match these unrealistic criteria and “adolescents who perceived themselves as deviating physically from cultural stereotypes were likely

to have impaired self-concepts” and lowered self-esteem (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 22).

Whilst most pubertal change takes place in early adolescence (ages 11-14 years), late adolescence is characterised by a greater focus on career interests, dating, and identity exploration. Some consider that completing school, or taking a first full-time job, signals the exit from adolescence and entry to adulthood (Santrock, 2001, p. 18). This is probably in recognition of the significant impact such milestones have on an individual’s ongoing development.

However, just as drop out is a socially constructed problem of recent origin so too is the notion of adolescence a relatively recent construct in human development theory. Indeed, it is only recently that adolescent development has come into focus. Santrock (2001, p. 8) suggested that adolescence was a notion designed, through restricting youth employment and introducing compulsory state education, to meet the economic needs of industrialised countries for more highly skilled labour and a reduction in unemployment:

*Especially important in the inventionist view of adolescence are the sociohistorical circumstances<sup>32</sup> at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time when legislation was enacted that ensured the dependency of youth and made their move into the economic sphere more manageable.” (author's emphasis, ibid., pp. 7-8)*

This view was supported by Enright, Levy, Harris, and Lapsley’s analysis of journal articles over four historical periods (1987, cited in Santrock, 2001, p. 8): the depressions between 1880-1894 and 1921-1935, and the two world wars. During economic depressions, psychologists wrote about the psychological immaturity of youth and their educational needs. During times of war the focus changed to the importance of youth as draftees and factory workers. This perspective on the adolescent period provides an insight into current concerns about the dropout problem, which can be viewed similarly as a response to economic and employment related issues.

Early philosophers, John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) considered that human development stopped at the end of childhood but today,

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<sup>32</sup> The decline in apprenticeship, increased mechanization during the Industrial Revolution, upgraded and more specialized skill requirements, separation of work from home, urbanization, age-segregated schools.

with increased life expectancy and greater knowledge based on empirical evidence, human development is now considered a lifelong process, with changes in an individual's physical, emotional, social and cognitive functioning identifiable over the whole life course.

Mid-twentieth century theories of adolescent development came in the main from two different perspectives. The psychoanalytic perspective focused on internal processes to explain development (Freud, Erikson) whereas the sociological theories (Bandura) concentrated on factors in society and the changing roles individuals played at various life stages. Both traditions emphasised adolescence as a period of stress, conflict, and difficulty. The teenage years became identified in the popular press as the *generation gap*: a time of rebellion, of self-consciousness and identity crises.

As a high school principal for eight years, I can attest that most students survive teenage years unscathed. Many adopt values similar to their parents on major issues such as morality, sexual attitudes and political and religious beliefs, Coleman and Hendry maintained:

While there is certainly some change in the self concept, there is no evidence to show that any but a small minority experience a serious identity crisis. In most cases relationships with parents are positive and constructive, and young people, by and large, do not reject adult values in favour of those espoused by the peer group. In fact, in most situations peer group values appear to be consistent with important adults, rather than in conflict with them. (1990, p. 201)

So why is there a gap between our own experiences and popular perception? The “sharp divergence of opinion...between what have been called the ‘classical’ and ‘empirical’ points of view” (ibid., p. 202) may be associated with the unique experience that many early researchers brought to adolescent theory development. As psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, their professional roles did not engage them with a cross section of the population: For example, many of Erikson's ideas about individual development emerged from clinical experience in which the incidence of disturbed youth is presumably higher. Coleman and Hendry (ibid., pp. 202-203) explained that for “sociologists...the problem is often to disentangle concepts of ‘youth’ or ‘the youth movement’ from notions about the young people themselves...[to avoid confusing] radical forces in society with the beliefs of ordinary young people (Brake 1985).”

Another reason for the divergence of viewpoints is that, whilst certain adolescent behaviours are considered normal adult behaviour (for example, smoking, drinking, and sexual activity) they are deemed inappropriate for youth. Media reporting sensationalises instances of anti-social behaviour, such as vandalism and drug taking, making it appear more common than it is in reality. However, it now seems to be more generally accepted that, “while a minority experience difficulty during the adolescent transition, the majority cope well and do not exhibit signs to indicate that they are grappling with ‘storm and stress’” (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 204). This is not to underestimate the importance of this transitional age during which “one of life’s decisive moments,” the selection of a career pathway, usually occurs according to Vygotsky (Rieber & Robinson, 2004, p. 471).

### ***Identity Seeking in Adolescence***

Vygotsky maintained that one of the basic features of adolescence is “the discovery of one’s own ‘I’” (Rieber & Robinson, 2004, p. 477). Students’ needs to express their new-found-identity sometimes bring them into conflict with school authorities. Students in this study sometimes mentioned these conflicts as part of the reason for leaving school earlier than intended. To the students what they wore and how they looked were expressions of their own individualities, symbolic of emerging identities and precious to preserve at all costs. Compliance with rules, including uniform codes, was seen as important for the school in its socialisation role. Infringements were sometimes taken as challenges to authority.

In the foreword to *Dressed to Impress* (Keenan, 2001, p. xv) David Martin, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, explained the cultural significance of what we wear: “Dress mediates how we see ourselves and how others see us, and if we want to pass muster we had better make the right choice.” The conflict for adolescents is that what they want to wear, how they wish to behave, and what is acceptable to peers, differs from the requirements of parents and the school. Changing physical appearance due to puberty exacerbates these identity problems for those students out of sequence with developmental norms<sup>33</sup>. As Coleman

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<sup>33</sup> Early and late maturers differ from on-time maturers because of their status as being socially deviant compared to their peer group and, as a result, they have been found to experience personality disorders in some cases.

and Hendry explained:

The essential dilemma for the individual adolescent in wishing to be fully integrated and accepted in society is between “playing appropriate roles” and “selfhood”: On one hand, it is important to be able to play appropriate roles in a variety of social settings and to follow the prescribed rules for these situations. On the other hand, it is equally important to maintain elements of individuality or selfhood. (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 45)

Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of drop out behaviour requires a combination of both socio-structural theories (mentioned in the previous section) and psychological theories (discussed here). These were regarded previously as competing conceptualisations: “A full understanding requires an integrated causal perspective in which social influences operate through self-processes that produce the actions” (Bandura, 1997, p. 6). In this chapter we progress towards this view through consideration of the four main adolescent development perspectives identified by Santrock (2001): psychoanalytic, cognitive, behavioural and social learning, and ecological.

### **Psychoanalytic Perspective on Adolescent Development**

Problems leading to drop out are the result of experiences early in life according to the psychoanalytic perspective, which “takes as its starting point the upsurge of instincts which is said to occur as a result of puberty” (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 3). This approach to personality development, introduced by Freud (1856-1939), focused on theories of personality development through psychopathological studies. Development is subconscious primarily, beyond awareness, deeply “coloured by emotion,” so to understand drop out in the context of a student’s development this conceptualisation requires analysis of the “symbolic meanings of behaviour and the deep inner workings of the mind” (Santrock, 2001, p. 38). In this view, ‘normal’ children move through five stages of psychosexual development in which they adjust to conflicts between various biological drives and social expectations.

Freud’s conception of personality has three structures: the id (instincts, the reservoir of psychic energy in the unconscious), the ego (which deals with the demands

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of reality, the rational decision-making aspect of personality), and the superego (the “moral branch of personality”, the conscience, which takes into account whether something is right or wrong) (Santrock, 2001, pp. 38-39). As Santrock explained, “the ego resolves conflict between its demands for reality, the wishes of the id, and constraints of the superego by using **defence mechanisms**” (emphasis in original, p. 39). Freud argued that the onset of puberty—the awakening of sexual feelings for others outside the family—led to a greater vulnerability of the personality during adolescence. As a result some individuals may adopt psychological defences, such as repression, to protect the adolescent ego and reduce anxiety: Repression pushes “unacceptable id impulses out of awareness and back into the unconscious mind” (ibid.). Whilst they are not necessarily unhealthy as short-term strategies, Freud’s daughter, Anna, suggested that these unconscious defence mechanisms are “key to understanding adolescent adjustment” (ibid.). Some adolescents may require assistance in facing reality and dealing with repressed childhood experiences which are too stressful to deal with consciously.

In one such case encountered in this study the student describes physical symptoms which suggest she is anorexic. Berk (2001, p. 360) suggested that anorexic eating disorders are associated with adolescent autonomy: “Often these parents have high expectations for achievement and social acceptance and are overprotective and controlling.” Applying Berk’s view to this student’s case would suggest that, whilst the daughter tries to meet these demands, “inside she is angry at not being recognised as an individual in her own right. Instead of rebelling openly, the anorexic girl indirectly tells her parents, ‘I am a separate person from you, and I can do what I want with my own body!’” (ibid.).

In another example a young girl in this study had difficulties coming to terms with her mother’s boyfriend, and the psychoanalytic approach was able to provide a useful insight into links with her absent father and her dropping out. Abecassis maintained that certain people but more particularly girls, have a greater “susceptibility to enmity” (2003, p. 14). This psychoanalytical perspective suggested that “one way to manage conflictual feelings,” which arise in the development of self, is by projecting them onto someone else (ibid.). The differentiation of self begins in the attachment relationships with parents. The importance of parent-child relationships, particularly the

sense of attachment security (the result of consistent and warm parenting), is known to be linked to peer relations and susceptibility to enmity, possibly providing an explanation for this student's actions.

However psychosexual theory, which emphasised that parents' management of children's sexual and aggressive drives during the first few years is critical for healthy personality development, has received considerable critique from feminists. Horney (1967, cited in Santrock, 2001, p. 41), for example, argued that it reflects a male dominant society and culture. Chodorow (1978, 1979, also cited in Santrock, *ibid.*) went further, claiming that women tend to define themselves in terms of their relationships and connections with others more than men do. Thus contemporary psychoanalytic theory places more emphasis on cultural experiences than sexual instincts as determinants of an individual's development.

Whilst Freud considered that development stopped at adolescence, Erickson proposed a theory of development that encompassed the entire life cycle: "All stages grow out of previous stages" (Muuss, 1996, p. 42). Erikson's (1902-1994) psychosocial theory of identity development combined knowledge gained through psychoanalytic training with the recognition of the influence of social effects. It emphasised that the demands of society at each Freudian stage not only promote the development of a unique personality but also ensure individuals acquire the requisite attitudes and skills necessary for full participation in a social setting. Early in their development children begin to assert their independence and develop active purposeful behaviour as a result of the challenges posed by exposure to a widening social world. Mastering knowledge and intellectual skills is a focus of school years. Erikson believed that teachers have a special responsibility for children's development of *industry*, that is diligence or habitual effort in pursuit of some goal.

Whilst there were some differences in approach, Freud and Erikson had in common a belief that problems in adolescence were the result of experiences earlier in life. The correlation of high school drop out with academic failure and grade retention, which came through consistently in previous dropout studies, may be rooted in the low self-esteem developed from primary school experiences. Erikson's fifth stage, *Identity versus identity confusion*, is the developmental stage characteristic of adolescence and it serves as a crucial step in an effective transition to adulthood:

Constructing an identity involves defining who you are, what you value, and the directions you choose to pursue in life....This search for what is true and real about the self is the driving force between many new commitments—to sexual orientation; to a vocation; to interpersonal relationships and community involvement; to ethnic group membership; and to moral, political, religious, and cultural ideals. (Berk, 2001, p. 390)

From my observations as a principal and parent the confusion teenagers experience can, in most cases, be better described as an exploration of values and priorities rather than a crisis. The differing perceptions about the level of difficulties experienced in adolescent transitioning can be attributed partially to the clinical foundations of Erikson's work and partially also to the historical context in which he developed his theories of teenage identity formation. Stressors on teenagers during adolescence have increased<sup>34</sup> as life has become more complex and as longevity increased. However, increased complexity is a trend associated more with Western industrial societies than with other cultures<sup>35</sup>.

The psychoanalytic theories detailed here have stressed the importance of adolescents' unconscious thoughts in human development, whereas cognitive theories, such as those promoted by Piaget and Vygotsky and outlined in the next section, emphasise conscious thoughts.

### **Cognitive Perspective on Adolescent Development**

Adolescence is the period in which self-consciousness and personality become fully developed. According to Muuss (1996, p. xv), the search for identity in

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<sup>34</sup>Santrock (2001, p. 11) noted that "many adults measure their current perceptions of adolescents by memories of their own adolescence." In the "roaring twenties" adolescents began to behave more permissively, with adolescent drinking increasing. In the 1960s and 1970s increased use of drugs, more permissive sexuality and civil disobedience by teenagers protesting against the Vietnam war led to the development of adolescent stereotypes "*based on information about a limited, often highly visible group of adolescents*" (ibid., p. 10, emphasis in original). However, Santrock maintained that much of the radical protest of youth has quietened down over the last 30 years and that "today's adolescents are achievement-oriented, more likely to be working at a job, experiencing adult roles earlier, showing more interest in equality of the sexes, and heavily influenced by the media" (ibid., p. 11).

<sup>35</sup> Cultural relativism arguments, based on the ideas of Boas and his student, Mead, who conducted extensive field work in Samoa, support the notion that "adolescence is not a biological but a cultural phenomenon" (Muuss, 1996, pp. 111-112). These views were later disputed by Freeman (1983), also based on Samoan evidence, (ibid., p. 111). In the United States "considerable evidence has accumulated that adolescence can be a happy and harmonious period of life, at least not for an insignificant portion of youth. Thus, the physiological changes of puberty and sexual maturation alone are not categorically responsible for adolescent difficulties. Anxieties, insecurities, social pressures, social expectations, and cultural, educational, and family factors all may contribute to adolescent stress" (ibid.).

adolescence “is a progressive exploration of potential roles” within which there is a huge “range of individual variability in these pathways” (ibid., p. xvi). This variability is attributable in part to the opportunities available within the environment but also to the skills and abilities that the young person is able to bring to bear in accessing these opportunities.

That individuals are active learners, engaging with and making sense of their environments, was the basis of Piaget’s (1896-1980) cognitive-developmental perspective, offering part of the answer to the question of variability. Piaget contributed to the understanding of the role that cognitive development plays in adolescence although, in common with many so-called stage theories, there has been some debate about whether the discrete stages of cognitive development exist as Piaget outlined, and also whether his theories have universal applicability or are culturally relative (Muuss, 1996, p. 169). It has been argued that the formal operations<sup>36</sup> stage, characterised by abstract thinking, may never be attained by a significant proportion of adolescents (Kuhn, 1979, cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 170). Piaget acknowledged that an atypical group of privileged adolescents from some of the best schools in Geneva formed the basis of his study but he maintained that differences between his findings and those of others highlighted “differences in speed of development without any modification in the order of succession of the stages” (Muuss, 1996, p. 170, drawing on work by Piaget, 1980). In this argument, lack of opportunity to solve hypothetical problems impedes the full development of abstract thought. Because of this, not all high school students will be capable of making the kind of reasoned decisions about staying on, or dropping out, which economic rationality suggested (Boudon, 1982, cited in Nash, 1997a, p. 151). Rational choice theories are based on the assumption that “all action is fundamentally ‘rational’ in character and that people calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do” (Scott, 2000, p. 1).

In Piaget’s social-constructivist explanation of knowledge, individuals actively piece information together, bit by bit, based on their previous experiences and the

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<sup>36</sup> Piaget identified four stages of cognitive development: the sensorimotor stage (birth to two years) during which infants construct an understanding of the world by co-ordinating sensory experiences with “physical, motoric actions” (Santrock, 2001, p. 44); the preoperational stage (two- seven years) in which children begin to present the world with symbols; the concrete operations stage (seven to 11 years) in which “logical reasoning replaces intuitive thought as long as reasoning can be applied to specific or concrete examples” (ibid.); the formal operations stage (appears between the ages of 11 and 15) evidences more abstract thought and children can begin to entertain possibilities for the future.

perspectives of others. According to this view, success in constructing knowledge is dependant on the level of intellectual maturity and the underlying structure of the individual's mind. The other component, which Piaget discounted, was the role that more knowledgeable adults, such as parents and teachers, play in development. Vygotsky (1896-1934) saw development as a socially mediated process in which children's language and communication skills quickly lead them down different developmental paths. In this way, the tremendous difference in the development and structure of self-consciousness and personality is seen to depend on the social environment to which the adolescent belongs (Rieber & Robinson, 2004, p. 478). This is not a new concept. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 16) acknowledged that "to assert that human development is a product of interaction between the growing human organism and its environment is to state what is almost a commonplace in behavioural science." Interaction between the two received little attention in the past, prompting Bronfenbrenner to remark that there had been a huge scholarly interest in developmental psychology, in particular on personality typologies, developmental stages and dispositional constructs, but little apart from "class-theoretical" interpretations of environmental effects, at that time (ibid., p. 17).

### **Behavioural and Social Learning Theories**

Many researchers suggested that the school setting had an effect on student learning and, consequentially, on drop out for underachievers, as we saw earlier in this section. Behavioural and social cognitive theories facilitate exploration of the interconnection between development, environmental experiences and dropout behaviour. Skinner (1904-1990), and other behaviourists believed that development was learned as a result of environmental experiences (Santrock, 2001, p. 47). In this worldview learning occurred as a result of rewards and punishments in the environment and *person factors* were unimportant. In contrast, Bandura (1925–present) believed that "a full understanding requires an integrated causal perspective in which social influences operate through self-processes that produce the actions," (1997, p. 6). Therefore, in social learning theory both the environment and cognition processes are important determinants of behaviour. Within social learning theory there appeared to be a diversity of thinking, merging the "clinically rich psychoanalytic concepts with the

scientifically rigorous behaviourist constructs” (Muuss, 1996, p. 281), although the role of imitation, modelling and observational learning, “especially the idea of bidirectional influences (from parents to child, but also from child to parent),” is the significant common ground.

Students have influence over what they do in this view although, as with most human behaviour, many interacting factors determine dropping out of school. Self-efficacy is the *person factor* which Bandura believed is especially important in children’s development: “People make causal contributions to their own psychosocial functioning through mechanisms of personal agency” (1997, p. 2). Beliefs in personal efficacy constitute the key factor of human agency where “*Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments*” (ibid., p. 3, emphasis in original). Students’ beliefs in their efficacy influence how much effort they put into learning, how long they persevere in the face of failure, the course of action they wish to take to overcome obstacles, the level of stress they experience in coping with taxing environmental demands, and the level of accomplishments they realise. Bandura (1997, pp. 5-6) explained that “human agency operates within an interdependent causal structure involving triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986a).” In this structure the external and social environment, the person (his or her internal characteristics, biological make-up, cognition, and other internal qualities such as intelligence, motivation, self control, self-perception and beliefs that influence perception and action) and the person’s behaviour (influenced by prior learning) influence bi-directionally. In the transactional view of self and society each individual exists in a complex web of relationships which are always changing and being changed by internal, external and social influences. In this view people and their environments are reciprocal determinants of each other (Bandura, 1977, cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 286).

An underpinning belief, which forms part of the critique of this theory, is that environmental, situational and social, rather than biological, maturational factors are primarily responsible for learning and development. In social learning theories, environmental stimuli are recognised but there is also acknowledgement of the influence which a person’s environmental perception may bring to bear: Stimuli can be internal operations or events, such as symbols, language, concepts and thoughts that

allow individuals to control their own behaviours and make decisions (Schiemberg, 1988, cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 308). The power of social learning theory appeared to lie in understanding, rather than in predicting, behaviours because there are so many situational and contextual factors in any set of social relationships. As Muuss pointed out, “the theory does not predict...why some adolescents so quickly and easily yield to peer pressure, whilst others do not” (1996, p. 309).

That humans can and do learn from each other through the entire life span is a significant feature of social cognitive theory. The contributions of social interactions in learning are secondary, or absent, from most other developmental theories. Whilst Muuss argued that social learning theorists have not yet adequately explained the cognitive processes (i.e., memory, thinking, evaluating, which are essential to learning), the significant role which others (parents, teachers, high status peers) play through modelling, explaining, reward and punishment has been established as a basis for sound educational practice (Muuss, 1996, pp. 310-319).

Although more advanced cognitive and psychological processes, which are dependant on the age or the development of the child, are an acknowledged part of social learning theories, Muuss claimed that supporters have yet to explain how maturation and age interact and affect development. It seems that social learning theory offers an important contribution to the thinking about adolescent development but, like the other theories described previously, it does not provide a complete description or explanation.

### **Ecological Perspective on Adolescent Development**

Earlier in this chapter, attention was drawn to the rapid nature of change in today’s society and to the different historical and cultural conditions which adolescents may experience in their growing up. Two theories, which emphasise the importance of the environmental context, are Elder’s (1934–present) life course theory and Bronfenbrenner’s (1917-2005) ecological theory.

Life-course theory has a strong emphasis on life-span development, considering the “*timing of social roles and life events, the interdependence or connections among lives, and the role of human agency and social constraints in decision making*” (emphasis in original; Elder, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, cited in Santrock, 2001,

49). This suggests that a more longitudinal approach needs to be taken than is evident in most other studies of drop out, so that over the course of time leaving behaviour can be put into the context of changes along the lines suggested by Elder (ibid.).

Bronfenbrenner's environmental contexts include a reference to historical time through the chronosystem. Bronfenbrenner's approach, which facilitates consideration of the "fine-grained inputs of direct interactions with social agents to the broad-based inputs of culture" (Santrock, 2001, p. 48), appeared to offer the most differentiated and complete account of the contextual influences on development identified over the course of the data collection in the present study. In this study, the settings of school and home were found to influence students' dropout behaviour powerfully. Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach has therefore been selected as an integrating framework from which to discuss dropout behaviour. This will be elaborated on further in Chapter 2.

Today there is general acceptance of human development as highly plastic, multidimensional and multidirectional, and embedded in multiple contexts (Berk, 2001, p. 9). This "**lifespan perspective**" offers a more complex vision of change and the factors which underlie it (emphasis in original, Berk, 2001, p. 8). Although recent research has shown that for most teenagers today adolescence is not the turbulent stress period Hall envisaged, it is still considered to be "one of the best understood and most misunderstood phases of the life course" (Muuss, 1996, p. xv). The complex and multifaceted nature of adolescent development makes it difficult for any one theory to satisfactorily account for all its dimensions.

Although the theories sometimes disagree about certain aspects of adolescent development, much of their information is *complementary* rather than contradictory. Together, the various theories let us see the total landscape of adolescent development in all its richness. (Santrock, 2001, p. 38)

This overview of adolescent development theories provides a range of concepts that are able to be called upon in the search for a greater understanding of drop out behaviour. The eclectic approach adopted in this study "*uses whatever is considered the best in each theory*" (Santrock, 2001, p. 51, emphasis in original).

In accepting the complexity of the adolescent developmental phase for all teenagers, we need to ask: what is it about persisting students that enables them to cope

with stressful circumstances whereas others respond by dropping out of school? The concept of resiliency, the ability to adapt effectively in the face of adversity, pulls together some key aspects from an eclectic theoretical orientation to adolescent development and is worthy of consideration in the search for an answer to this key question.

### ***What Makes Some Teenagers More Resilient?***

The concept of resiliency emerged from several long-term studies on the relationship of life stressors in childhood with competence and adjustment in adolescence and later life (Garmezy, 1993; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992; cited in Berk, 2001, p. 10). These studies found that some individuals were able to cope with stressful life events whereas others had lasting problems.

Stress is “the reaction, both physical and mental, to the demands made upon a person,” and stress disorders are “those associated with an individual’s inability to meet these demands” (Jefferies, 1979, p. 335). Stress is not usually determined by a single factor but by multiple factors including physical (such as the body’s response to stress), environmental (such as overload, conflict, and frustration, as well as negative life events and daily hassles), emotional and personality factors (such as angry, hostile tendencies) and sociocultural factors such as poverty.

Individuals who are more resilient to the potentially damaging effects of adverse and stressful life conditions are typically characterised by warm parental relationships (a close relationship to at least one caring parent figure, who provides affection and assistance and introduces order and organisation into their life) and social support outside the immediate family (this can be provided by all sorts of people—perhaps a grandparent, a close friend, or a teacher). A third factor is a difference in temperaments of more resilient individuals. As Berk explained: “Children with calm, easygoing, sociable dispositions who are willing to take initiative have a special capacity to adapt to change and elicit positive responses from others” (op.cit.).

The psychological traits that make up temperament (individual differences in quality and intensity of emotional reaction, activity level, attention and emotional self-regulation) are believed to form the cornerstone of adult personality (Berk, 2001, pp. 184-185), although the genetic foundation for individual differences in emotional style

is modified with experience. Early experiences, for example, whether there are secure attachments to parents in infancy, are central to psychological development in later childhood and adolescence, reflected in characteristics such as self-esteem and emotional adjustment, according to attachment theorists such as Bowlby and Ainsworth (cited in Santrock, 2001, p. 162).

In this review the importance of parents in assisting young people with the transition problems of adolescence, particularly with issues arising in the school environment, emerged. The complexity of the drop out phenomenon was illustrated by the variety of reasons<sup>37</sup> dropouts gave for leaving school in the American National Education Longitudinal Study (1988, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 131): 77 per cent reported school-related reasons and 34 per cent gave family-related reasons. The school setting has been touched on and so now we turn to consider the home environment, and within it, the role of parents in influencing students' decisions to leave or carry on at school.

## Parents

Family background is widely recognised as the single most important contributor to success at school. It can explain much of the variation in educational outcomes, including school achievement and dropout behaviour (Coleman et al., 1966; Jencks et al., 1972, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 138). Most of the research has focused on the structural characteristics of families, such as socioeconomic status (commonly measured by parental income and parental education) and family structure. Over the past century families have changed radically in America, with larger households and two parent families now less common according to data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (Day, 1993, cited in Schargel, 2004a, pp. 21-22). There is evidence that this is a trend also in other developed countries such as New Zealand (see Chapter 2). However, there seemed to be contradictory views about the effects of family structure on drop out: Rumberger referenced several studies which showed that students from single-parent families and step families were more likely to drop out of school but also cited recent research which suggested that it was only where the dissolution of two-parent families

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<sup>37</sup> Note, some students gave more than one reason and hence the data exceed 100%.

resulted in loss of income that this likelihood increased (Pong & Ju, 2000, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 138).

Family disorganisation through divorce, abusive parenting associated with drug and alcohol consumption, lack of parental support and supervision, and poverty are amongst factors predisposing young people to risk-taking behaviours, such as dropping out of school and delinquency, Muuss and Porton found (1999b). How structural disadvantage, such as poverty, influences parenting behaviour and other aspects of family life is frequently overlooked in sociological research, according to Sampson and Laub (1999, p. 120). Similarly they claimed that developmental models in psychology have tended to emphasise family processes and early antisocial processes to the neglect of structural context.

In seeking to address the question of why only some adolescent boys reared in poor neighbourhoods became delinquents, Sampson and Laub found it necessary to bring together aspects from both structure and process theories to provide an adequate explanation. Their findings have possible application in considering the similar question of why only some students from apparently similar backgrounds drop out from school. Sampson and Laub suggested that the high levels of financial stress experienced by many lower-class parents result in psychological distress, which in turn affects child management practices. It is through parenting behaviours that economic hardship is thought to affect adolescent development.

This idea was substantiated by a re-analysis of Glueck's (1950) study on juvenile delinquency, leading Sampson and Laub to conclude that family processes, such as supervision, attachment and discipline, "mediated approximately two-thirds of the effect of poverty and other structural background factors on delinquency" (op. cit., p. 133). They theorised that poverty inhibits the capacity of families to achieve informal social control, which in turn increases the likelihood of adolescent delinquency. It seems that strong and consistent family values and associated practices of control serve as important buffers against structural disadvantage in the larger community.

Cohesive families characterized by consistent, loving, and reintegrative punishment, effective supervision, and close emotional ties appear to have overcome these disadvantaged conditions in producing a low risk of adolescent delinquency. (Sampson & Laub, 1999, pp. 133-134)

In this way the effects of parent-child relationships on delinquency, and thus possibly on drop out and other associated risk-taking behaviours, can be explained. Indeed, several studies (McNeal, 1999; Teachman et al., 1996, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 139) support the notion that the risk of drop out is reduced for students who have strong relationships with their parents. Empirical studies have found that students whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, provide emotional support, encourage independent decision-making (known as authoritative parenting style), and are generally more involved in their schooling are less likely to drop out of school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger et al., 1990, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 140).

As already mentioned, the so-called generation gap between parents and teenagers promulgated by the media is not generally sustained by research findings. Despite minor conflicts over issues such as make-up, dating and music, most teenagers hold similar values to their parents and indeed look up to them for advice, Coleman and Hendry maintained (1990, p. 85). For most adolescents the family provides a safe haven safe where teenagers can feel supported as they take a respite from the challenges posed by daily life (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 90) and few experience increased feelings of rejection and alienation from their parents during adolescence (Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, & Yule, 1976, cited in *ibid.*, p. 86). That is not to say there is not some level of conflict experienced at this time. Indeed Coleman and Hendry's review of empirical studies supported the contention that adolescents' growth into adulthood is favoured by a home environment which allows them to test out the boundaries of authority and shape their beliefs through debate with others.

Students frequently express feelings of confusion over the differing expectations of their parents, teachers, and society. They want greater freedom to make their own decisions but with greater autonomy comes insecurity. This accounts for inconsistencies in their behaviour: Sometimes adolescents want to be independent but they also want to be supported because facing problems alone is not easy. Just as adolescents are ambivalent in their expectations of parents, so too many parents experience conflict in how they should relate to their children, because the adolescent years often coincide with the difficulties of adjusting to middle age.

Adjusting to unfulfilled hopes, preparation for retirement, declining physical health, marital difficulties, and so on, may all increase family stress, and add further to the problems faced by young people in finding a route to independence which is not too fraught with conflict. (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 85)

But it is not only the relationships parents have with their children that affect the likelihood of dropping out. Parents' relationships with the school are also seen as part of the explanation to account for school achievement and drop out.

Parents' involvement in their children's education has been shown to be heavily influenced by their personal histories and educational backgrounds (Reay, 2005, p. 26). Where their class and cultural backgrounds were different from those of the teachers, parents had difficulties in negotiating effective relationships with school and addressing issues of concern regarding their children's progress. This is commonly recognised by many parents, according to Gavin McCardyle, Director of *English to Go*, a company which provides English language development support on line to participants from many countries.

*One of the key drivers for non-English speaking migrants to attend "English as a second language" courses is to be able to engage with schools to ensure their children get the very best education available. (Personal communication, October 17, 2006)*

Whilst parental involvement was seen as very important in children's achievement and retention in school, there were gendered and classed differences in the way parents engaged. That different types of family relationships were established with the school according to parents' social strata was noted by Lareau (1989, p. 123). One of the main points of difference was the way in which parents responded to requests from teachers and interacted with the school. Lareau maintained that working class families and the school are characterised by separation, whereas middle and upper class families forge relationships characterised by interconnectedness (1989, p. 8). Middle and upper class parents attempt to shape their children's school site experiences whereas lower and middle class parents believe that teachers are the experts responsible for education. Lower and middle class parents were found to seek little information

about either the curriculum or the educational process, and their criticisms of the school tended to be associated with non academic matters.

It was mothers, rather than fathers, who were primarily responsible for their children's upbringing and education, studies conducted by David, West, and Ribbens (1994, cited in David, 2005, pp. 15-16) found. They also observed differences between mothers' involvement in different social class locations. Other studies supported this notion of gendered and classed differences, reporting that working class mothers tended to see their relationship with the school as complementary and supportive of the teachers, whereas middle class mothers saw their role as a compensatory one because of a "combination of relative affluence, educational expertise and 'self-certainty' that gave them options" (Reay, 2005, p. 30) to modify school provision and redress any perceived gaps.

Lareau (1989, p. 123) discovered that, whilst previous research associated parent involvement with high levels of achievement at school, especially in reading, the greatest effects on academic progress by parental involvement were on students from the upper-middle class who were behind their peers. The organising of culturally enhancing activities, such as music and dancing lessons, and the provision of additional tuition where students are experiencing difficulty may be impossible for working class mothers because of lack of time (because they are often working), money, or expertise. However, Reay found "very little difference among women, regardless of their social class or ethnicity, in either the importance they attached to education or the mental energy they devoted to their children's schooling" (2005, p. 28). Reay explained that "where children's class and cultural background bears little resemblance to that of their teachers, connections between home and school may be minimal and tenuous" (*ibid.*, p. 26). She further reports that "schools tend to offer their scarce resources to those who demand them most vociferously rather than to those in greatest need" (*ibid.*, p. 27).

From many years of working as a secondary school principal, I can report that most parents acknowledge the high school years as a very important period of their children's schooling, because this is when the qualifications necessary to make a successful transition to well-paid employment and the preparation for a career can be achieved. Thus, selecting a "good" secondary school is of vital interest to parents. Of "paramount importance for middle class parents [is] getting their child into the 'right'

sort of secondary school, typically one which produces good examination results” (Reay, 2005, p. 33). In choosing a secondary school for their children to attend David (2005) found that mothers had a significant influence in the family decision but that fathers from the middle class and fathers with children in private schools were also very involved in the choice process. It was “evident that families do not take these issues lightly but invest considerable amounts of time and energy into thinking about education and particular schools” (David, West, and Ribbens, 1994, cited in David, 2005, p. 15). Parents spend much time deliberating over which secondary school to send their children, so it can be assumed that the decision to leave school would also be regarded as a very important decision, one which would not be taken lightly. However, there did not appear to be much written about this in the literature, although it was suggested that parents’ attitudes to school and work might affect the decisions which their offspring make about staying on or leaving school.

Interestingly, it seems that neither adolescents nor their parents have an accurate sense of their power or influence. Indeed, Coleman and Hendry maintained that “teenagers perceive their parents to be less influential than they really are, while adults perceive that they are more influential than they actually are” (1990, p.88, citing evidence provided by Belsky, Lerner, & Spannier, 1984). As well as through their parenting practices, parents influence their children in other ways, such as by setting an example through role-modelling behaviour. Providing a living example of gender and work roles, involving both knowledge and interpretations of these roles, establishes a measure against which young people evaluate what is available to them in a time of transition.

With divorce now more common, the increasing prevalence of single caregiver families may limit the availability of role models within the family setting. Indeed, much information about the influence of parents has been deduced from studies of children where a parent has been absent. Boys from father-absent homes were more likely to encounter difficulties at school and be less popular with peers than those with fathers living at home (Conger & Peterson, 1984, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 94), whilst paternal absence in girls manifested itself in deviant behaviours. These were influenced by whether the mother was divorced or widowed, and ranged from spending large proportions of time seeking out male company and engaging in sex-related

behaviour (where mother had divorced) to the opposite extreme, being inhibited in male company (where mother was widowed), as girls attempted to cope with their anxiety and lack of skills in relating to males (Hetherington, 1972, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 94). Bereavement was easier for students to adjust to than divorce, as the latter was frequently associated with more radically changed circumstances, less financial security, greater uncertainty about the future, and less dialogue about the situation. These studies suggest that parents' influence is significant as a source of knowledge and by way of example as role models. However, most importantly, is the assistance parents provide during the transition period of adolescence to allow their children to make the adjustments necessary in developing sex and work roles.

The development of contrasted gender roles provides a good example of the type of confusion adolescents can experience over this transition time. Female menarche is a "significant symbolic developmental milestone" (Stein & Reiser, 1999, p. 61) which comes with attendant responsibilities relating to fertility and unwanted pregnancy. Girls have a different relationship with their male peers and male adults from that point on. A study of boys' responses to "semenarche" (Stein & Reiser, 1999) found that the level of anxiety incurred by first ejaculation could have been reduced by adequate prior education. Despite sex education classes and some parental input, many participants were surprised and confused by their first ejaculation. "Given the context of male peer relationships, the number of children being raised by single mothers, and the disproportionate number of female teachers, many boys are left to their own devices to interpret the experience," according to Muuss and Porton (1999a, p. 33). In cases where discussion had occurred it was often after the event, a cause for concern in the wake of ongoing publicity about unwanted pregnancies and AIDS.

Freud (cited in Stein & Reiser, 1999, p. 61) pointed out how persistently parental acknowledgment of childhood and early adolescent sexuality was avoided. Yet education and interactions with family (and peers) affect adolescents' experiences of pubertal events. Childhood and early adolescent sexual experiences are legally prohibited and socially disapproved. These sanctions contrast with explicit media messages about sexuality which portray greater permissiveness. Risks associated with multiple partners and unprotected sex, including pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, are part of sex education programmes in schools. In my experience, parents

often see their more conservative views undermined by the free talking during sex education classes and by the school health nurse's provision of contraceptive advice.

Many women have married later, delayed childbirth and continued to work once their children are born, with the result that families where both parents work are now more common. With more parents working and the longer period of compulsory education, there is an increased likelihood that adolescents will get conflicting messages about how to behave, exacerbating the normal tensions experienced in adolescence. Confused messages are associated with other role changes which occur during this transition period, as individuals move from "nonresponsible" (play) roles to "responsible" (work) roles, from being "submissive" to parental authority, to leaving home and being independent (Benedict, 1938/1980, p. 15, cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 113). During childhood individuals have their roles ascribed by others but, as they mature, greater opportunities are available "not only for a choice of roles, but also for a choice of how those roles should be interpreted" (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 8). Role conflict is common as, for example, in the case of the son and boyfriend, where the expectations of the parents are that the son is dutiful and the expectations of the girlfriend are that the date be attentive. The son's independent actions to please his girlfriend may be incompatible with his parents' wishes to arrive home by a certain time.

Similarly, conflicts arise through different expectations at home and at school. A common example, in my experience as principal, is when the teenage daughter is expected to look after siblings whilst mother and father both work evening shift but at school the next day is taken to task for not having completed homework. Sometimes conflicts arise because parents hold unrealistically high expectations of their teenagers, yet others continue to treat them as although they are still children, leading to what Thomas (1968, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 9) termed "role incongruence." Here the individual is placed in a role for which she or he is not fitted; consequently, there is conflict between the adolescence preferred role and the one ascribed. The development of role behaviour is thought to be determined by relationships with significant others; through interaction between the individual and parents, and his or her perceptions of the expectations which they hold (Brim, 1965, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 10).

In families where both parents work children are presented with a different role model from the traditional stay-at-home mother but there are often changes in how both parents see their roles when they are employed outside the home. Hoffman (1974, 1979) and Montemayor (1982) found that girls appeared to benefit from having their mothers in employment, being more independent and motivated but this was not so for boys who suffered decreased supervision and increased responsibilities to which they did not adjust as well (cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 93).

Maternal employment also had interesting effects on the development of sex roles, given that many fathers are now also involved in the day-to-day running of households and take a more active role in child-rearing. Studies by Mussen and associates (1962, 1963, 1974, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 91) found that boys whose fathers provided a strong masculine role model had high self-esteem and were the most popular during adolescence but appeared less well adjusted in adulthood. Coleman and Hendry concluded that boys whose fathers provide a moderately masculine role model but who are also involved in the feminine caring side of family life, make better adjustments in adult life, experiencing “fewer conflicts between their social values and their actual behaviour” (1990, p. 91).

These writers argued that sex role development is even more complicated for girls, because sex roles are less clear for them. They say confusion arises for girls because higher status is awarded to masculine roles and women’s position in society has passed through a period of rapid change. The key issue in successful adjustment for girls appears to be having a female role model who had resolved her own problems of sexual identification, whether they were liberal or traditional in outlook. It was found that those experiencing difficulties in adjustment were girls whose sex role behaviour was based on rejection of an unaffectionate mother, or on identification with a mother who had failed to resolve her own identity problems (Conger & Petersen, 1984, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 91). It would seem that adolescents who grow up in a caring family, where the same sex parent represents a workable and rewarding role model, find fewer difficulties in the development of their own sexual identity.

Similar conclusions were also reached by Coleman and Hendry (op. cit.) in relation to work role-modelling, although this does not mean taking the same type of job as the mother or father: Work role-modelling is concerned more with the transmission

of attitudes to work and areas of work interest. Career aspirations, and attendant expectations regarding length of stay at school, are consequently closely related to parents' educational backgrounds and work experiences.

In summary, whether a psychoanalytical view, concerning the breaking of "infantile ties with the parents" (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 83), or a sociological perspective, focusing on adjustment problems in dealing with changing roles and responsibilities (Lewin, 1939, cited in Muuss, 1996, p. 112), is adopted, it can thus be seen that parents play important roles in socialisation and in an adolescent's achievement of independence. Leaving school is regarded as a significant milestone in the attainment of independence, one of the central themes of adolescent development. When and how this milestone occurs is closely associated with parents' own education and work experiences, and their expectations and parenting styles. Relationships between parent and child and with the school are important influences on an individual's academic progress and on the likelihood of dropping out. Parents' own problems in making adjustments to mid-life changes occur at the very time their children reach adolescence, exacerbating the tensions inherent in this transition period. Whilst conflict during adolescence appears to be of a relatively minor level for most students this is not the case for all—some feel a sense of alienation. The students who do not feel they have support at home are those most likely to drop out of school when the going gets tough.

## Conclusion

Difficulties in comparing the findings of various studies were associated with the differing definitions of drop out, differing data collection methods, and the lack of consistency in data submitted by schools. These factors made ascertaining the nature and extent of the dropout problem a troublesome exercise. In summary, three main methodological approaches were evident in research about drop out from educational institutions: retrospective, cross-sectional, and longitudinal studies.

Despite the limitations of retrospective<sup>38</sup> studies, at-risk profiles remained popular as planning aids for teachers to target students requiring extra support. As well as concerns about the degree of error inherent in identifying potential dropouts, the labelling of such students was potentially harmful, as indicated by the link between grade retention and subsequent drop out. Statistical probabilities generated by factor analysis were found to lack predictive or explanatory power but provided a platform of knowledge which usefully guided educationists in thinking about the complex issues associated with student drop out. In retrospective studies students' perspectives were often dismissed, or treated lightly, as the honesty of reasons given was considered suspect because of the negative connotations associated with dropping out. There was some suggestion that the reasons given were merely socially acceptable attributions and not the real cause of early leaving.

A variation on the retrospective approach was the cross-sectional design, which compared those who left with persisting students. Such studies revealed the similarity between these two groups, suggesting that fit with the school culture and school transitions might warrant further attention. Longitudinal studies, which follow a particular cohort during a period of time at school, were few, probably because of the commitment required and the associated costs. Such studies allowed an exploration of factors which contributed to early leaving at the very time they were exerting their effects, providing a clearer view of the complex interaction of factors that influence the student to drop out.

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<sup>38</sup> Retrospective studies are where leavers are surveyed, or their case histories analysed, to determine dropout characteristics.

From the diverse range of research work on the topic, and my own experience as a school principal, it was evident that the so-called dropout problem was constructed differently at a national, regional, school and individual level. On a national and regional level, policy encouraged a longer stay at school for most high school students and retention rates were seen to have generally increased as the notion of a high school education for all became more widely accepted. However, the bigger picture analysis suggested that the effects of policies impacted unequally on differing sections of society, with drop out rates higher for students from minority ethnic groups and those from lower socioeconomic strata. Some researchers began to look beyond the statistics to consider underlying reasons for differences in student outcomes, such as drop out, at high school.

These differences in educational outcomes were thought to be related to the beliefs and values the family held and transmitted through the routine activities, the conversations, and the practices of daily living. Social interaction with more knowledgeable members of society, such as parents and teachers, is the mechanism whereby children acquire the ways of thinking and behaving that make up a community's culture. In this way the values, beliefs, customs and skills of a social group are passed from one generation to the next, and these include expectations about length of stay at school and future occupations. White, middle class children come from home backgrounds with values similar to that of school, and hence these students find it easier to adjust to the expectations of teachers and to succeed academically.

As we have seen, parents also influence their children by role-modelling behaviour by providing a living example of sex and work roles, as well as first-hand knowledge and interpretations of these roles. With more parents working and a longer period of education, schools and the state have picked up many of the responsibilities accorded previously to parents. Consequently there is an increased likelihood that adolescents will get conflicting messages about how to behave from their parents and from teachers.

Society itself gives mixed messages to students about their status and their roles and responsibilities. Current thinking about adolescence is that it is a smooth and continuous process of human development, as is social progression through school levels. But with legislation which defines the age of compulsory schooling and restricts

the age of sexual connection, voting, driving and cigarette and alcohol purchase, socioculturally and legislatively determined discontinuities are imposed on the natural process of adolescence. There is not the gradual transition from school to work, and to greater responsibility, that was seen in the past. Today the shift is more abrupt because adolescents are kept in a state of dependency longer than adolescents of previous generations. Because of this, there is a greater potential for role confusion and discontinuity (where there is no organised way of moving from one role to another) for adolescents than they will experience at any other time over the human lifespan.

The sociological approach to dropout behaviour, concerned with the processes of socialisation in the school and home and about roles and role changes during this transition, offers a significant contribution to the explanations for drop out on the wider societal level. At the individual level, a psychological perspective allows consideration of the meaning of drop out for the students themselves. Psychoanalytic theories explain how early experiences with parents can extensively shape an individual's development. These differing perspectives contribute to a deeper understanding of student drop out and of an individual's progression through the critical transition period of adolescence. They point the way forward in considering how best to assist students as they move from school to new roles as young adults.

In summary, then, the literature offers various explanations to account for student drop out that can be grouped broadly into those that "blame" individual deficiencies for high drop out rates, and those that look at social structural conditions such as poverty. Unfortunately psychological and sociological theories are often viewed as competing frameworks. As Alton-Lee remarked, "problems of siloing in turn constrain research literature reviews, drawing the charges of idiosyncrasy and untrustworthiness" (2004, p. 4). Nash argued against "an acceptance of a dichotomy between the levels of effective analysis and practice that are, in fact, subject to no such necessary division. We must always work at different levels" (1999a, p. 179) he asserted. He explained that:

social relations and processes...can be studied through a close investigation of the everyday lives of individuals, [...but] the construction of explanatory accounts of social differences in educational attainment and access is one that demands the most thoughtful and rigorous attention to the constraining and

enabling aspects of the economic, cultural, and political structures that affect families, schools, and students. (Nash, 1997a, pp. 3-4)

Many factors behind drop out have been reviewed here, and they are often treated as separate *causes*. Some studies, such as the family resource framework, (Nash, 1993), showed the inter-relatedness of some of these factors but no one theory adequately accounted for why it was that some students left, whilst others, faced with apparently similar circumstances, stayed on at school. It is clear that the factors identified as influencing drop out inter-relate in complex ways. One theoretical framework which is able to incorporate all of them is that of Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1995, 2005).

Application of Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective to the study of drop out has, as its central focus, individuals shaping, and being shaped by, interactions with their environment, as active agents in their own development and in the management of the transition from school. The adaptation of the ecological framework to conceptualise secondary school drop out captures the complexity of the interrelationships between system levels, between the policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, students and their friends. It is to this framework that I turn next.

## **CHAPTER 2: EXAMINING DROP OUT IN CONTEXT—AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

From international research into high school drop out it was evident that the so-called “dropout problem” was constructed differently at national, regional, school and individual levels. The previous chapter indicated that factors in the immediate settings of family and school, as well as bigger picture political, educational, economic, employment and welfare systems, influenced drop out. However politically expedient it may be, it is overly simplistic to blame the individual, the family or the school. School retention patterns require interpretation within the context of time, place and policy because the behaviour of students who leave high school early cannot be understood outside of the settings in which drop out occurs. An ecological perspective was thus selected to provide a conceptual framework within which to investigate these complex interactions between students who leave school early and their environment. Part of the contribution which this research makes to our knowledge of secondary school drop out is to evaluate the appropriateness of an ecological model in illuminating this phenomenon.

### **The Ecological Framework**

The term *ecology*, first defined by German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866 (Freese, 2001, p. 2), involves the study of the interrelationships between living organisms and their environment. Since that time, these biological concepts have been applied to many different disciplines outside the natural history domain where they originated. Human ecology generally addresses “relationships of humans to their environments” (ibid., p. 1). It assumes that human behaviour can be understood only in situ and that individuals and their environmental context are “inextricably linked” (Steinberg, 2001, p. 2). Freese explained that “the overriding theme construes human ecology as knowledge of the complex interactive connections that integrate human activities with environmental contexts” (2001, p. 5). The ecological perspective

provides a conceptual framework within which to investigate complex interactions between people and their environments:

Proximal settings are seen as connected to each other, contained within broader institutional and community contexts that shape their structure and influence what takes place within them. In addition, proximal settings and the broader environments that contain them are seen as located within particular historical, social, economic, political, geographical, and cultural contexts that influence the nature, structure, function, organization, and influence of all levels of the environment. (Steinberg, 2001, p. 1)

The ecological perspective can be seen as not one idea but an eclectic assortment of ideas which “unite an array of otherwise unconnected scholarly traditions” (Freese, 2001, p. 1).

Steinberg explained that the term “context” is used loosely. It can refer to anything from “an interpersonal relationship” (for example a student’s emotional expression in the *context* of the student-teacher relationship), “a social group” (interpersonal conflict within the *context* of a peer group); “a physical setting (e.g., sex role behaviour in the *context* of the classroom), a locale (e.g., crime in the *context* of neighbourhood poverty); or a broad expression of time or culture” (e.g., the role of education in the *context* of twenty-first century New Zealand) (2001, p. 1, emphasis in original). Support for the adoption of this approach to education problems is provided by the work of Barker and Gump (1964, cited in Steinberg, 2001, p. 2) who found that students' behaviour in small schools was markedly different from students' behaviour in large schools.

In the late 1970s psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner drew widespread attention to the role of context in human development and behaviour. This work led to the development of the ecological perspective on human development which is a “theory of environmental interconnections and their impact on the forces directly affecting psychological growth” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 8). Researchers had previously tended to study their subjects in laboratory environments, to the extent that Bronfenbrenner claimed developmental psychology had become “*the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time*” (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 19). Advocating for the study of children in their natural environments, “in their homes, schools, and playgrounds,”

Lerner (2005, p. x) explained, that the

experimental research tradition ...places considerable theoretical and practical limitations on what can be learned about the forces that affect human development. Laboratory settings do not reflect the actual situations in which children develop, so knowledge of how to design programs that can improve outcomes for children and families is constrained. (ibid., p. xxi)

Introducing Bronfenbrenner's seminal work on the ecology of human development Cole also emphasized the "crucial importance of studying the environments within which we behave if we are ever to break away from particularistic descriptions and contentless processes" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. ix).

Here the emphasis is not on the traditional psychological processes of perception, motivation, thinking and learning but on their content—what is perceived, desired, feared, thought about, or acquired as knowledge, and how the nature of this psychological material changes as a function of a person's exposure to and interaction with the environment. Development is defined as the person's evolving conception of the ecological environment, and his [or her] relation to it, as well as the person's growing capacity to discover, sustain, or alter its properties. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 9)

Magnusson (1995) took this concept further in advancing a holistic, integrated approach to individual development based on the proposition that the individual functions and develops in an ongoing process of interaction with his or her environment.

At each specific moment, individual functioning is determined in a process of continuous, reciprocal interaction between mental factors, biological factors, and behaviour—on the individual side—and situational factors. (ibid., p. 27)

In the many previous dropout studies referred to in the last chapter, a myriad of contextual and individual characteristics had been identified but researchers failed to link these into a coherent framework to bring an understanding of the process of early school leaving and the meaning of dropping out to the individuals themselves. With its central focus on the individual within a dynamic and reciprocally influential setting, it appeared that, with the recent enhancements suggested, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model might indeed provide a satisfactory basis from which a greater understanding of dropout behaviour could be gained. This ecological conceptualisation forms the

framework for the present study on student drop out and retention. In this framework “the explanations for what we do...are to be found in interactions between characteristics of people and their environments, past and present” (Cole, in the Foreword to Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. x).

Dropping out of school involves leaving the school setting and changing roles from that of high school pupil to parent, worker, unemployed benefit recipient or tertiary student. In this framework, dropping out is conceived of as a type of “ecological transition.” Transitions are movements “through ecological space” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26) and, as such, dropping out can be seen as “both a consequence and instigator of developmental processes” (ibid., p. 27). This raises the question of the definition of development.

Texts on human development commonly assume an understanding of their title topic, a concept which is often equated with growth and maturation. In the bioecological model—a more recent reformulation of his original ecological model—Bronfenbrenner has recognised the necessity of including more explicitly the levels of individual structure and function, both biological (which includes physical changes), psychological and behavioural, “fused dynamically with the ecological systems” (Lerner, 2005, p. xiv) to depict the “dynamic developmental relations between an active individual and his or her complex, integrated, and changing ecology” (ibid., xviii). In this theory, human development is defined as the “*phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups*” extending over the life course, across successive generations, and through history (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 2005e, p. xxviii). Magnusson explained that “individual development is concerned with individual functioning in terms of thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions studied across the lifetime of the individual” (1995, p. 20). He clarified that “if a person’s distinctive pattern of characteristics remains unchanged across time, no development has occurred....Processes that go on in an unchanged manner, within existing structures, do not constitute development” (ibid.). The following section describes in detail Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, providing examples of its application to dropout behaviour.

## Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

The linkages between the many factors and sources of influence identified by earlier dropout research is provided by ecological systems theory, which suggests that the explanations for early leaving behaviour are to be found in the interactions between the characteristics of people and their environments. As Berk succinctly explained, “ecological systems theory views the person as developing within a complex *system* of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment” (emphasis in original, 2001, p. 25).

This multilevel, multidimensional approach to human development is one of development-in-context where context is viewed as a series of five nested environmental systems, one inside the other, described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem layers. These interconnected systems range from the “*fine-grained inputs of direct interactions with social agents to the broad-based inputs of culture*” Santrock explained (emphasis in original, 2001, p. 48). This conceptualisation of drop out facilitates consideration of both the students’ interactions with their local settings (school, family and friends), and the impact of bigger picture political influences such as the effects of educational, economic, employment and welfare policies. The innermost levels, the proximal settings in which the students spend most of their time, and the broader environments that contain them, are located within particular historical, social, geographical and cultural contexts that influence the nature, structure and function of all other levels of the environment.

### ***Microsystem***

The microsystem is the innermost level of the environment and it is the setting in which the student lives and spends time: It is “the complex of relations between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing the person” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, cited in Lerner, 2005, p. xiii). A “setting” is a “place where people can readily engage in face-to-face interaction....The factors of *activity, role, and interpersonal relation* constitute the *elements*, or building blocks, of the microsystem” (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22).

Later formulations of the ecological model emphasise the centrality of the biopsychosocial person who is, in effect, the centre of gravity, with her or his qualities, and those of people with whom she or he interacts, shaping interactions in unanticipated ways. The most proximal dropout settings include the student's family, friendship group, classroom, workplace and the neighbourhood in which she or he participates in the different roles as child, student, friend, part-time employee and citizen.

In this view, the student is not "a passive recipient of experiences in these settings, but...someone who helps construct the settings" (Santrock, 2001, p. 48). So this level concerns relations between the student and social agents (parents, peers, teachers), and it includes the network of activities, roles and interaction patterns associated with the person's immediate surroundings. More recent conceptualisations of the microcosm (Lerner, 2005, p. xvii) also include an individual's interaction with the semiotic system of symbols and language, allowing for consideration of media influences on drop out behaviour.

If the microsystem is viewed as a central focus of influence in the adolescent's life, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem can be visualised as concentric circles surrounding it.

### ***Mesosystem***

The mesosystem involves relations between microsystems, and consists of the network of social systems surrounding and interacting with the developing person: "*In sum, a mesosystem is a system of microsystems*" (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 2005d, p. 46). It incorporates the connections between contexts, the linkages between two or more settings containing the developing person, and consequently features relationships which may be complementary or in conflict, such as those with school and family. Parents' involvement in school life, their classed and gendered interactions with school which favour those of European descent and middle class backgrounds, and their influence on their children's aspirations and career destinations, are mesosystem effects which are likely to be associated with dropping out.

## ***Exosystem***

The exosystem is the visible or concrete representation of macrosystem characteristics (e.g., culture and public policy), McIntyre explained (1998, p. 12). These manifestations of the macrosystem embrace specific social structures that do not themselves contain the developing person as an active participant but "in which events occur that affect what happens in the person's environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, pp.7-8). In New Zealand, examples are the Labour and Education Ministries, which have developed transition policies that impact on young peoples' post-school pathways (Higgins, 2002). This study seeks to assess how the effects of the exosystem level of the environment, such as transition policies, legislation affecting benefit eligibility, attendance regulations, and school practices, influence the decisions students make about staying on at school.

## ***Macrosystem***

The macrosystem is the outermost level, the "superordinate level of the ecology of human development" (Lerner, 2005, p. 14). It is not a specific context but involves the attitudes and ideologies of the culture in which individuals live. It is the beliefs and behaviour norms that set the pattern for structure and activities and the values, laws, customs, and resources of the culture which are passed down from generation to generation. These societal influences on activities and interactions at all inner layers also affect the pattern of adolescent development and an individual's life choices.

Macrosystem variables include the educational philosophy and values which mirror the wider historical, social and economic values of New Zealand society. New Zealand has prided itself previously on being a relatively egalitarian society but with the introduction of *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms (Ministry of Education, 1988) an increasingly stratified education system resulted.

This dropout study was conducted at a time when many secondary schools were still adjusting to the "reforms" which applied new and challenging ideas of market competition and self management to the delivery of education. The possible effect of

these changes on the drop out rates of schools is naturally of more than local interest<sup>39</sup>. This raises issues of the influence of the chronosystem, of time, a later (1994, cited by Lerner, 2005, p. xvii) addition to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory.

### ***Chronosystem***

The chronosystem is not a specific context but refers to the dynamic nature of the person's environment, the way it changes over time. Magnusson (1995, p. 20) declared that "individual development is concerned with individual functioning in terms of thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions studied across the lifetime of the individual." By adding the time dimension patterns of environmental events, the effects of sociohistorical conditions and the nature and impact of transitions and changes occurring since an event can be considered. This aspect of the model allowed for recognition of changes within proximal settings which might affect development (such as instability of family settings), as well as consideration of the influence of "big picture" policy changes, to be factored into the design of this study (discussed in Chapter 3) so that the impact of such changes on high school drop out can be revealed.

### ***Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) Model***

With the addition of the time factor, the 1979 model provided the "conceptual tools to understand and study the differentiated but integrated levels of the context of human development [but] Bronfenbrenner recognised his theory would be incomplete until he included in it the levels of individual structure (biology, psychology, and behaviour)" Lerner explained (2005, p. xiv). Three types of person characteristics have been identified as most influential in shaping the course of future development: first, *dispositions* that can set proximal processes in motion; second, *bioecological resources* of ability, experience, knowledge, and skill that are required for the effective functioning of proximal processes, and third, what Bronfenbrenner and Morris termed

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<sup>39</sup> Because of its "long-standing and impressive reputation among developed countries for social innovation" educational "reform" in New Zealand was of interest internationally, according to Fiske and Ladd (2000, p. 12). New Zealand's geographic isolation, small size and the rapidity with which reforms were introduced made this case particularly interesting: "The country's leaders did not experiment with halting and incremental reforms....they threw out the old system in toto, put in a new one, and left fine-tuning until later" (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 12).

*demand characteristics*, those that invite or discourage reactions from the social environment (emphasis in original, cited in Lerner, 2005, p. xvi). Development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction, referred to as *proximal processes*, between people and their environment (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 2005a, p. 6).

Proximal processes are the primary mechanisms for human development. To have an effect, however, such interactions must occur regularly over extended time, generating

the ability, motivation, knowledge, and skill to engage in such [interactive] processes both with others and on one's own. For example, through progressively more complex interaction with their parents, children increasingly become agents of their own development, to be sure only in part. (ibid.)

This notion of proximal processes as enduring forms of interaction in the immediate environment links with Vygotsky's (Rieber, 2004) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) which explains how complex mental activities, such as problem solving, have their origins in social interaction. This notion assists in focusing attention on the adolescent's growing "realization of his or her own power to progress toward concrete goals in everyday life" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005b, p. 99), of the development of beliefs about the relation of "self" to the environment inherent in such concepts as self-esteem<sup>40</sup>, self-efficacy<sup>41</sup> and locus of control (Banks, 1999, p. 87).

In summary, there are four components to Bronfenbrenner's most recent bioecological human development model: the developmental *process*, involving the fused and dynamic relation of the individual and the context; the *person*, with his or her individual repertoire of biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics; the *context* of human development, contextualised as nested systems; and *time*, constituting the chronosystem that moderates change across the life course (Lerner, 2005, p. xv).

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<sup>40</sup> Self-esteem is the "global evaluative dimension of the self," for example as a good person, whereas self-concept is a domain-specific evaluation of the self, say, as a good athlete (Santrock, 2001, p. 302). Self-esteem is also referred to as self-worth or self-image.

<sup>41</sup> Self-efficacy is the "belief that one can master a situation and produce positive outcomes" (Glossary in Santrock, 2001, p. 7).

Within an ecological framework based on this model lies the possibility to connect issues of self-development and identity, which are paramount for all adolescents, with some key themes emerging from the literature review. These include the family resource framework that structures much of the New Zealand research into inequality and difference in schooling (for example: Nash, 1993, 1997b; Nash & Harker, 1998), feminist writing on the differing roles men and women play in transmitting social class advantages and disadvantages to their children (Finley, 1992; Lareau, 1989, 1992; Reay, 1998, 2005) and Clarke and Clarke's work on resilience (2003), facilitating exploration of why it is that some students drop out whereas others persist at school when faced with seemingly similar situations.

“Whenever individuals add or let go of roles or settings in their lives, the breadth of their microsystem changes” Berk explained (2001, p. 26). These shifts in context are called ecological transitions, and this thesis conceives dropping out of school as such an event. It is the intention of this project to evaluate the usefulness of the ecological model in developing an understanding of drop out from both the uniqueness and similarities in the leavers' stories and to illuminate this transition phenomenon with a view to providing insights which may benefit educational colleagues.

## **Framework for the Study of Drop out**

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model does not refer to the nested systems in discrete terms. In later writings he spoke of “interconnected systems” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005e, p. 1) to reflect the synergistic interaction between heredity and environment. However, the very structured approach of his 1979 model provides a useful framework within which to locate the systems which previous studies and my own experience suggested might have a powerful influence on dropping out.

“Typically in the historical development of a given science, class-theoretical concepts precede field-theoretical ideas and are gradually replaced by the latter” Bronfenbrenner argued (2005c, p. 109). Based on Lewin's (1931, 1935, 1951) differentiation of research paradigms, class-theoretical approaches seek to explain phenomena by describing the category or class to which they belong. In contrast, field-theoretical paradigms specify “the particular *processes* through which the observed phenomenon is brought about” (ibid.). The former “may often be the strategies of choice

for exploring uncharted domains. Like the surveyor's grid, they provide a useful frame for describing the new terrain" (ibid., p. 110).

Drop out research appears to be at this point. Much is known about the characteristics of students who leave school early. However, little exploration of the process of dropping out, or "cooling out" as some researchers suggested is more the case for many young women (Clark, 1960, cited in Finley, 1992, p. 228), has occurred. In particular, there has been little consideration of the meaning of drop out to the leavers themselves.

An ecological approach offers the opportunity to progress our understanding about process and to gain multiple perspectives. The ecological model developed to provide a greater understanding of drop out behaviour is represented by Figure 1. It was adapted from McIntyre's (1998, p. 14) adolescent career development model. Besides differences in the systems identified as influential, a major change incorporated here is the greater focus on the psychological field, allowing for consideration of how drop out may relate to a student's quest for self. This is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's later writings in which he urged a focus on "this psychological terrain [which] has still to be explored" (2005d, p. 44). In this model individuals are both the products and producers of their own development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005b, p. 96). The model incorporates the systems and other contextual elements that influence student drop out, especially the reciprocal interactions between adolescents and their immediate settings. Each system is represented by a circle<sup>42</sup> and arranged concentrically in ecological zones around the centre, where the individual student is positioned. The two dimensional representation necessarily limits the ability<sup>43</sup> to show the relationship dynamics, the frequency and intensity of reciprocal interactions.

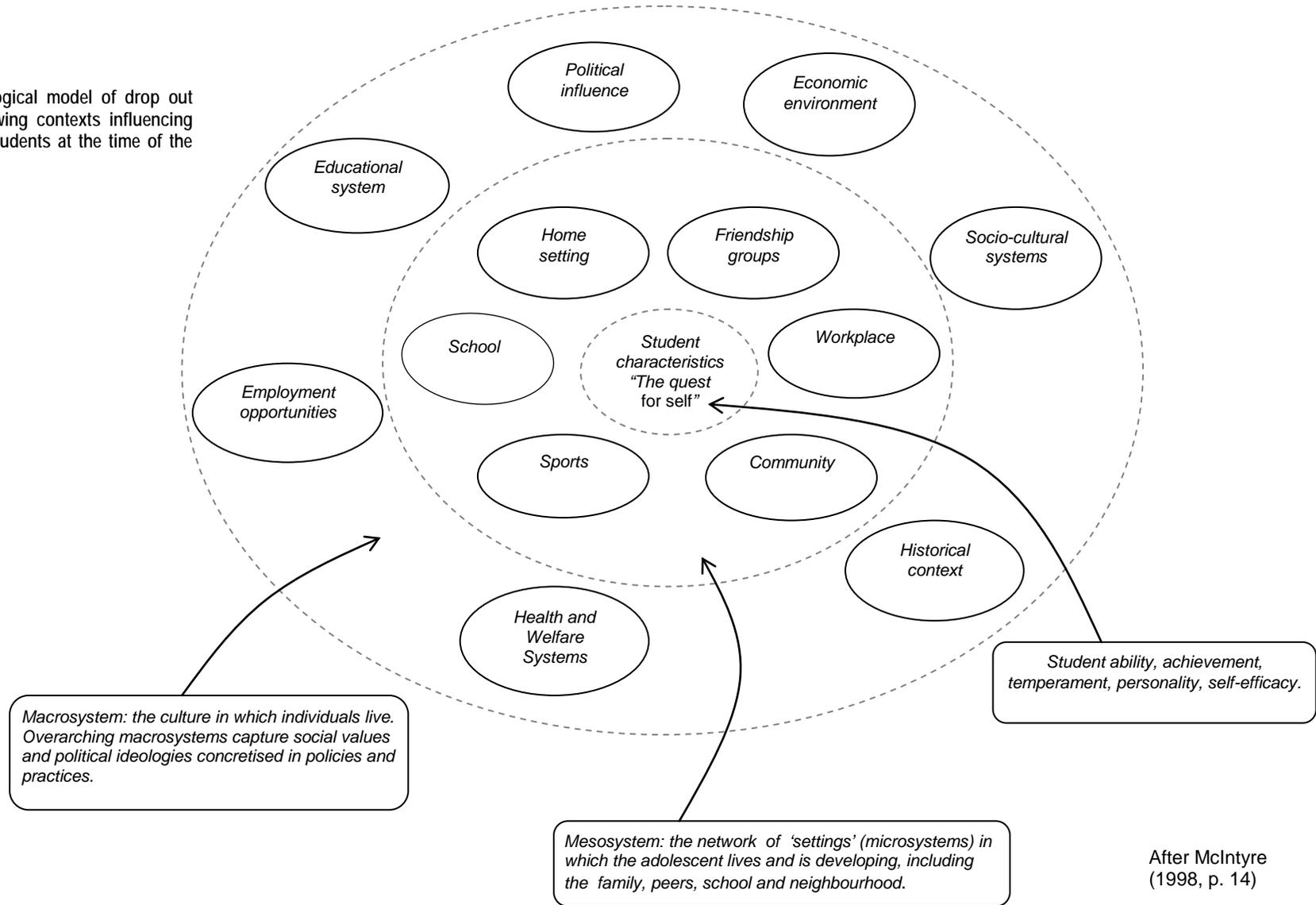
The central location of the person in the model is not accidental because the main focus in this thesis is to ascertain the meaning of drop out to the individual. Therefore, the student's experiences within her immediate settings, especially within the school setting and the sphere of influence of family and friends, are of main importance.

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<sup>42</sup> For the sake of clarity there has been no attempt to establish any degree of overlap between the circles representing the settings of school, family, workplace, neighbourhood, and so on, although it is recognized that there are overlaps and linkages which varied in degree and intensity between individual situations.

<sup>43</sup> "Finding ways to model the reciprocal and dynamic relations between individuals and their environments" is a major challenge (Steinberg, 2001, p. 1).

Figure 1. Ecological model of drop out behaviour showing contexts influencing New Zealand students at the time of the study (2003).



The model also indicates how the wider cultural and ideological contexts of the macrosystem come to have important bearings on the behaviours of individuals within their own unique microcosmic settings. Using relevant literature, this “big picture” environment, and the resulting exosystem manifestations, will be outlined in the next section to provide a context for the actual investigation, which took place over a two year time span, commencing in 2003.

## **The “Big Picture” Context: Macrosystem and Exosystem Features of Student Drop out in New Zealand**

This section offers an ecological analysis of the overarching macrosystem of student drop out from New Zealand state girls’ secondary schools, and of the exosystem expression of these in the country’s economy, politics, employment opportunities and sociocultural, health, welfare and education system characteristics. Here we see how societal values and ideologies are captured through exosystem policy and practices. The temporal dimension of Bronfenbrenner’s model, the chronosystem, is taken into account through the historical review of the impact of these various macrosystems on student drop out and by elements incorporated into the research design (Chapter 3).

### ***New Zealand: Geographical Context***

New Zealand is a small country, made up of two main islands in the South Pacific Ocean, 1,700 kilometres south of Fiji, 2,250 kilometres east of Australia, and “halfway around the world from Mother Britain, the country of origin for most of New Zealand’s modern-day settlers and the primary source of its cultural heritage” (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 15). The country has a relatively short history of settlement, possibly due to its remoteness, with the estimated arrival of the first peoples, known as Maori, at the end of the eleventh century. The first European to visit was Abel Tasman in 1642, followed a century later by British explorer James Cook. Like Australia, New Zealand was originally part of the British Commonwealth. The location and history are reflected in the ethnic composition of the population, which is largely European. There were approximately 4.0 million people in 2003, of whom 14 per cent were Maori, 6 per cent

Pasifika, and 4 per cent Chinese, Indian and others. Many of the systems and structures were based originally on British models.

Unlike many other British colonies New Zealand was not conquered by military force. Instead, new migrants purchased land from Maori and established relations based on trade. The Treaty of Waitangi was signed by 45 Maori chiefs in 1840 and, although there has been subsequent debate and ill feeling about the meaning of the Treaty and implications for it in today's world (Waitangi Tribunal, 2007), this agreement was unique<sup>44</sup> in the world. Possibly because of the Treaty and origins of the largely immigrant population base, New Zealanders have a "long tradition of egalitarianism" and a general "dislike of overt class distinctions" (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 18). Up until quite recently the export economy was based largely on pastoral production with a heavy reliance on British markets. Today the economy is more diversified with the development of light industry and the services sector.

New Zealand has a high youth population,<sup>45</sup> and population projections revealed a rapidly changing demographic profile by ethnic identity: "Our children increasingly bring multiple cultural heritages to their education" (Alton-Lee, 2004, p. 3). Education is compulsory for all children aged between six and sixteen years although most children are enrolled at school on their fifth birthday. The New Zealand Education Act (1989) provides for free education in state schools administered by boards of trustees. Homeschooling, private schooling, state-integrated schooling and correspondence schooling are other options available to parents. In 2003 there were 761,755 students attending schools, a slight increase (2%) on the previous year. Most of this increase (3.5%) occurred in the secondary sector (Years 9-15). The highest overall growth rate was in Auckland, and one third of all New Zealand students attended school in this region at the time of the study. Auckland and Wellington "have higher proportions of their population with higher qualifications than the regions which are rural and on the periphery" (Pool, Baxendine, Cochrane, & Lindop, 2005, p. iii).

As at July 2003 there were 2,693 schools in New Zealand, of which 469 were secondary and composite schools. Of the 14 year old students in July 2001 an estimated

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<sup>44</sup> The Treaty established principles to guide the working relationship between the indigenous people and new settlers: "The Treaty implies a partnership, exercised in utmost good faith" (Waitangi Tribunal, 2007, p. 486), in which "the needs of both cultures must be provided for" (op. cit., p. 487).

<sup>45</sup> The fourth highest in OECD countries after Mexico, Turkey, and Iceland (Alton-Lee, 2004, p. 3).

82 per cent were still at school at age 16 in 2003. The OECD's *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) revealed the third highest mean achievement in reading literacy for 15 year old students in New Zealand but the dispersion of achievement scores was second widest out of 30 countries. Such wide dispersion of achievement is a recurrent pattern for New Zealand in international comparative studies, according to Alton-Lee (op. cit.): "While demonstrating high mean achievement in PISA the New Zealand education system is less equitable than the OECD countries' average." Average achievement as shown in PISA is lower for Maori and Pasifika learners according to Alton-Lee, although Asian students leave school better qualified than any other ethnic group, Pool et al. (2005, p. 16) maintained. Whilst retention rates for all students have been increasing Pakeha retention has been increasing at a faster rate than Maori, explaining the failure to "close the gaps" (ibid., p. 13).

For New Zealand as a whole there is an obvious difference between male and female educational attainment, with the latter leaving school better qualified than their male counterparts<sup>46</sup>. The qualifications people have achieved by the time they come to leave school is one indicator of how well educated they are and how equipped they are to gain employment or to embark on tertiary level studies. Attainment levels also give an indication of length of stay at school and school retention. The four regions above the national rate of school retention are Auckland, Wellington, Canterbury and Otago, "all regions with strong traditions in schooling" (Pool et al., ibid., p. 15), although these results could be affected by students moving into these areas to complete their education. The West Coast had the lowest levels of school retention, followed closely by Northland and Marlborough. It is thought that these regional patterns are a function of underlying structural factors of sociocultural origin (ibid., p. 14) and related to the early settlement patterns of Pakeha. Regional development is also a contributing factor in these patterns, with highly qualified workers moving increasingly to Auckland and Wellington. As a result, "the country's stock of highly qualified human capital is increasingly clustered in two, possibly three areas" (ibid., p. 20).

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<sup>46</sup> This is discussed in detail later in this chapter under the section entitled "Sociocultural Factors."

## ***Historical Context of Drop Out and Retention Problems***

I commenced this project at a time when all secondary school principals had been made aware of government-level concerns about the *retention problem* and the effects it was allegedly having on both the economic and social wellbeing of the country. It was a turbulent time, a time of rapid change, as the full effects of the “*Tomorrow’s Schools*”<sup>47</sup> reforms took hold (Ministry of Education, 1988) and recommendations from the reviews of the national qualifications framework were implemented.

Fiske and Ladd (2000, p. 20) identified the low rate of secondary school completion as a negative feature of New Zealand’s state education system. They argued that “such a system may have been tolerable in an era when jobs were available for anyone with a basic education and when a generous welfare system could serve as a safety net for those with limited skills,” but claimed that this was no longer the case. There seemed to be a clear relationship between the perception that high school authorities needed to cope with a serious student retention problem and economic factors, such as the wider availability of employment, the demand for highly skilled labour, and the limited ability of the state to support those not employed in times of fiscal restraint.

A market forces conceptualisation of education had been introduced by *Tomorrow’s Schools* (ibid.), including self governance and parental choice. Parental choice, the right of parents to select the school their children will attend, was premised on the notion that, as a result of the interplay of market forces, the quality of schooling would improve. The reforms resulted in fierce competition for students, rewarding bigger schools whilst less popular ones were forced into a spiral of decline: “The most difficult situations arose when particular schools were sent into tailspins by the new competitive environment and lost so many students that their continued existence as institutions was called into question” (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, pp. 259-260). Differential Ministry of Education funding<sup>48</sup> was introduced. This had an effect of encouraging

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<sup>47</sup> “*Tomorrow’s Schools: The Reforming of Education in New Zealand* outlined the Labour government’s 1988 reform package and set the scene for a range of reforms enacted between 1989 and 1991, including changes made by the National government in 1991, when they introduced full parental choice (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 3).

<sup>48</sup> Post reform, the per pupil funding component of schools’ operating grants assumed that the appropriate level of funding for school operations depended on the number of students in the school. It was based on an assumption that

senior school retention, assisting government to address its concern about the retention problem in secondary schools.

The *New Zealand Education Gazette*, official bulletin for the Ministry of Education, drew attention to retention issues in state secondary schools through an article featuring Rotorua Girls' High School's increased retention rates which rose from 41 per cent in 1995 to 60 per cent in 2001 (Velde, 2001, p. 10). Whilst these data indicated a reduction in the percentage of students leaving, the actual numbers dropping out had increased, because in the previous five years the local secondary school population in the area had grown by 8.5 per cent<sup>49</sup> (Ministry of Education, 2001). So, despite the reported increased retention rates, many of the girls still left before completing five years of secondary schooling. Lower Maori retention was of particular concern in this decile<sup>50</sup> 5 school. This meant that an increasing number of young Maori women were entering the labour market with minimal or no qualifications<sup>51</sup>. That early school leavers with few qualifications are at-risk of longer term unemployment is an aspect discussed later in this chapter. Similarly the fact that dropouts from certain socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds are over-represented in the national picture will be given further attention.

### ***Changes in the New Zealand Economy***

From European settlement until the late 1960s New Zealand operated "as something of an offshore farm for Britain," McIntyre argued (1998, p. 21). In this protected environment, quantities of pastoral products were exported in exchange for goods and services, with the result that most New Zealanders enjoyed "high per capita incomes and full employment despite a relatively undeveloped skill base" (ibid.). However, high unemployment followed worldwide oil supply crises (notably 1973 and

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older students required more equipment and resources than younger students. The funding for the oldest students was 50 per cent higher than that for the lowest levels, according to Pole, 1997, cited in Fiske and Ladd (2000, p. 142). The per pupil formula provided an incentive for schools to attract and retain more senior students on the basis that the real costs of supporting additional students were less than the average costs per pupil.

<sup>49</sup> Although only by 3.4 per cent (8018) nationwide.

<sup>50</sup> In 1995 the New Zealand Ministry of Education introduced a system of classifying schools by deciles as a means of "reflecting the greater educational challenges imposed on schools by disadvantaged students" (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p.80). Consistent with international studies students from decile 1-3 schools were found to comprise between 30.1 to 31.33 per cent of those leaving without school qualifications, compared to 7.4 to 9.8 per cent of those from deciles 8 to 10 in 2001 and 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2004a; Ministry of Education, 2004b).

<sup>51</sup> For 16.9 per cent of leavers School Certificate was their highest qualification, and 17.2 per cent left with no qualifications (ibid.).

1979), and the loss of preferential trading status, when Britain entered the European Common Market in 1973. The balance of payments crisis and growing unemployment, coupled with the prospect of ongoing significant welfare expenditure associated with the payment of the domestic purposes benefits, accident compensation and universal superannuation schemes, were factors used by Treasury (The Treasury, 1987) to convince the re-elected Labour Government to embark on a radical restructuring of New Zealand's economic and social institutions. Underpinned by a neoliberal philosophy which "places individual freedom above all other values" (Codd & Openshaw, 2005, p. 175), Treasury's proposal saw an increased role for the market and a reduced role for the state. The reforms ("Rogernomics") introduced by Minister of Finance Roger Douglas were based on Far Right monetarist theories which included: market liberalisation and deregulation, minimalist government, fiscal restraint, profit incentives for state-owned enterprises, and reduced spending on social programmes (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 28). With these changes New Zealand began a major shift away from "universality and community" towards an outward-oriented growth strategy based on "a free market that responded to individual self interest and that maximised freedom of individual choice [as] the most efficient way to accumulate profit" (McIntyre, 1998, pp. 31-32).

That such radical changes were brought in by a Labour Government is of special interest. Wilkes (1993, cited in McIntyre, 1998, p. 31) argued that this occurred because "the fourth Labour Government was confronted with the failure of orthodox methods of capital accumulation, a crisis in State fiscal budgeting, and a need to restructure the economy in line with shifts in global markets (p. 205)." Concerns about the poor quality of the New Zealand workforce were raised as part of the economic restructuring, and led to the introduction of educational reforms.

The economic disruption of the 1980s made it clear to all New Zealanders that their country was part of a rapidly changing global economy that would require a workforce with much higher skills than in the past. School drop outs could no longer expect to find employment and the country could no longer afford the relatively low school persistence rates. (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 30)

Consequently the rising unemployment rates from 1985 acted to focus attention on economic reforms and specifically on the need for a suitably skilled labour force to

compete internationally. This impacted on the role of secondary schools, especially the role expected in the preparation of young people for the labour market.

### ***The Politics of Education System Reforms***

Schools are “instruments for the dissemination of public policy” (Openshaw, 2005, p. 225). Indeed, many of the changes to the organisation and administration of schools in the period immediately preceding the commencement of this study can be seen to have arisen as a consequence of the new directions in economic policy. As Codd and Openshaw (2005, p. 165) pointed out, the terminology associated with these reforms conveys the idea that they were improvements, changes for the better, whereas many changes were in fact politically and economically driven, not educationally motivated. “There was no groundswell of dissatisfaction<sup>52</sup> with the education system to justify reform” (Kelsey, 1997, p. 219). The 1982 OECD review suggested a general level of satisfaction with the education system prior to that time: “To an extent greater than in some other OECD countries the parents, citizens, employees and workers of New Zealand appear to be reasonably well pleased with what is done for them in schools, colleges and universities” (ibid.). Treasury, however, saw the education system as “relentlessly squeezed between fiscal and political pressures” (Codd & Openshaw, 2005, p. 177), and thus proposed replacing equity with the notion of parental choice and market competition. The “Picot Report” (Task Force to Review Education Administration, 1988) added another dimension, that of self-managing schools.

The resulting policy for *Tomorrow's Schools* (Ministry of Education, 1988) substantially reduced the role of the state in the governance and management of education. Secondary education was most affected by the change of balance between central and local decision-making. Administration of schools was to be conducted by local communities through the establishment of boards of trustees and the implementation of charter requirements to ensure consultation and accountability. Local

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<sup>52</sup> Business leaders with no background in education were commissioned to oversee the reviews which prepared the way for these controversial changes. Citing Bollard, 1994, Kelsey (1997, p. 46-7) claimed that the shift in thinking required to facilitate greater state control was undertaken by “a small group of key civil servants ‘who moved among key institutions, putting reforms in place and preventing bottlenecks’. Most had economics qualifications, but few came from professional backgrounds or had practical experience of the particular activities of which they took control....[they] shifted from one job to the next with little apparent on-going accountability for what they had put in place.”

school boards were able to determine spending priorities within government allocated budgets<sup>53</sup> and employ teaching staff they thought appropriate, although a Teacher Registration Board was established to register professional standards of teachers and the Education Review Office was founded to audit schools, including curriculum implementation. The Department of Education was dismantled and in its place a new Ministry of Education established.

There was a voter backlash against the reforms<sup>54</sup>, which failed to deliver on economic growth as promised, and National came to power again in 1990. The new Bolger National Government raised the school leaving age (a way of reducing unemployment in response to the economic recession), abolished the Parent Advocacy Council (designed to convey community views to the Minister of Education), and removed school zones.

Picot considered that the creation of more choice in the system was a way of ensuring greater efficiency and equity. Whilst choice was one of the core values underpinning the new self-managing schools concept the removal of school zoning, which purportedly gave parents unrestricted choice and aimed to facilitate the reallocation of students “to available places according to supply and demand” (Kelsey, 1997, p. 221), led to greater educational inequality and widened the gap between “rich” and “poor” schools, according to Gordon (1994, cited in Codd & Openshaw, 2005, p. 181). This resulted in “disparities between schools...increasing along both class and ethnic lines” (Codd & Openshaw, *op. cit.*). Analysis of changes in enrolment patterns conducted by Fiske and Ladd showed that parents appeared to be trying to move their children up the decile ranking of schools:

Disadvantaged students are significantly over-represented in the schools that are least able to compete for students and hence, by the market definition of success, are failing schools. Because the playing field is not level, competition is not healthy, and it leads to a situation in which the benefits to the schools serving advantaged students are intensified and the problems of the schools serving

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<sup>53</sup> The inadequate funding allocated resulted in many boards levying annual student fees and engaging in entrepreneurial activities, such as opening their doors to international students, in order to provide the facilities and resources their school communities demanded.

<sup>54</sup> OECD (cited by Kelsey, 1997, p. 6) noted that Labour had deregulated the finance markets whilst imposing restrictive monetary policies through high interest rates, resulting in a high exchange rate which undercut exports. Consequently, despite a change of government, between 1985 and 1992 Kelsey (*op. cit.*, p.9) noted that growth across OECD economies averaged 20 per cent, whilst New Zealand's economy shrank by one per cent.

disadvantaged students are exacerbated....Full parental choice is not sustainable over time, especially in fast-growing areas like Auckland. Unless policymakers have no concern for the efficient use of existing resources and are willing to invest in new school facilities while others remain underutilised, a system of parental choice can quite quickly become a system in which schools do much of the choosing. (2000, p. 250).

As a result of the reforms recruitment and retention rates and, consequently, school size, increased in popular schools unless limited artificially by capping roll growth through Ministry of Education approved maximums or the establishment of school zones (Coutts, 2000). The reforms often led to popular schools, those drawing their student intakes from predominantly white middle class communities, having waiting lists for enrolment. Roll growth in popular schools worked to the detriment of the rolls in other secondary schools, unless the schools were situated in regions of demographic growth.

The reduction in drop out from popular schools was sometimes more apparent than real. Such schools could use legitimate policies and procedures to “push out” students who were not conforming to school behaviour norms and uniform codes, whilst still retaining a consistent cohort size through taking in waitlisted students. In this way educational reforms, which also affected the availability of post-school training<sup>55</sup> options for early school leavers, can be seen as wider macrosystem influences affecting both drop out rates and the individual lives of those who left before completing the year.

### **Curriculum, Qualifications, and the Role of Schools**

There is “a very real set of relationships among those who have economic, political, and cultural power in society...and the ways in which education is thought

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<sup>55</sup> *Learning for Life II* (1989) outlined reforms in the post-compulsory education sector which mirrored those implemented in the compulsory schooling sector. These changes were implemented through the *Education Amendment Act* (1990). Subsequently the concept of a seamless education system was introduced as the *National Qualifications Framework* in 1991 and “tertiary institutions were recast as delivering private benefits to fee-paying students, in order to justify reduced government funding and force the institutions to respond to market demand. While enrolments in professional courses boomed, low spending on trade training left the labour force seriously underskilled” Kelsey (1997, p. 4) maintained, adding that “the short sighted nature of the government’s withdrawal from planning and investment in training was exposed as soon as economic growth returned. A severe shortage of engineers, builders, printers, fitters and turners, machinists, electricians, sheet metal workers, quantity surveyors and architects was attributed to emigration and a lack of investment in training. By November 1994 only half as many people were taking apprenticeships as ten years before” (ibid., p.266).

about, organized, and evaluated” Apple (2004, p. vii) argued. Despite the introduction of the education reforms, “tensions between market-driven education and the government’s need to ensure an appropriately skilled future workforce remained” (Kelsey, 1997, p. 222). Thus it was not surprising that the economic and political environment which led to educational reforms also heralded a new qualifications framework and a new school curriculum in *Education for the 21st Century* (Ministry of Education, 1993a).

The reforms brought a shift away from the values of “full employment, equality of treatment, multiculturalism, a consensual approach to education, consultation and participation, and individual freedom and social justice” which had underpinned the New Zealand education system prior to the reforms (OECD, 1993, cited in Kelsey, p. 327). The basis of educational restructuring was driven by three contradictory goals, according to Jesson (quoted in Kelsey, 1997, p. 222): first, that of “a deregulated, artificially constructed education market, where education was a commodity subjected to the rigours of supply and demand,” second, of “community participation, diversity and accountability, which demanded effective democratic input into decisions on policy, operations and resources” and third, “the development of a highly skilled and technologically literate population, which required a centralised, skills-based approach.” The latter was a key driver in a curriculum review process which allegedly involved wide public consultation.

The final version, *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993b, p. 6), stated the new curriculum aimed to “enable students to achieve their potential, to continue learning throughout life, and to play their full part in our democratic society and in a competitive world economy.” Apple (2004, p. 76) explained that “the roots of schooling as preparing children for ‘work’ are obviously quite deep,” and claimed that the revised curriculum perpetuated the historic link between schooling and occupation, and the qualities associated with an employee’s role. In New Zealand it comprised national curriculum statements for the seven areas required to be covered by schools—each defined the learning principles, achievement aims and the objectives which teachers were required to cover.

However, as O’Neill (2005, cited in Openshaw, Clark, Hamer, & Waitere-Ang, 2005, p. 188) explained, the wider pedagogical view of curriculum includes not just the

knowledge to be transmitted but also “embodies the broader ‘social, political and cultural processes or constructs which embrace values, assumptions, fundamental beliefs about the world, basic knowledge and visions of utopias, which may or may not be overt’.” This “hidden curriculum” includes the role schools play in the reproduction of social stratification and the perpetuation of society’s inequalities, “the training of students in values and norms that help to perpetuate the existing system of stratification” (Sullivan, 2004, cited in Openshaw et al., 2005, p. 188). In this conceptualisation of curriculum the reforms had their effect through the way the school was organised and administered, the day-to-day routines of schools and the practices of teachers, all of which contributed to the students’ experiences. When students in Canadian studies were asked “what was it about the school which made them quit” (Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995, p. 41), the “irrelevance of the curriculum as a whole” was commonly reported: “I was basically bored with a lot of classes, and because I was bored I wasn’t going to some of them, and as a result I got kicked out of some of the classes [INT 136]<sup>56</sup>” (ibid., p. 43).

Such research raises questions about the contribution the school curriculum and school operations make to early school leaving. Certainly the subject choices offered to students in six New Zealand medium sized secondary schools were found by Hipkins (2004) to be very conservative: There are “profound and challenging implications” for the nature of subjects and structure of learning in schools as a consequence of the rapid social change brought about by the advent of the knowledge society which schools have yet to consider (ibid., p. 3). Knowledge “has become perhaps the most important factor determining the standard of living – more than land, than tools, than labour” (World Development Report, 1999, cited by Ernst & Young, 1999b, p. 1) but what we think of as knowledge is changing, and therefore the school curriculum needs rethinking as well, according to Gilbert (2004, slide 29). To a degree what is taught in schools is still based to a degree on industrial age ways of thinking and knowing. As a result schools are becoming “increasingly moribund and irrelevant institution[s]” that function only to provide students with the credentials that their parents say they need (Prensky, 2005, p. 4).

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<sup>56</sup> [INT 136] refers to student interview number 136 in the study by Tanner, Krahn, and Hartnagel (1995).

A rather cynical view is that schooling prepares students for the world of work through accustomising them to work-like conditions, to “tasks offering little intrinsic satisfaction, and to supervisors—their teachers” (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 169). This view is supported by Hargreaves’ British study (1981, cited by Coleman & Hendry, *ibid.* p. 168) that found “very little of our secondary education is strictly vocational: schools are more oriented towards public examinations than towards jobs.” The school, “through its examination system and access to high status knowledge, acts as a ‘gatekeeper’ by assigning youth to future career paths and educational opportunities,” Openshaw suggested (2005, p. 225).

The history of public school examinations<sup>57</sup> assists in explaining why inequities in occupational opportunity persist. Openshaw maintained that “NCEA, like Proficiency and School Certificate before it, was created in response to changing educational, economic and social requirements” (2005, p. 247). He explained that the more people who acquire a qualification, the less real value it had in the job market: “The examination then begins its irreversible decline and loses its selectivity. ‘Qualification inflation’ occurs and the selectivity becomes vested in a higher qualification.”

The changes made over time to the School Certificate (SC) examination (Lennox, 2001, p. 2) illustrate this point. SC was the first national examination students encountered at senior school during the period 1934-2000, and it operated to select an elite group of students capable of going on to further study. It also came to be recognised in the wider community as the distinguishing trademark of a completed secondary education for a larger middle group going out directly into employment from school (Lee & Lee 1993, cited in Openshaw, 2005, pp. 237-238). The increased student retention in senior high school, and subsequent increase in the number of students achieving success in this examination, began to pose some difficulties for its value. At the same time changes in the labour market and community expectations of a longer stay at school led to calls for a review of school qualifications.

The perception that the existing School Certificate, Sixth Form Certificate, and UEBS [University Entrance, Bursary and Scholarship] examinations no longer met the

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<sup>57</sup> The Proficiency Examination introduced in 1899 was followed by the introduction of School Certificate (SC) in 1934. In 1945 SC became the only Form 5 (Year 11) award. Whilst from 1946-1967 a pass over four subjects was required (awarded overall for results in English and three best other subjects), between 1968 and 2000 single subject passes were adopted. The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 1 replaced SC in 2002. Level 2 was introduced in 2003 replacing Sixth Form Certificate, and Level 3 in 2004, replacing UEBS.

needs of an increasingly diverse secondary student population or the “vastly changed conditions that characterised New Zealand society in the last quarter of the twentieth century” led to criticism of traditional assessment procedures from many groups: The Department of Education, The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA), Maori and feminist groups and activist secondary students (Openshaw, 2005, p. 247).

A more flexible and adaptable assessment system [was] all the more vital if educational institutions of the future were to adequately meet the needs of successive generations of school leavers, who would face a world in which family life, societal values and employment prospects would be far more fluid than had traditionally been the norm. (ibid.)

I was on two working parties advising the then Minister of Education, Lockwood Smith, on the concept, and later on the practicalities, of a new National Qualifications Framework based on standards-based criteria. The concept underpinning the framework was that tertiary and secondary education would interface in a seamless way allowing students recognition for prior knowledge through either credit transfer or demonstrated ability. Portability required implementation of a national assessment system based on recognition of credit. As a result the National Qualifications Framework was established and secondary qualifications, (National Certificates at Levels 1, 2, and 3) introduced incrementally from 2002, with a mix of externally examined and internally assessed standards. A feature of these new secondary qualifications was the inclusion of both vocational unit standards, (which were assessed against pre-published standards on a “met” or “not met” basis) and conventional subjects which were differentiated by three achievement rankings (achieve, merit, and excellence).

The NCEA allowed schools to shape courses for students with different learning needs and assess for credits towards NCEA or other NQF certificates. However, the review conducted by Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, and Ferral (2004) indicated that there was not the variation in students’ programmes which might have been expected. Three main types of courses were identified as common across the senior school: First, traditional-discipline courses<sup>58</sup> which were assessed by achievement standards and

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<sup>58</sup> In traditional-discipline courses assessment is mostly by achievement standards and the curriculum is organised by divisions imposed by the separate standards: These reflect traditional ways of thinking about the structure and content

tended to be more “academic;” focused on knowledge about the discipline which was not related to any particular context (‘knowledge for its own sake’). Second locally-redesigned courses<sup>59</sup> which were a mix of unit and achievement standards, and third, contextually-focused options<sup>60</sup> which were the vocational or applied unit standards courses that attempted to make closer links with students’ everyday contexts and/or the future contexts of work or leisure.

Through curriculum and qualification reviews, then, changes to the education system allowed for alternate pathways. These were intended to provide encouragement for senior students to stay on at school. Whether these changes have been effective in this regard is an important question.

Certainly there is an increasingly diverse range of students in the senior school who now appear to be able to get more recognition for what they have achieved, Quirke (2006) maintained in *The Dominion Post* newspaper headline “Moving on and up” referred to in the introduction. This article highlighted the well-established correlation between ethnicity, social class, and achievement (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 30) but also seems to suggest that Government policies established to place emphasis on the development of a skilled labour force have indeed achieved their aim, with greater retention and achievement levels indicated in some schools at least. An alternate view, and a commonly voiced critique of standards-based assessments since their introduction, is that the criteria for achieving credits under the new qualifications are not as rigorous as the standards established by the externally examined qualifications which they replaced (the “old” School Certificate).

Whilst current levels<sup>61</sup> of employment are high in most regions of New Zealand, in the competition for occupational rewards (e.g., remuneration and career

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in that subject. More than half of the students in the study by Hipkins et al. were taking such subjects, which included both core and optional subjects from the old world definitions.

<sup>59</sup> Locally-redesigned courses generally had a mix of achievement and unit standards and, at Year 12 and 13 particularly, different mixes including levels, selected at different schools. In these courses the curriculum still tends to be organised around the assessment instruments but most cover less of the traditional curriculum content, allowing for some variation in pacing and for the limited introduction of broader contexts for learning.

<sup>60</sup> The contextually-focused options are usually assessed by unit standards and offer a reduced number of credits for which assessment is predominantly internally assessed. These courses tend to focus on skills and practical application, rather than recall of knowledge out of context. They may also offer credits earned through Gateway placements, and, more recently, ASDAN (Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network) also contributes credits to the qualification.

<sup>61</sup> The Labour Party report reduced numbers receiving the Unemployment Benefit by two thirds, from 150,000 in June 1999 to 50,000 in June 2005. Unemployment, they claimed, is down to the lowest level in the OECD, with

advancement) only those credentials which discriminate among job applicants are valued (Collins, 1979, cited in Finley, 1992, p. 245). This suggests that both higher level positions and all jobs in times of economic recession will be filled by people with the highest levels of qualifications. Credential inflation affects students from lower class backgrounds the most, because the higher level qualifications required by technical, professional and managerial positions generally require more time to be spent studying. The costs of prolonged study include living expenses, tuition fees and the loss of income because of being unable to work full-time.

The longer the period of financial support required, the more disadvantaged families of modest means become in supporting their offspring through the educational contest. The winners of the educational contest between middle- and working class youth turn out to be those who can go the longest without working. (Finley, 1992, p. 245)

In disadvantaged families the pressure for young people to leave school and get a job before completing the qualifications they are capable of achieving may be a major reason for dropping out, as some overseas studies suggested (Juenke, 2004, pp. 2-3, citing results from a National Longitudinal Survey [NLS]).

Finley went on to say that working class women were more disadvantaged than their middle class sisters because in families with scarce resources these were often prioritized in favour of males. Certainly this was my own experience. My father did not believe in education for girls and actively discouraged my ambitions to become a doctor. He wanted me to leave school as soon as I could and become a secretary like my mother. I completed five years of secondary education and went on to study at university but of my own volition. My three brothers, on the other hand, all had opportunity for further study as of right, two completing mechanical engineering apprenticeships and one gaining a university degree in economics. My own experiences are congruent with the research findings which suggest that whilst “individual temperament and choices play major roles in people’s lives...they do so within boundaries partly determined by their class positions” (Finley, 1992, p. 241).

In schools assistance with career choices was provided by specialist careers' advisors, as well as deans and classroom teachers. The Ministry of Education recognised the importance of the careers advisor role by allocating a specific PR Unit (additional reimbursement for taking on additional responsibilities) for this position. McIntyre's review of careers counselling in schools (1998) noted that schools were poorly served because of a lack of support from suitably qualified counsellors and by limited policy guidance. Following the introduction of the National Administration Guideline covering careers education (NAG 1, iv in Ministry of Education, 2000), there has been an increased focus on career education and guidance in the school curriculum and increased interest in the *Pathways and Prospects* of young people leaving school (Vaughan, 2004, cited in Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. v).

Participants in this New Zealand study of youth in transition "described exploration of, and new learning about, their skills, interests, and aptitudes as well as exploration of future possibilities achievable by 'creating selves'" (ibid., p. 89). This research highlighted "the importance of people's identity investments, and current and future self-concepts, in the perception of possibilities and ability to make career decisions" (ibid., p. 91). In the ideal, exemplified by the "Confident Explorers" cluster, the notion of career was interpreted in a very wide sense, "approaching it through themselves" (emphasis in original, op. cit., p. 91): "Their overall framework was generally not attached to a particular job, vocation, or profession; it was attached to being a particular kind of person with a range of high-level and adaptable skills" (ibid.).

However, despite "an increase in career development support," it would seem that socioeconomic status and gender, more than curriculum offerings, have shaped both the direction and timing of the transition which young people make from school into work or further study. The effects of family disadvantage can be ameliorated to a certain degree by the actions of the state in providing health and welfare support but the economic and educational reforms were accompanied by reductions in spending in these two key areas.

### ***Health and Welfare***

With the establishment of the milk in schools scheme in 1937 Labour set the tone for its health and welfare commitment, which was followed up in 1939 with the

Social Security Act (1938) which established affordable access to health care for all. Low cost housing and a social welfare system which gave security to the elderly, infirm, and those without employment were Labour's stated policy goals during that period (The Labour Party of New Zealand, 2005a).

However, in their post-election briefing papers to the returning Labour Government of 1999 the Ministry of Social Policy suggested that only half of New Zealand families were at no risk<sup>62</sup> of poor outcomes (such as school failure or unemployment). As well as this challenge to the effectiveness of welfare policies the New Zealand Treasury pointed out they were unsustainable, given demographic predictions and the international economic situation.

As a result economic restructuring was accompanied by radical changes to the social welfare system, including reductions in expenditure on social support. The abolition of the Unemployment, Sickness and Domestic Purposes benefits for under-18 year olds was one way government saw to encourage senior students to stay on to complete five years of secondary schooling, or to move into post-school education and training. Whilst representing a saving on benefit payments, these reductions were accompanied by the introduction of means tested student allowances. In September 1997 the Minister for Education, Wyatt Creech, announced an increase in Family Support payments for parents of 16 and 17 year olds, with the intention of further encouraging low-income families to keep young people in school beyond the compulsory leaving age (16 years of age). From January 1, 1998, all 16 and 17 year old students in New Zealand were only able to receive state income support if they were legally married, in a defacto relationship with dependent children, or eligible for an independent circumstances allowance (a living allowance for young people estranged from their families). So, whilst young people were provided with disincentives for leaving school their parents were offered incentives to assist keeping them at school.

Meantime the changes to the way schooling operated in the new competitive environment posed additional challenges to "loser" low decile schools, which became, according to Fiske and Ladd, "repositories for a disproportionate share of the country's most difficult to teach students," including those with health and nutrition problems

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<sup>62</sup> These estimates were derived largely from the work of David Fergusson, using the Christchurch Health and Development Study (Footnote 1 in Davey, 2000, p. 1).

who were not considered fit to learn without considerable additional support (2000, p. 234). They reported that a high proportion of students from low decile schools arrived in class having had no breakfast and many did not have a regular place to sleep (*ibid.*, p.235). Students had iron deficiencies and high cholesterol levels, often the result of poor diet, and exhibited symptoms of diseases such as: arthritis/rheumatic diseases, asthma, cardiovascular and blood disorders, diabetes and hearing problems related to glue ear, which pose barriers to effective learning. In addition, many students with childhood disadvantage—including poverty, family instability, and abuse—demonstrated adjustment and behaviour problems (such as attention deficit disorder) in the classroom, which had their sequel in school drop out, adolescent offending and mental health problems according to Davey (2000). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) monitoring committee considered that health risks to young people in New Zealand were posed by relatively high rates of youth suicide, teenage pregnancy,<sup>63</sup> and alcohol abuse by young people (UNCROC, 2004, p. 11). In particular the committee was concerned about the availability of mental health services for young people and a difference in the health status of Maori, compared to non-Maori, and made recommendations to government for policy changes to redress these concerns.

As well as differences between Maori and non-Maori, gender differences in the health and wellbeing of adolescents have also been identified. Davey found that boys are more likely than girls to present with behavioural and conduct problems, mental health problems, substance dependence, accidental injury and death, intentional injury and homicide. Boys are more likely to commit suicide or have attempted to do so. This evidence led her to question whether the relative underachievement of males (discussed in the next section) may be linked to risk factors which influence their behaviour and hence their school performance (Davey, 2000, p. 16). Whilst both males and females are exposed to the same types of economic risks—and subjected similarly, it seems, to bullying (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 23)—boys are more likely to engage in drug<sup>64</sup> use, unsafe sex, and greater impulsive and risk-taking behaviour which causes them to be stood down or suspended from school, apprehended for juvenile offending, or brought

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<sup>63</sup> Previous studies (Nash & Major, 1995; 1996, cited in Nash, 2002c, p. 150) found that pregnancy was the main reason for girls dropping out from school.

<sup>64</sup> Both genders were equally likely to abuse alcohol and use cannabis, but males were more likely to be involved with hard drugs.

into physical danger through, for example, sports injuries and motor vehicle accidents.

Antecedents and predispositions to risk-taking behaviour which can seriously affect wellbeing can be traced through the school histories of leavers, according to overseas studies (Muuss & Porton, 1999a, p. 425). Statistics available for stand-down and suspension rates across New Zealand<sup>65</sup> provided support for this contention. For both types of school-initiated withdrawal, males and Maori students<sup>66</sup> were over-represented and stand-downs and suspensions were found to be more common occurrences in lower decile (1-5)<sup>67</sup> schools. New Zealand Ministry of Education data (Melville, 2003, pp. 45-50) revealed that continual disobedience (25.9%) and physical assault (22.3%) were the most common reasons for stand-downs of students between 2000 and 2002. For suspensions over the same period, continual disobedience (24.9%) and drugs (29.8%) were the most commonly cited reasons.

School patterns are reflected in police offending statistics. Because the majority of cases involving young people are not dealt with by formal proceedings in court, “there is a lack of robust information about the extent of offending by children and young people in New Zealand” (Melville, 2003, p. 127). Apprehensions by the police, rather than offending statistics, are thus considered more useful indicators of trends in youth offending (ibid., p. 129). The rate of apprehensions for drugs, violent crimes and offences against people have all risen in the last decade, and “internationally New Zealand has a high rate of suspected participation in teenage crime” (ibid., p. 127). Apprehensions showed both gender and ethnic differentiations, with males accounting for 81.8 per cent of youth court cases and 51.2 percent of youth court cases involving Maori (ibid., p. 131).

At the time of commencing this study little work appeared to have been done internationally on the differing patterns and correlates of anti-social behaviour in girls (Pakiz, Reinherz, & Giaconia, 1999, p. 449). This may have been because girls are less prone to behaviour and conduct problems than boys, as two New Zealand studies have

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<sup>65</sup>On average, three quarters of those suspended from school were male (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 23; Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 72).

<sup>66</sup>Ministry Reports on stand downs and suspensions for 2002/3 (Melville, 2003) confirmed that Maori form 21 per cent of the school population but on average 40 per cent of all stand-downs.

<sup>67</sup> In 2002, the rate for stand-downs was found to be generally higher for lower decile schools: decile 2 had the highest rate in 2002, with 39 stand-downs per 1,000 students and decile 4 had 38 per 1,000 students. Decile 1, 3 and 4 schools have had continual increases in their stand-down rates since 2000 (Melville, 2003, p. 46).

shown<sup>68</sup> (Christchurch Health and Development Study [CHDS] and Dunedin Multi-disciplinary Health and Development Study [DMHDS], cited in Davey, 2000, p. 3). Behaviour and conduct problems, which range from truancy and minor delinquency to criminal behaviour and serious mental health disorders, were found to be “strongly associated with family disadvantage and instability” (Davey, 2000, p. 3). Females were more at-risk of sexual abuse than males and risk-taking behaviour, such as drug and alcohol abuse, was correlated with the early onset of sexual activity and risky sexual behaviour, leading to unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. More than socioeconomic status, early sexual activity was associated with leaving school early, lower school qualifications and living away from parents, according to Silva and Stanton (1996, cited in Davey, 2000, p. 11). Girls were more likely to be involved in adolescent-limited delinquency (although not to the same extent as boys) if they experienced early onset of puberty and attended coeducational schools, where they were exposed to older male delinquent role models, deemed “a key factor in girls’ delinquency” (ibid., Davey, p. 4).

The New Zealand youth health status report (Ministry of Health, 2002) offered further details about the risks to the wellbeing of adolescents, including mortality and morbidity, injury (both unintentional injuries, abuse and violence), mental health, mental illness and suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, cannabis and tobacco, gambling, diabetes and sexual and reproductive health.

This overview has identified some of the health and welfare issues which school principals increasingly have to deal with on a day-to-day basis. This is necessitated in part because many parents are working and cannot find the time to follow up on health issues and risks to their children’s safety. Some students are not in stable family situations with a consistent caregiver, giving added reasons for school staff to be vigilant in monitoring students’ health and being aware of possible security concerns. A further reason is, of course, that these risks for individual students may also become barriers to learning, or risks to the health and safety, of others. School principals are looked to by parents and caregivers to help find a way through the raft of inter-agency

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<sup>68</sup> The Dunedin study compared the likelihood of delinquency behaviours between males and females and the ratios were 4.5:1 for childhood conduct disorder; 7:1 for adult antisocial personality and 2:1 for self-reported adolescent delinquency. Males committed a higher proportion of the more serious and violent offences, whereas for drug usage, vandalism and theft, the incidence was similar for males and females.

protocols when help is required by students and their families. The pity of the situation since the reforms is that principals and other staff are spending more and more time on administrivia to do with increasing Ministry of Education accountabilities, property and finances, to the detriment of teaching and learning and student welfare.

Assurances were given that “more resources are being allocated to Health and Education” (The Labour Party of New Zealand, 2005b, p. 3) but the “radical and progressive measures” (p. 1), which Labour initiated as part of the economic reforms in the period 1984-1990 left a legacy of unresolved health and welfare issues for schools and their communities to deal with, without putting in place adequate support structures or resources. The fact that health and welfare issues are frequently raised in the drop out literature, as being associated with early school leaving, is significant. Socioeconomic and sociocultural factors influence health status, and they are also associated with levels of educational achievement and drop out.

### ***Sociocultural Factors***

There are cultural and class differences in how adolescence is viewed. The role of adults, such as parents and teachers, in assisting youth to make the transition from school to work or further training has been highlighted already. In ways which are strongly linked to socioeconomic status and their own educational background, parents influence students’ decision-making about leaving school. Parenting practices are reinforced for middle class children by schooling but not for those of working class backgrounds. It is likely that for this reason international literature showed low socioeconomic status to be strongly associated with drop out (Dorn, 1996; Kaufman, Kwon, Klein, & Chapman, 2000; Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995), as well as closely linked to achievement (Nash & Harker, 1997, p. 42), regardless of ethnic background (Drew & Gray, cited in Demie, 2001, p. 98). Similar patterns were found in New Zealand but comparisons were limited by the scope of data collected annually from every secondary school and lack of research in the area of gender, ethnicity, and social class differences available at that time (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 5).

There was a trend for secondary students to stay at school longer but even so, at the commencement of this study more than half of those students starting school in Year

9 left before completing five years of secondary schooling. There were some differential retention rates exhibited for specific groups, as the 2003 data well illustrate (Table 1).

Table 1:

*Apparent Retention Rates by Age, Ethnicity and Gender for 2003\**

Ethnicity	Age 16		Age 17		Age 18		Total		
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Age 16	Age 17	Age 18
All**	78.6%	85.5%	53.9%	62.4%	13.7%	13.5%	81.9%	58.1%	13.6%
Maori	53.9%	66.1%	33.4%	39.9%	8.6%	8.6%	62.7%	36.7%	8.6%
Pasifika	79.8%	88.5%	59.3%	68.2%	25.4%	20.4%	84.1%	63.7%	23.0%

From Ministry of Education (2006, p. 9; 2004b, p. 37)

Note. \*Compared with age 14 enrolments: no adjustments were made to account for migration.

\*\*Excludes Foreign Fee-paying students and NZAID Scholarships.

Of all 14 year olds at school in July 2001, 82 per cent of them were still at school at the age of 16 in July 2003 (Ministry of Education, 2004b, p. 37). Of all the 14 year olds at school in July 2003, 80 per cent of them were still at school in 2005, showing similar student retention into the senior school over the period of study (Ministry of Education, Data Management and Analysis Division, 2006, p. 4). Maori students had the highest drop out rate and Pasifika students had the highest retention rates in 2003, continuing longstanding trends since 1986 (*ibid.*, p. 9). Whilst the proportions of males and females staying on until age 18 were not greatly dissimilar, progression beyond the age of compulsory education (age 16) was less likely for males. So, retention rates at secondary school appeared to show a strong correlation with sociocultural factors.

The raising of the school leaving age from 15 to 16 years in 1993 had little effect on retention; it simply consolidated a trend for generally higher retention rates. Despite this trend for longer stay at school, evident since 1986 (*ibid.*), on average<sup>69</sup> 16 per cent of leaving students left high school without qualifications in the years which followed (Statistics New Zealand, 2001). Up until 2000, Maori and Pasifika students

<sup>69</sup>Although the year 2000 figure peaked at 19 per cent, the 2003 numbers (8,195 left with no qualifications out of a total 53,471 leavers) showed 15.33 per cent, reverting back to the pattern of previous years (Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 74).

were consistently over-represented amongst those students who left without qualifications: Pasifika students formed 6-7 per cent of all leavers but 9-10 per cent of those leaving without qualifications; Maori students made up 17-19 per cent of all leavers in this period but consistently high proportions (36-39%) of those leaving with no qualifications. Data for the year of study (2003) showed that, despite a rise in the total high school population, the proportions of Maori and Pasifika students had not varied greatly<sup>70</sup>.

In 2003 a total of 53,471 students left school and, of these, Year 13 was the last year of schooling for 57.1 per cent of them (Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 37). The leavers' profile for the top end of the senior school was comparable with the previous year's results, with 67 per cent of all leaving students gaining NCEA Level 2<sup>71</sup> or higher. Twenty per cent (10,523) gained A or B Bursaries and, of students leaving with UEBS, 5.14 per cent were Maori and 1.6 per cent Pasifika compared to 74.28 per cent European. However, because this study took place at a time when there was a changeover of national qualifications, comparing the percentages of students leaving school who were eligible to attend university<sup>72</sup> is probably the best way to illustrate differences in achievement across ethnic groups (Table 2). Considering the overall high school ethnic composition (Maori about 20% nationally), it is clear that Maori underachievement has been a longstanding trend.

Table 2:

*Percentages of Students Leaving School Eligible to Attend University*

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<sup>70</sup> Secondary school ethnic composition in 2003: European 60 per cent; Maori 17.4 per cent; Pasifika 7.4 per cent; Asian 8.2 per cent. Since 2000 the numbers of students from minority ethnic groups have been increasing, whilst European numbers have declined slightly (Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 37). Higher school retention and differential birth rates were factors in increased high school numbers.

<sup>71</sup> To illustrate the complexity of this period of transition between qualification regimes, this category was noted as including "Sixth Form Certificate, at least 14 credits at National Certificate Level 2, National Certificate Level 2, ACE or overseas awards at Year 12 level, and 1-13 credits at Level 3 or above" (Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 74).

<sup>72</sup> During 2004, NCEA Level 3 was offered for the first time and New Zealand (NZ) Scholarship was introduced. The Data Management and Analysis Division of the Ministry of Education consider that students leaving with University Entrance, NCEA Level 3, NZ Scholarship or a Level 4 NQF qualification can be compared with students who would have left previously with eligibility to attend university (2006, p. 4). However, it was actually harder to gain university entrance with NCEA than under UEBS (3 Bursary passes at C grade or better), Principal's Nominee (Awa High) explained in a personal communication of July 26, 2007. This was because in addition to gaining the requisite 42 Level 3 credits from approved subjects, there were additional numeracy and literacy requirements (14 Level 1 mathematics credits and eight Level 2 English credits from the reading and writing strands) which made it more difficult for some students to gain entry. In addition, the New Zealand (NZ) Scholarship was a monetary award, not a qualification, so students entering for this examination still needed to enter for NCEA as well.

Year	Ethnic Group				Total
	Maori	Pasifika	Asian	European/ Pakeha	
2000	7%	10%	52%	30%	27%
2001	7%	10%	54%	30%	26%
2002	8%	9%	52%	31%	27%
2003	8%	9%	54%	33%	29%

Note. Data derived from Ministry of Education (Data Management and Analysis Division, 2006, p. 4).

Reflecting the implementation of a more flexible qualifications structure (NCEA<sup>73</sup>), I had expected the percentage of those leaving without any qualifications to have dropped but Ministry figures showed a similar percentage leaving with no qualifications. However, in 2003 the “No qualifications” category included students who had achieved some credits (but fewer than 14 credits); any credits gained could be carried over to accumulate towards qualifications in the future. The apparent lack of change reported for 2003 could arguably be because the new framework was not fully bedded in: NCEA was only available at Level 1 and 2 nationwide. Of the leavers with no qualifications, 48.24 per cent were European, 35.67 per cent were Maori, and 9.97 per cent Pasifika—once again similar results to previous years. The results for Level 1 were further disaggregated to identify those students gaining 14 plus credits and those attaining NCEA Level 1 (80 credits or more). With the complexity of the transition period, it was therefore difficult to compare results on a national basis with those of previous years.

Despite this fact, there were some notable trends apparent, for example differences by geographical region in the proportions of students leaving with few or no formal qualifications. These differences were attributable to either differing ethnic mixes of localities or socioeconomic factors. Of relevance to my work as Executive Dean at Northland Polytechnic was the finding that Northland was a case in point, with

<sup>73</sup> It had been optional for schools to adopt the unit standards approach at first, but in 2002 all schools were expected to have senior students engaged in the standards-based national qualifications, National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) Level 1, with a roll out of mandatory adoption over successive years (i.e. 2003, Level 2 and 2004, Level 3). Data published since 2003 for individual schools are able to show both the new qualification achievements in a year and, in addition, a comparison with all qualifications of students on the July 1 roll in that same year.

secondary school achievements below the national average. That there were strong correlations between school attainment and Socio-Economic Status (SES) was illustrated by results in 2000<sup>74</sup> and 2001, which showed that 80 and 60 per cent respectively of all school leavers from decile 8-10 schools gained Sixth Form Certificate whilst only 49 and 47 per cent of leavers from decile 1-3 schools achieved at this level (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 37). Although the figures are not easily comparable because of the introduction of NCEA reporting, the 2003 leavers' data indicated similar correlations with achievements and school decile ratings, with proportionally more students being retained into Year 13 and gaining Bursary in decile 8-10 schools than in decile 1-3 (Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 76). Over all secondary schools 15 per cent of students left with no qualifications that year, and these students represented 26 per cent of the number leaving from decile 1-3 schools but only 8 per cent of those leaving from decile 8-10 schools.

Whilst social class differences are important, Lareau (1992, p. 222) argued that "they are mediated in critical ways by gender."<sup>75</sup> New Zealand statistics indicated gender differences in student performance at school and in drop out rates, with slightly more males leaving without qualifications, averaging 56-59% of those leaving in any year (Ministry of Education, Data Management and Analysis Division, 2006, p. 9). The underperformance of boys and wastage of talent as increasing numbers of young men drop out of school, are killed or jailed, has been attributed to a variety of causes (Lashlie, 2005). These include lack of role models, with the increasing number of mothers who are sole parents, and the feminisation of the teacher workforce in primary schools. Increasingly in the secondary system, differential treatment of children in the classroom and the nature of parent involvement in schooling are thought to contribute to

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<sup>74</sup> Sixty four per cent of all students leaving schools in 2001 gained Sixth Form Certificate or higher (Ministry of Education, 2004a, p. 37). There was no explanation offered by the Ministry of Education for the significant drop in the percentage of school leavers gaining these qualifications between 2000 and 2001, nor for the apparent numbers leaving without qualifications (Statistics New Zealand, 2001), although labour market fluctuations may have been a factor. Another factor may be that, with increased retention and a greater diversity of students in senior levels, many schools had incorporated alternative programmes and commenced vocational unit standards delivery, for which there was no central reporting system at that time.

<sup>75</sup> For statistical purposes gender can be taken simply to refer to males and females, Alton-Lee and Praat explained, (2001, p. 7), but gender is: "*more than biological differences between men and women. It includes the way those differences, whether real or perceived, have been valued, used and relied upon to classify women and men and to assign roles and expectations to them*" (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 1996, cited in Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 7, emphasis in original). A brief overview of six commonly used theories to explain gender differences is given by Alton-Lee and Praat (2001, pp. 7-8).

the reproduction of the inequalities of society (Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, & Tiakiwai, 2003b; Lareau, 1992).

Despite historic arguments that the New Zealand curriculum favoured boys, gains in girls' achievements in school (Maharey, 2006) are such that Baker (cited by Dye, 2006, p. A7) asserted changes to curriculum, teaching and assessment now favour girls. This trend was identified more than a decade ago by Nash (1993, p. 151) who noticed that whilst in 1978 a greater proportion of boys than girls gained UEBS, this position was reversed by 1991. The proportion of girls gaining this highest level school qualification quadrupled in contrast to the much less substantial increase (barely double) for boys over that same 13 year period. Whilst in 1991 proportionally more boys than girls left school with School Certificate, proportionally more boys than girls also left without any formal school qualifications at all, leading Nash to conclude that "the performance of girls in national examinations at all levels is now superior to that of boys" (ibid.). The greater achievement of boys in the past may be attributable to gender biases in parents' involvement in schooling, as mothers spend more time assisting their sons to succeed than their daughters, an early study found (Stevenson & Baker, 1987, cited in Lareau, 1992, pp. 222-223). However, now more mothers are in employment possibly they no longer have the same time to spend in supporting their sons as they had in the past.

Nash clearly showed that girls were outperforming boys in national qualifications yet 10 years later Steve Benson, Senior Policy Analyst for the Ministry of Education, reported that "843 of the elite Scholarship awards went to boys and just 341 to girls" in the 2005 examinations, indicating girls still lag behind boys in certain fields of achievement ("Ministry plans to take a leaf out of Australia's book", 2006)<sup>76</sup>. Gender differences in certain subjects, especially at the higher levels, had also been highlighted by Nash (1993, p. 151): More boys than girls sat UEBS in physics, mathematics (statistics and calculus options), accountancy and design in 1990. However, he recognised that the proportion of girls studying these subjects appeared to be on the increase, a consequence of increased labour market opportunities for girls.

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<sup>76</sup> The most recent information at the time of publication still referred to "old" qualifications data, suggesting that the Ministry of Education had also experienced some difficulties in making comparisons. Their analysis concludes that "gender differences in participation and achievement in the compulsory school sector favour both females and males, and are related to the particular curriculum topic and level under examination" (Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 3).

Writing at the same time, Jones found that “in New Zealand society, middle-class and working-class women still have relatively limited entry into those well-paid and expanding job areas which demand mathematical and science skills” (1991, p. 153). Interviews with both Pakeha and Pasifika girls in streamed classes revealed most girls’ career aspirations were tempered by their perceptions that they were weak in mathematics and science (ibid., pp. 153-154). Participation and performance in these areas is related to access to particular areas of work and knowledge. This contention is supported by Baker and Jones (1992, p. 198), who found that “in systems with higher percentages of women working in the formal workforce, girls are more likely to perform as well as or better than boys in mathematics.” This point is amplified by the subject-specific analyses completed by Alton-Lee and Praat in *Questioning Gender* (2001, p. 12), which found that, whilst gender differences in participation rates in senior science had been reducing, physics is still chosen by twice as many males as females. With biology the pattern is reversed.

Recent changes in the technology curriculum had “attempted to confound the traditional gendered pattern of participation but there is evidence that these persist” (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 17). Girls did better at tasks which involved design, whereas boys did better at tasks involving electrical circuitry or understanding how a technological device works, a finding consistent with Nash’s earlier findings about subject preferences and performance. Interestingly there were no significant gender differences reported in performance on computing tasks (Crooks & Flockton, 1997, cited in Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 17). N.E.M.P. findings<sup>77</sup> showed also that students from low decile schools had the lowest performance and those from high decile schools had the highest performance on 40 per cent of tasks involving technology. Furthermore, children in decile 1-3 schools fall further behind as they get older (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 17). Maori and Pasifika students performed less well than other students on technology tasks in N.E.M.P.

The *Questioning Gender* analysis found that whilst mathematics was chosen by relatively similar proportions of girls and boys in School Certificate (69 and 70 per cent respectively in 1995; a marked increase in female participation since the 1970s), at

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<sup>77</sup> N.E.M.P. is the National Education Monitoring Project which began assessments in 1995 to provide dependable, consistent information about the educational achievements, attitudes and motivation of New Zealand students.

UEBS level boys were still more likely than girls to take both Mathematics with Statistics (52 and 41 percent respectively) and Mathematics with Calculus (40 and 26 per cent respectively). What was particularly interesting was Gilmore's finding that, at school entry level, girls "perform significantly better than boys" in mathematics (1998, cited in Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 13) but, by school leaving age, males outperformed girls.

Gender differences in technology, science and mathematics are thought to be attributable to "the constraints imposed by traditional assumptions...concerning the nature of male and female social roles" (Grafton, Miller, Smith, Vegoda, & Whitfield, 1987, p. 108). These were reflected in teacher conceptions of what courses are "appropriate" to particular pupils (*ibid.*, p. 110), the "way in which encouragement to pursue academic success in math and science is directed more to boys than girls" (Lareau, 1992, p. 221), as well as in differences in teacher expectations of students' abilities "which establish science as a male preserve" (Kelly, 1987, p. 127). Girls who see science as masculine achieve less well than other girls. This perception is supported by the sheer numbers of boys taking sciences, the absence of female science teachers or role models as scientists, the dominance of male illustrations and examples in textbooks, and the "ordinary, everyday, taken-for-granted ways that boys behave [that] form a link between masculinity and dominance in science," according to Kelly (p.134). Her conclusion that it is social factors which produce gender differences in participation and performance is supported by the research of Baker and Jones (1992, p. 199) into academic mathematics.

Responding to renewed debate about inborn superior mathematics abilities, Baker and Jones analysed data from 77,000 grade eight students over 19 nations and found a degree of international variability that supported a sociological rather than biological explanation for differing performance in academic mathematics. They found that males did not outperform females everywhere, and they attributed differences to access to higher education and the labour market. Changes in gender gaps also occur over time, providing further evidence for their conclusion that "parity in opportunity yields parity in performance" (*ibid.*). As an example, Hacker's (1991, cited in Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 7) essentialist explanations for Australian boys' superior science

achievement were similarly invalidated when girls' science achievement exceeded that of boys in Victoria.

It is interesting to reflect on these conclusions in the context of literacy and English performance, areas where boys underperform in comparison to girls. Girls perform significantly better than boys on half of the N.E.M.P. reading tasks at Year 4, and on 64 per cent of reading tasks at Year 8. The findings for information skills showed that girls do better than boys at accessing written information, a skill that is important right across the curriculum (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 14). More girls take English in senior school and they perform better, Alton-Lee and Praat's analysis of results between 1992 and 1997 revealed: Whilst "girls have been performing more highly than boys in secondary school assessments in English...the disparity has been decreasing over the decade" (ibid.).

At a principals' conference on *Boys' Education* in 2004 the Hon. Trevor Mallard identified two particular areas of weakness: reading literacy at primary level and internally assessed<sup>78</sup> areas at secondary level (2004, p. 1), which indicated the continuation of these same trends in the first results from NCEA. In 2002, the most significant gender gap in achievement for Level 1 NCEA was in English standards, he said: "Boys were much less likely to gain English standards than girls, and the proportion of girls receiving excellence grades was twice that of boys." This is an international trend but it seems that New Zealand has one of the widest gender gaps (Alton-Lee & Praat, 2001, p. 14), to the extent that the underachievement of boys has now become of concern at government level: Gender gaps "are wider than expected in New Zealand schools and particularly for Maori and Pasifika boys" (Mallard, op. cit.).

Paul Baker (2006, p. 2) claimed that although the gender gap varies in size, it is comprehensive. Boys have a lower retention rate than girls: "By the end of Year 12, 43% of boys but only 35% of girls have left school" (p. 3) and, of "296 [NCEA] external achievement standards, girls outperformed boys in 258." Out of discussions about such gender differences debate about the value of single-sex and coeducational schooling emerged. Baker (2006, p. 5, part 3) took exception to the New Zealand

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<sup>78</sup> Although the first results from NCEA dispelled the "common expectation that boys would perform better than girls in exams" (Mallard, 2004, p. 1).

Council of Educational Research claim that “academic achievement is generally unaffected by whether the school is coeducational or single sex,” arguing that “boys’ schools or classes have particular advantages in meeting male needs” and that “most co-ed schools are doing little to specifically target boys’ needs” (ibid., p. 2, part 1). Nash and Harker’s analysis of national data (1998, pp. 106-107) showed that, at that time, single-sex schools were more selective about their intake than coeducational schools and that the attainments of their students were higher. However, their analysis indicated there were no significant differences in the performance of boys and girls attending single-sex or coeducational schools once statistical adjustment had been made for differences in the intake characteristics of these schools (Nash & Harker, 1997, p. 5).

Despite these gender differences, then, the fact remains that in New Zealand achievement differs more by ethnicity and social class, a recurring trend apparent both in the national data and the subject-specific analyses completed by Alton-Lee & Praat (2001, p. 11). Overall, what is significant is the continuing lower retention and attainment levels of Maori students compared to those of European origin. Maori students were the least likely to leave with qualifications, and Maori males had the lowest percentage leaving school with Level 2 NCEA (Sixth Form Certificate) or higher. Maori underachievement was identified as a longstanding pattern.

However, the question about achievement is not simply about length of stay at school, because Pasifika students had the highest retention rates in the senior school (as shown in Table 1), a “reflection of the importance that Pasifika families and communities place on their children staying in education” (Education Counts, 2005b, p. 4). Nevertheless their achievement levels also lag behind those of their peers (Table 2). The inevitability of unequal educational outcomes for Maori and Pasifika students in an inequitable society is the central theme of New Zealand researcher Alison Jones who recorded several instances where Pasifika students were “cooled-out” by teachers (1991, pp. 171-172). While the teachers appeared to care genuinely about their students, the students in the “failing” classes were encouraged to lower their expectations to what teachers deemed to be more realistic levels of achievement.

No doubt the teachers are largely correct in predicting the girls’ different futures.

The girls themselves had been resigned to the probabilities for a while....[the

girls] didn't expect much, and they blamed themselves for their disappointing school achievement....How could the girls protest about the outcomes of their schooling or their uninviting employment prospects when they are part of the expected natural order of things? (Jones, 1991, pp. 172-173)

Such an interpretation smacks of structural determination yet, despite the fact that many students leave school with few qualifications, tertiary attendance figures suggest that many also later engage in further education (Hughes & Pearce, 2003, pp. 199-200), suggesting self agency may also have a role to play in career development.

A study (Boyd, Chalmers, & Kumekawa, 2001) of students' intentions prior to leaving school and their actual destinations one year later found that career intentions<sup>79</sup> also differed according to ethnicity and decile, with lower proportions of Maori and students from decile 3 schools intending to go on to tertiary study after leaving school. Of the Maori and Pasifika students who had intended to study post-school, a proportionally smaller group actually went on to achieve this goal compared with their European and Asian counterparts. However, "the fact that they had changed or developed their plans further was something that most respondents had in common" (ibid., p. 17). Getting new information was one of the reasons cited for making the changes because, whilst family and whanau had been the most common sources of initial career advice, the most useful information for assisting with transitions was reported as employment, school, or tertiary based.

The New Zealand research, then, appears consistent with international work which showed the powerful influence of the family in career development, right into late adolescence, early adulthood and beyond. Family background was widely recognised as the single most important contributor to success in school (Rumberger, 2004, p. 138). Whilst many family-related characteristics of students at-risk of dropping out have been identified (Wells, 1990, p. 10, Appendix A) much empirical research has focused on the structural characteristics of families. Few researchers have attempted to identify the underlying processes through which family structure influences dropping out (Rumberger, 2004, p. 138). However, the family resource theory of cultural and social reproduction described by Nash (1993, pp. 18-37) seeks to do just this,

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<sup>79</sup> There were no significant gender differences on both these aspects.

suggesting that differing family assets or resources (financial, social, and educational) account for the lack of educational achievement made by Maori, Pasifika and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, relative to their peers.

This was congruent with international research which has suggested that it was differing parenting practices, known as “parenting style,” which produce different patterns of high school retention and achievement (Baumrind, 1991; Dornbusch, Ritter, Leiderman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 140). Rumberger asserted that students whose parents monitor and regulate their activities, provide emotional support, encourage independent decision-making and are involved in their children’s schooling, are less likely to become dropouts (*ibid.*). That there are classed differences in parenting practices has already been alluded to but Lareau maintained that whilst working class mothers fail to be as closely involved in their children’s schooling, this was not related to the value placed on education but to the “lack of educational competence and the relatively low social status of parents compared with teachers” (1992, p. 222). Parental influence does not occur in a social vacuum, according to Steinberg, Darling, and Fletcher (1995, p. 425), reinforcing the notion that the effects of parenting styles need to be examined within the broader context of family life in which young people develop.

In her study of Pasifika girls, Jones spoke of parents aspirations, of the “New Zealand school as offering their children the chance of better things” (Jones, 1991, p. 55). She illustrated how, as an institution, the family aims “to maintain and, if possible, improve its economic and social position” (Nash, 1983, p. 15). Bourdieu wrote of the difficulties some young people experience in trying to meet the expectations of their parents to go beyond the social position they have inherited (1999b, p. 508) and of the difficulties of managing the relationships with parents within the context of what he described as the crisis in family structures (Bourdieu, 1999a, p. 186).

Social capital, which is manifested in the relationships parents have with their children, other families and the school, is sometimes measured (for example by Coleman, 1988, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 139) by indirect means such as family structure. Family structures have changed radically over the last century and, as a consequence, a great diversity of family situations is encountered in the work of high

school principals. Besides day-to-day contact with individual family members, principals (or their representatives) attend family conferences for students with disabilities (IEP Planning), board of trustee suspension hearings, and, on occasion where students had been apprehended for out of school offences, youth family group conferences. As well as providing evidence of the shifting roles of schools post reform, the involvement I experienced as principal made me very aware of the complex relationships within the families and communities in which my students lived.

These impressions of radical change are confirmed by Melville's analysis of key statistical indicators for New Zealand children and young people (2003, p. 15) which revealed that, whilst the nuclear family remains the norm (69%) this type of family structure is on the decline. She found that 73 per cent of the children were still in their original two-parent families but that seven per cent of children lived in two-parent families where one was not a biological parent and an increasing number (31%) were living in one parent families.

The reality is that in many instances the relationship between child and parents is social and no longer simply biological. Step families, blended families, adoptive families, same sex partners, divorces, separations, and children in care are all situations where children may be living in a household with two parents, but not necessarily one or both biological parents. Additionally substantial numbers of children are being reared in sole parent, extended and multi-generation families. (Melville, 2003, p. 15)

How these changes in family structure affect the influence of the family on educational achievement and drop out behaviour will be revealed over time, with ongoing monitoring and evaluation.

The fact that the widespread changes experienced in New Zealand society over the last 20 years did not affect all ethnic groups equally has already been touched on. The "recurrent theme of ethnicity differentiation in the great majority of these statistics" was deplored by Chief Executive of Barnados, Ian Calder. He claimed many of the indicators of lack of wellbeing are underpinned by child poverty: "By whatever

measure<sup>80</sup> is used the stark fact is that one third of all New Zealand children live in measurable deprivation” (Foreword to Melville, 2003, p. i).

As a result of the economic reforms New Zealand has experienced one of the fastest growing rates of inequality amongst developed countries, with a huge increase in poverty: “Although these changes have been heralded as examples of positive economic reform (Kelsey, 1997, p. 1), in real terms they have widened the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ (Easton, 1993; Statistics New Zealand, 1995; Kelsey, 1997),” Atwool explained (1999, p. 381). A recent report by Chatterjee and Podder on the impact of these reforms found that 80 per cent of households now receive seven per cent less of the country’s wealth, while the top 10 per cent receive 14 per cent more (1998, cited in Atwool, *ibid.*). Families have “borne the brunt of these economic changes” and as a result, they “are more likely to be living in poverty (O’Brien 1998)” (*ibid.*). Indeed by 1997 it was estimated that 30 per cent of children were living in benefit-dependent households as compared with 12 per cent in 1985 (*ibid.*, citing Roberts, 1997), and that the incidence of poverty was “considerably higher among Maori and Pasifika Island families” (*ibid.*).

Only recently has it become realised that “many of the ‘intractable social problems’ [rich nations] are facing have their origins in relative deprivation during childhood” (Child Poverty Action Group, 2003, p. 12). Charmaine Pountney argued that children cannot learn if they are coming to school hungry, malnourished, sick or tired (cited in Child Poverty Action Group, 2003, p. 46). In many families both parents work in an effort to maintain a better standard of living but this too impacts adversely on the children because work responsibilities conflict with family obligations and parents’ ability to invest time and emotional energy (Atwool, 1999, p. 389).

*While it is true that many poor families make sacrifices to give their children the best possible start in life, the broader picture shows that those who grow up in poverty are more likely to have learning difficulties, to drop out of school, to*

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<sup>80</sup> Poverty can be measured in two ways: absolute poverty (lack of resources for a bare minimum existence, so that children’s health and growth are at-risk) and relative poverty (where the physical needs are catered for minimally, but children are excluded from the activities considered normal for their peers) (Child Poverty Action Group, 2003, p. 9). An income of less than 60 per cent of the median income is commonly accepted as a benchmark to measure poverty (Smeeding, O’Higgins, Rainwater, & Atkinson, 1990, cited in *ibid.*). “Because income is the necessary resource for food, shelter and other necessities in modern capitalist economies, the study of income, particularly income distribution and equality, has made a major contribution to the analysis of poverty” (Waldegrave, Frater, & Stephens, 1997, p. 10). All of these aspects also impact on the educational achievement of children.

*resort to drugs, to commit crimes and to be out of work, to become pregnant at too early an age and to live lives that perpetuate poverty and disadvantage into succeeding generations.* (emphasis in original, UNICEF, 2000, cited in Child Poverty Action Group, 2003, p. 12)

This quotation clearly establishes the association between poverty and other schooling problems, including dropping out.

Overseas experiences suggested that potential dropouts can be identified early on in their schooling as exhibiting academic difficulties, poor attitudes to school and low vocational and occupational aspirations: Inattentiveness, short attention span, excessive absences, lack of social skills, inability to face pressure, court-related and health-related problems (Wells, 1990, p. 6) are commonly cited predictors of leaving high school before graduation. Help in dealing with behaviour problems identified by the school is one area where differing family resources disadvantage those in poverty. Under New Right economic policies and practices children are regarded as a cost for which their parents are largely responsible (Atwool, 1999, p. 387), although parents' access to services and support in their parenting role varies according to the family's socioeconomic position:

Whereas middle class families have access to a choice of services including those provided by the state, working class families and those in the underclass are more likely to be the target of services that include elements of surveillance and control [Jamrozik and Sweeny, 1996; Makrinioti, 1994]. (op. cit., p. 390)

Many students who drop out from school have had a long history of behaviour problems whilst at school. Similarly, Muuss and Porton<sup>81</sup> (1999b, p. 419) suggested, high school dropouts have “an increased probability of being involved in juvenile delinquency and becoming an unwed parent and substance abuser” once they leave school. A Christchurch longitudinal study (Fergusson, Swain-Campbell, & Horwood, 2002, p. 21) also found that young people who left school without qualifications were at increased risk of adverse outcomes including substance abuse and juvenile offending, as well as being at higher psychological risk. Many “risky acts seem to be associated with one another” Muuss and Porton maintained (ibid.). Indeed, as part of “growing-up,” it is

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<sup>81</sup>Introducing a review of the risk taking literature outlined by the same authors in a subsequent section of this same book.

likely that adolescents will engage in “inappropriate, undesirable, and even detrimental decisions that produce negative consequences” (ibid., p. 424). However, because of changes in the structure of the family they claimed that “the family is less protective, provides less supervision, and in general has become less influential” (ibid., p. 426).

While causality cannot be assumed in the links between antisocial behaviour and emotional, behavioural, familial and educational factors, their association is clearly identified. For example, the bi-directional effects of substance abuse and academic failure are well known and support Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) conceptualisation of development as the result of the complex reciprocal interaction of an individual student’s characteristics with her or his environment. In this model risk-taking behaviour can be seen as a personality variable, and those who are able to withstand “risk temptations” have higher self-esteem, family connectedness and positive peer and/or adult role models—the “well-known protective features that contribute to resilience,” according to Muuss and Porton (1999b, p. 420). A small proportion of males characterised by “poorer social skills, academic achievements and mental health” (ibid.) continue these behaviours into later life but most adolescents cease delinquent activities as adult roles become available and the consequences of inappropriate behaviours threaten this status.

So, once again the influence of the family is seen as pivotal in supporting adolescents through the transition into adulthood. Progress towards adulthood is commonly signalled by entry into the workforce, so much of the transition of later adolescence concerns negotiating steps towards success in the world of work. However, aspirations tempered by the influence of schooling and parental expectations are in turn affected by sociocultural factors, as we have seen, and also by the realities of the labour market and the availability of employment opportunities.

### ***Employment Opportunities***

Economic reforms, resulting in a fragmented and casualised labour market, and the changing nature and composition of the family, have had a significant bearing on transitions from school to employment and on community perceptions of drop out. However, “as far as social changes are concerned, the most striking is undoubtedly the marked increase in youth unemployment” (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 1). More than a

decade later, school leavers still faced a labour market characterised by high levels of uncertainty and risk (Higgins, 2002, p. 44). Early leavers without qualifications, the school dropouts, continue to find it difficult to secure employment in the economic environment of today.

In May 1998 17.4 per cent (one in six) of New Zealanders aged 15-19 were unemployed (*The Jobs Letter*, 1998, cited in Atwood, 1999, p. 381), and overall unemployment levels continued to rise until 2000. Rising labour force participation, accompanied by an overall drop in unemployment, was experienced between 2000 and 2003 (Sears, 2004, p. 3), although most of this employment growth was concentrated among those in the 55 to 59 year age bracket and among Maori and Pasifika peoples<sup>82</sup>. The average number of hours worked per week also increased, providing yet another indicator of the high demand for labour.

During this same period when unemployment was generally declining, there was a 7.1 per cent increase in the number of 15 to 24 year olds who were not in the labour force. Statistics New Zealand attributed this “increase in non-participation among the younger age groups [to] an increase in the numbers of 15 to 24 year olds whose main activity was studying” (ibid.). Factors keeping students out of the labour market were associated with changes in the age of compulsory school attendance and welfare support limitations. The shift in transitions policy in the 1980s, from employment creation programmes to training schemes, signalled a change in the way youth unemployment was interpreted (Higgins, 2002, p. 50). Transitions policies from this time were based on a “skills deficit thesis” in which employment was thought to follow the gaining of qualifications (ibid.). However, this linear relationship, what Higgins called the “jobs-qualifications equation” (ibid.), was found not to represent the experience of many young people overseas (ibid., p. 53) or in New Zealand (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. 91). Many young people have become marginalised through “gaps in the institutionalised process of transition,” Wyn and White maintained (1997, cited in Higgins, 2002, p. 53).

In New Zealand the labour market changes did not impact on all groups equally. Unemployment continues to be concentrated among the young, women, Maori and

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<sup>82</sup> Since 1996 Maori and Pasifika have had the highest unemployment rates, despite these rises. In 2003 unemployment data by ethnicity showed Maori had the highest rate at 11.3 per cent, Pasifika followed at 8.9 per cent, while European/Pakeha recorded only 3.8 per cent.

Pasifika, a trend identified earlier by Nash (1983, pp. 11-12). The relative lack of achievement of Maori at school has long been the subject of concern (Jones, Marshall, Matthews, Smith, & Smith, 1995, pp. 162-163,165), and the result is that even in times of a strong labour market, there are more Maori and Pasifika unemployed or in casual or limited tenure employment. Part-time work has increased for the 15-19 year old age group, especially since 1991 (Davey, 2000, p. 13). Similarly, whilst full-time work involvement has fallen for both males and females in the younger age groups, participation rates remain higher for males. This is despite higher female retention and achievement in education. The New Zealand situation is similar to that reported overseas where, in America for example, more girls than boys graduate from high school and more women than men receive baccalaureate degrees: However, “even though women have all but closed the overall gap in educational attainment between the sexes, the occupational world fails to reward women equitably for their accomplishments” (Mickelson, 1992, p. 149). This statement is supported by evidence of the continued existence of a gender segregated occupational structure and gap in the salaries of men and women doing similar work. Girls’ increased educational participation and attainment did not appear to be delivering improved economic wellbeing (Davey, 2000, p. 4): Women’s average income levels in the late teenage years are lower, they are more likely to become unemployed and they are much more likely to become welfare dependent in later life, than men (Davey, 2000, p. 16)<sup>83</sup>.

When students leave school for employment, as they shift from one setting to another, they experience changes in their roles and responsibilities, signifying that an ecological transition has occurred (after Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). Jahoda (cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 183) identified five basic needs met traditionally by the structured framework of employment:

- 1 work provides a structure for each day, week and the year;
- 2 it enforces activity;
- 3 work links individuals to goals and purposes that transcend their own;
- 4 it defines aspects of personal status and identity; and

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<sup>83</sup> Sex-role stereotyping and gender discrimination need to be examined to throw light on these distinctions, Davey suggested. However in this context, women’s greater longevity and child-rearing responsibilities, which fall more often to females as wives, mothers and grandparents, are factors which require consideration.

5 it implies regularly shared experiences outside the family.

However, the direct passage from school to employment can no longer be assured.

This model [of the world of work] had been shattered both by the impact of an economic slump that deprived millions of their jobs, and by the economic restructuring of the economy shown in the decline of traditional manufacturing industry and the emergence of the silicone chip industries based on new technologies and the development of the service sector. (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, pp. 166-167)

The alleged mismatch between the skill set and capabilities of school leavers and occupational requirements in the service and high technology sectors led to challenges in the 1980s and 1990s about the appropriateness of high school education.

A radical restructuring of this system is needed to provide lifelong learning options for the majority of the population rather than a mandarin experience which is irrelevant to the needs and inappropriate to the capabilities of all but a few....The period of compulsory education should concentrate on the transmission of 'basic skills' which can be identified and foreseen and which can be applied in future trades and professions not yet foreseeable. (Virgo, 1981, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, pp. 166-167)

Whilst students without these basic skills would be less likely than others to obtain employment, there is no guarantee of employment even with qualifications: "When teachers justify schooling in vocational terms, the message is questioned by children who know full well that academic credentials are no guarantee of a job, and this is especially so of low-achievers" (Hartley, 1985, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 171). Similarly, Alison Jones' study reported students' commonsense insights into the realities of the labour market: Young female Pasifika recognised that "there's not enough jobs" and "qualifications don't guarantee you a job" (1991, p. 159). She concluded that, "in this situation, it seems that working class kids, and particularly working class Polynesian kids, could reject the idea of the school's offer [to opportunity] as a con" (ibid., p. 51).

Unemployment continues to be concentrated among the young, women, Maori and Pasifika, a trend associated with the level of qualifications gained at school. People with no formal qualifications have unemployment rates far exceeding those with

qualifications, and they have the lowest median incomes (Education Counts, 2005a, p. 1). As well as a greater likelihood of unemployment, young people leaving school without qualifications may also face problems adapting to changing expectations in the workforce: With the increased application of technology, they may face difficulties in terms of society's need for lifelong learning, and in returning to formal study in later years (*ibid.*).

When young people move from school into unemployment they are denied what is in effect a rite of passage into adulthood, as they are still dependent financially on their family or the state welfare system. They face a series of social and psychological issues related to role transition and role conflict because unemployed life is different from when they were at school, and yet they are similarly dependent. For students without the personal resources and support of friends and family to adjust to these additional stressors, drugs and alcohol may be one form of coping, supporting the stereotype of the school drop out. Labour market difficulties, such as unemployment and job instability, do not necessarily lead directly to crime and drug use where dropouts do not "experience greater deprivation, and remain committed to occupational achievement" (Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995, p. 121).

Ironically at a time of relatively high youth unemployment, research conducted by the Dunedin Mayor's Taskforce for Jobs and the Dunedin Youth Forum found that many adolescents engaged in part-time work whilst they were still at school. This investigation showed that 63 per cent of those enrolled as full-time students worked 10 hours or less a week, although 10 per cent were of concern because they worked more than 15 hours per week (2003, p. 3). Some conscientious students worked more than 25 hours each week but also spent 20 plus hours in that same time period on homework. The Dunedin survey was unable to draw any conclusions as to whether the number of hours worked affected student engagement in learning. There was no correlation between time spent on homework and the hours spent working (which averaged out at 4.4 hours per week and ranged from zero to 20 plus).

Neither is there necessarily any link between the work experience gained through this part-time employment and future work or careers: "The work young people do out of school is often intellectually undemanding...it is simply a way to earn money" (Vaughan, 2003, p. 7). That many young people are working part-time whilst still at

school is a symptom of the casualisation of the labour market. Youth pay rates encourage employers to take on school students in preference to older people, where jobs do not require a high level of skill or maturity. As a consequence students may find it easy to get part-time employment when they are in school but increasingly difficult to find and retain full-time employment once they have left. Early leavers who drop out of school into casual employment may not be fully aware of this and other labour market trends.

The increasing complexity, globalisation and fragmentation of the labour market has meant that all young people are “now required to engage in a continuous series of decisions, beginning at school, that will shape their lives and careers, their pathways (Vaughan, 2003)” (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. v). The New Zealand longitudinal study conducted by Vaughan et al. highlighted the challenges of providing support in the transition from school to work, suggesting that, with the “different responsibilities and insecurities faced by young people than [in] previous generations” there should be “more of a focus on *career and identity production*” (italics in original, 2006, p. v), on career development rather than skills matching for specific occupations for which there may not be employment opportunities.

## Conclusion

In the ecological framework adopted for this study, nature is used as a metaphor to understand societal concerns about dropout behaviour. In this conceptualisation, drop out is seen as an ecological transition, both the “product and producer of developmental change” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26), a “function of the interplay between person and environment” (p.16). The focus in this chapter has not been on the immediate settings in which the students live but on the larger contexts in which these settings are embedded, on the overarching educational, employment and health and welfare systems within the particular historical, economic, political, sociocultural and, of course, geographical location. Whilst it was necessary to attempt to convey to the reader a sense of the powerful influences exerted by the wider environment, it was difficult to isolate the various aspects of the bigger picture because of the interconnectedness between the various settings which became very apparent as the inquiry proceeded.

Changes in ideologies and values (macrosystem) were revealed through the policies and procedures adopted to implement the reforms (exosystem) which occurred over a range of systems and settings in the decade preceding this study. Many countries—for example, England, Australia, Chile, United States (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. xiii)—have looked at aspects of self-governing schools, parental choice and market competition as ways of organising and managing education systems differently but the reforms which occurred in New Zealand are “arguably the most thorough and dramatic transformation of a state system of compulsory education ever undertaken by an industrialized country” (ibid., p. 3).

A liberal ideology underpinned the reforms, which were characterised by “bold thinking, aggressive political leadership, resolute commitment to large-scale social engineering, and unforeseen consequences” (ibid., p. 4). Liberal ideology sees education as creating and sustaining social change through “its ethic of individual achievement based supposedly on merit” (Apple, 2004, p. 16). Whilst national data showed that some individuals and groups of students were seen to achieve under this new system, the outcome of the reforms was a schooling system which appeared to perpetuate an unequal society.

A number of assumptions underpin a liberal ideology, the first being that

“schooling critically affects the level of economic growth and progress through its link with technology” (Roger Dale, et al., 1976, cited in Apple, 2004, p. 16). One effect of this was to put increased pressure on the school system to produce a skilled and qualified workforce. This ideology was reflected in changes to the curriculum introduced as part of the national curriculum review processes<sup>84</sup>. Despite these changes it was apparent that the traditional gendered patterns of participation and achievement persisted in technology, sciences and mathematics, leading Alton-Lee and Praat to suggested that “a digital divide” existed, with students from low decile schools and Maori and Pasifika students performing less well than other students on technology tasks in N.E.M.P. (2001, p. 17). In science and mathematics achievement was found to differ more by ethnicity and social class than by gender, although differences were still apparent. The focus on the development of a skilled workforce was of particular government interest but the introduction of parental choice was another driver leading to greater public scrutiny of school results.

Increased parental choice resulted in a market environment where schools actively competed for student enrolments. Despite Ministry of Education concerns about the misuse of test results as a measure of school effectiveness, the publication in local newspapers of so-called “league tables,” which ranked schools by their average results, exacerbated the movement of students from low decile to high decile schools (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 130). Ministry of Education retention data did not take account of school transfers, so this precluded identification of possible school-initiated drop out, or pushouts which, it was suspected, might have been on the increase as parents used their rights (with the abolition of zoning in 1991) to place their children in schools which they felt would give them greatest opportunity for success.

Because the success of students rises so clearly with the decile of the school  
—and hence with the proportions of advantaged students and white students—it

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<sup>84</sup> In 1984 a major controversy arose when the then Minister of Education, Merv Wellington, released a policy document, *A Review of the Core Curriculum for Schools*, and allowed only eight weeks for public comment; thus education became an election issue and the incoming Labour Government pledged to allow for full consultation, conducted under the auspices of the new Minister of Education, Russell Marshall (Codd, 1990, pp. 193-195). The outcome, *The Curriculum Review* (1987), was highly criticised by the Treasury, and less than two months later the Taskforce to Review Education was set up under Brian Picot. This committee’s report (Picot Report) proposed radical restructuring of the education system based on the provision of greater choice, from which it was proposed greater efficiency and equity would flow. Middleton explained that “while the dominant educational issues of the post-war years were curricular...those of the 1980s have been defined as economic—how to curb public expenditure and get value for money” (S. Middleton, 1990, p. 89).

is not surprising that parents might use the mix of students as a shorthand for school quality. (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 198)

Parents were encouraged by publications such as *Choosing a Secondary School*, (Education Review Office, 1997)<sup>85</sup> to “shop for the best educational situation for their children” (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 58). Over time, however, it became clear that full parental choice was not sustainable because of pressure on facilities, and as a result it became the “popular” schools which served already advantaged students which did the choosing. The problems of schools serving disadvantaged students were compounded by the reforms as they lost their best students and best teachers to other schools.

This situation seriously challenged a second assumption inherent in liberal ideology, which is that an education system based on advancement by merit provided a “ladder and an avenue for social mobility” (Apple, 2004, p. 17). The reformists had seen education as being “capable of redressing social inequalities, of overcoming—through the equalization of educational opportunity—the unfair distribution of life chances” (ibid.). However, this chapter has illustrated the links between early school leaving and unemployment and/or lower incomes, which in turn are associated with poverty and dependence on income support. Young people generally had higher unemployment rates, even in periods of declining unemployment as experienced in the two years prior to 2003 when this study commenced. For young people without qualifications this trend was exacerbated.

The educational reforms had many unanticipated consequences. One of these was the way teachers perceived their jobs, possibly affecting relationships with students and thus contributing to student disillusionment with school. Bourdieu (1999a) was critical of the position teachers have been placed in by such reforms. Teachers and other “social workers” are “mandated by the state...to assure basic public services, health and education in particular, for the most disadvantaged” (1999a, p. 184) but without the means to effect “the contradictions of the State, which they often experience as profoundly personal dramas...produced in part by their own actions, such as those resulting from the hopes raised and then dashed by the education system.” The raising of the age of compulsory education confirmed the likelihood of a prolonged stay at

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<sup>85</sup> The Education Review Office replaced this with a new publication, *Going to Secondary School*, in November 2006.

school and reinforced community expectations about universal high school education, placing young people in conditions where their aspirations were raised but without any guarantees for their future.

In 2003, when this study of drop out commenced, schools were still in the process of implementing the new assessment regimes associated with NCEA. Many were suffering from the unanticipated effects of reforms which introduced parental choice and competition, including falling rolls and subsequent under-resourcing. The preceding period of rapid change in schools left many teachers tired and jaded, as they strove to deal with the introduction of new curricula, the additional workload associated with increased internal assessment, and the adoption of NCEA resubmission and moderation requirements. Added to this workload were duties associated with marketing the school in the new competitive environment. The reforms resulted in an increasingly diverse body of students, many of whom had no real idea why they were still at school.

The perspectives of policymakers differ from that of teachers, parents and the students themselves. Policymakers conceptualise the problem as falling retention rates, reflecting their desire to keep young people out of the workforce in response to changing economic circumstances. Schools are interested not just in why students are dropping out but also why an increasing number of students are staying on into senior school. The more diverse school community results in the presence of many more disaffected students, which puts an added strain on life in classrooms. For students, the problem is one of navigating a transition to economic independence...For parents, the retention 'problem' is often experienced as angst. They wonder what will happen to their children when they leave school without credentials. (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, pp. 17-18)

This worry translated into community concern about drop out and retention in secondary schools, even though it was found that greater numbers of students were actually staying on into senior school than ever before in history.

Policy changes reducing the availability of welfare support for young people were implemented as deterrents to leaving school without employment. Similarly, the introduction of means-tested allowances for families with children still at school beyond the compulsory age of attendance provided incentives for parents to keep their children

at school. These policies, combined with changes to the curriculum and qualifications system, contributed to increasing student retention in the senior school.

Contrary to public concern about student drop out and the consequences for individuals and society, completion of a senior school education had become an age-related norm for the majority of students. So in one sense the “dropout problem” can be seen as a social construction, or more properly a political construction. The “false starts, set-backs and disappointed aspirations that arise from encounters with real structural constraints” (Higgins, 2002, p. 54) within educational institutions, the social welfare system and the labour market, are exacerbated by limitations imposed by the socioeconomic location of some families. Hence there was considerable variability in the national retention and achievement rates when they were further analysed by ethnicity, socioeconomic status and gender. These differences are the result of a complex interplay between the structured power relations in society and the “practices, language, desires, bodies and thoughts of the people who form it” (S. Middleton & Jones, 1997, p. ix).

Wrenching social changes are not new, according to Bandura, but what is new is the magnitude and pace of changes experienced today: “These challenging realities place a premium on people’s sense of efficacy to shape their future” (1997, p. vii). To what extent the students who left school early during 2003 were able to shape their own lives within the constraints of the social systems that organised and regulated them, within the contexts of family and school, was of great interest in this study.

Thus, having established some of the big picture influences in Part 1, there is now a shift of focus to the leavers themselves. In Part 2 leavers’ stories tell of their activities, roles, and relationships centred on the immediate settings of the home, school, and workplace. Part 2 commences with an overview of the methodology employed in this case study of drop out and retention (Chapter 3). The findings from the multi-site investigation are captured in Chapter 4 (Drop out places, people and patterns) and again in Chapter 5 (Students’ stories).

## **PART 2: TALKING TO DROPOUTS IN THEIR OWN SETTINGS**

The pressure on secondary school principals to deal to the “problem” of high school retention was apparent from the previous chapter. Their salaries and their schools’ funding were pegged to the number of students and the school’s decile rating, forcing them into competition for students on the basis of academic reputation. Some principals resorted to less than ethical strategies to achieve these results. This is the context in which, as the principal of a state secondary school, I decided to look into retention and drop out. I drew on my own experiences from this role, and as a past pupil of an all girls’ school, to the understanding of the stories of the young women who left the three schools studied over 2003 and beyond. Analysis and interpretation are coloured by these experiences and those of the research journey, for “understanding *is* interpretation” (emphasis in original, Schwandt, 2000, p. 194). This notion of interpretive understanding acknowledges that the prejudgments, prejudices, and biases of the researcher influence the development of meaning, which is seen more as the product of dialogue with key informants than a discovery. Schwandt explained that what we are and how we understand the world contributes to the development of meaning, which is not merely a matter of representation but as a *negotiation*, as a “matter of coming to terms” (2000, p. 195), of “evaluating and choosing” (ibid., p. 201) among competing interpretations. Such a view raises issues associated with my dual role as both the researcher and as a principal of one of the schools.

The title for this section, talking to dropouts in their own settings, indicates the importance of the influence of the wider context on dropping out, described in the previous chapter, and highlights the significance of student “talk” as a “window into the human experience” of leaving school, for “*texts are us*” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 769). The first chapter of this section describes the research design that evolved from the objectives of the study, and how data was collected about students who left school over 2003. How the dropouts’ perspectives were put together with those of other key informants to develop an understanding of the meaning of drop out, which is at once

“perspectival and contextual” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 201), is outlined here. Subsequent chapters in this section report on the findings using the numbers and narratives approach outlined in Chapter 3. The concluding chapter, Chapter 6, provides an overview of these findings and explains how they contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexity of retention and drop out in the three girls’ state secondary school sites.

## CHAPTER 3: DESIGN AND CONDUCT OF THE CASE STUDY

### Background

The key question which initiated this research was:

*Is there a significant retention problem in girls' secondary schools?*

The international research seemed to suggest that this was indeed a complex question. Prior to undertaking this study retention rates had been increasing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, stabilising to an average length of stay at secondary school of 4.5 years overall and 4.2 years for Maori students (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 55). Rotorua Girls' High School can be used to illustrate the situation. Despite increased retention rates from 41% in 1995 to 60% in 2001 (Velde, 2001, p. 10) lower Maori retention was still of concern in this decile 5 school. As well as pointing to differences in drop out rates according to ethnicity, the literature review also suggested that there were differences in drop out rates associated with gender. I was a principal of a girls' school at the time of commencing this research and, because this was the area of greatest relevance to me, I decided to limit the scope of this project to a study of girls' only schools.

A picture of high school drop out at an international and national level had been ascertained. The next stage of the project was to review exactly what the extent of the retention problem was in my own school and other girls' schools.

#### Other girls' schools

Because of delays in the Ministry of Education publication of school data, I conducted an informal comparison of New Zealand girls' state secondary schools in 2002 to give some baseline data about overall drop out rates and rates for Maori (see Table 3). I was also interested to see whether there was any pattern according to decile ranking.

Table 3

*Comparison of Retention Rates in Girls' State Secondary Schools, 2002*

New Zealand Girls' High Schools	School decile rating	Maori students (% of total School)	Retention rate (% of Year 9 to Year 13)
Gisborne	4	36	54
Wanganui	4	18.8	75
Whangarei	5	23.2	68
Rotorua	5	36.4	59
Napier	6	3.4	53
Waitaki	7	6.6	76
Hamilton	7	12	67
Nelson	8	8	68
New Plymouth	8	10.2	73
Palmerston North	9	8.8	73

Note. Table compiled from schools' self-reported data. List incomplete because some data unavailable.

There was little pattern evidenced, attributable to the treatment of dropouts as a homogeneous group, to differing school policies and to the way drop out was measured. There were problems with the data too, as both these data and Ministry of Education retention and drop out figures were presented as Year 9 to Year 13 ratios, which did not take account of student transfers. It was also unclear whether the girls' schools' data included international students, which the Ministry data did not.

### **My own school**

Because of concerns about retention in my own school an exit survey system was initiated in 2000, which added additional questions about post-school destinations and students' school experiences to the normal withdrawal procedures which every school has in place (Appendix B). In theory, this strategy allowed administrators to gather data on school transfers, thus giving greater accuracy to retention figures.

However, comparisons of exit survey results with official Ministry of Education data derived from March 1 school returns showed that many students never officially left school—they merely failed to return at the beginning of the next year. Whilst not all leavers' views were captured through this process some useful information was gained, with annual exit survey reports showing that a large number of senior students left school for the workforce or continuing education (e.g., polytechnic study). International students accounted for a large proportion of “overseas” leavers who were returning home, having had time abroad to improve their English.

The 2002 exit survey report suggested that greater numbers had left school that year, with 27 students (about a third of the respondents) transferring to other schools. The summary in Appendix B shows that some of the leavers were very positive about the school but there were also some who expressed concerns. It was interesting that the very same aspects which some students found to be highlights of their experience (for example the school's facilities) were mentioned as areas requiring improvement by others. The school's board of trustees wanted to see if they could find out more information about those leaving, because student numbers affected funding. Trustees were also concerned that a high attrition rate might reflect dissatisfaction with the school.

A retrospective survey of all school leavers between March 2002 and March 2003 was thus conducted by the board. Their report indicated that of the 212 students whom they calculated had left during that period, 56 were found to be graduating students leaving school after completing Year 13. Board data showed that a further 56 had transferred to other schools: 39 of these were juniors; 5 leavers were international exchange students returning home; 11 had Ministry of Education exemptions to leave school early for employment or for further training with another provider; 6 were excluded students (pushouts); and 5 were truants (dropouts) referred to NETS for follow up. There was no information about the majority of leavers, although it was noted that the time period<sup>86</sup> for this board survey was more than 12 months and it included two beginning of the year periods, during which many students are undecided about their futures and rolls are unstable.

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<sup>86</sup> This is why Ministry of Education funding is calculated on enrolments at March 1 of any year.

The board report noted there was a 26 per cent uptake on the survey<sup>87</sup> which was distributed to the homes of 120 students, as graduating, excluded and international exchange students were not included in the survey. In total it was found that 5 of the 28 respondents left because they were not achieving or had lost enthusiasm; 6 left for personal reasons, or because they were experiencing bullying or homesickness, and a further 9 left because they were dissatisfied with their schooling experience. As well as presenting quantitative data 60 comments were recorded, although there were only 28 respondents. The nature of the responses suggested that mostly it was parents/caregivers, rather than students, who responded to the survey.

Parents seemed to have an entirely different perspective on the leavers' problems than the students' exit surveys portrayed. Many of the reasons parents gave were related to finances (the school had a hostel which ran as a stand-alone business, and hence had to charge fees) and the number of teacher professional development days taken as part of the national training programme for NCEA.

- *Our children don't learn with so many days off. Hence people will not pay fees.*
- *Too many days off for teacher training. Make these days useful for students as well—job incentive training.*
- *Expense of having a child live away from home. Problems became big issues due to distance.*

Not all parents were negative about the school, however.

- *She was doing well and I know the school or teachers did their very best for her. Thank you for teaching them like you did.*

Students comments also indicated that many of the leavers had enjoyed school.

- *I really enjoyed my time at [Awa High] and am very disappointed that my full schooling wasn't completed there as I now see how remarkably lucky I was to be with such wonderful and supportive staff and fellow pupils.*

In contrast, some other students had left because they were unhappy.

- *I disliked the way I was being treated. I was singled out...fairer punishment. Better communication. [teacher] needs to listen to student's side of the story.*

One transferring student thought that the problems she had experienced were to do with the single-sex character of the school.

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<sup>87</sup> Independent analysis of the figures suggest the rate was lower, at 17.9 per cent. Fourteen surveys were returned to the school, address unknown.

- *The school I'm at now is co-ed. With only females things get very bitchy. This isn't fair on students who just want to get an education.*

The chairperson's report<sup>88</sup> to the board did not draw any specific conclusions, although it acknowledged that "*the survey provides us with insights into why those students left and with some useful baseline data.*" What was clear from survey findings was that the drop out problem looked different depending on the vantage point from which it was viewed, a conclusion also reached by an Australian study into dropping out (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 18). It was noted that many previous studies had dismissed students' perspectives or treated them lightly (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995, p. 9), and that "when young people do 'speak', their voices are very often not heard" (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 18).

As a culture we don't seem interested in "knowing" in a dialogic way: that is to say, knowing that affects how we might act in the future, what young people know about themselves, and how they make sense of their lives. (ibid.)

This gap in the literature identified the need for an approach based predominantly around students' perceptions. From international, national, and local school data then, key research questions emerged. The complexity of the dropout problem suggested that these required investigation in multiple ways, and the case study design was thus selected as it allows for an explanation of drop out in context and for triangulation of data through a multi-method approach.

## Objectives and Research Questions

The main *objectives* of this research were to determine the processes which lead to early leaving, to find out what schools do to enhance retention and minimise withdrawal, and to evaluate the usefulness of Bronfenbrenner's framework in developing an understanding of the meaning of drop out to the students themselves.

The specific research questions to guide this study were developed from the literature review and from local school knowledge:

- *What are the differences between those who stay and those who leave?*
- *What is the nature of the decision-making process?*
- *What is the inter-relationship between the many factors known to influence the*

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<sup>88</sup> Although all quotations and references can be supported by reference to specific documents, details of dates and sometimes the specifics of sources, have been removed in an effort to maintain a level of confidentiality.

*decision to leave school early?*

- *What role does the family play?*
- *What is the contribution of the school and educational system in the generation of inequality/difference in retention rates?*

The question: “What do I want to know in this study?” was highlighted by Janesick (2000, p. 382) as the critical beginning point of any research project. Questions which form the basis for the inquiry are identified and, once clear, the researcher then develops the most appropriate methodology to proceed with the research project. Wiersma (2000, p. 208) suggested that this process of research design was similar to using a funnel; initiating the study by way of general research questions and then seeking a site, subjects, sources of data, and procedures for data collection in order to address these. On the basis of initial data collection the groups, sites, and procedures become more specific. This narrowing continues until data collection, analysis, and interpretation finally focus to reflect the particular phenomenon that has emerged. This is precisely what occurred in this study, which began with an overview of the “problem” in a range of educational institutions but eventually narrowed down to a focus on retention and drop out using just three school sites.

## **Research Study Method**

To address the research questions above, and to do justice to the complexity of the topic, this study of drop out and retention in Aotearoa New Zealand girls’ secondary schools employed three interactive and complementary strands:

1. *Quantitative*: examining the extent of the problem and establishing patterns of dropping out.
2. *Qualitative*: listening to what students, school staff, and parents understand is happening during early school leaving.
3. *Longitudinal*: tracking three cohorts of senior students during the year of the study (2003).

My intrinsic interest in drop out came from my love of the school at which I was principal, and my desire to ensure that as many students as possible went on to make the best of themselves. This circumstance suggested a case study was the best approach. Case study is an investigation to answer particular research questions using the range of evidence available in a specific case setting. “Intrinsic” case studies have in common

the aim to seek greater understanding of a particular case in all “its particularity *and* ordinariness” (emphasis in original, Stake, 2000, p. 437).

Whilst the insider information I brought with me to the case could be regarded as an advantage, the integral involvement of the researcher in case study gives rise to concerns about internal validity and researcher bias, exacerbated in this specific instance by the potential for role conflict (Snook, 1999, p. 77) and researcher effects because of the position of authority I held. Thus two other independent school sites were selected for inclusion in the case study, to act as a balance to the report generated from my own school. Through using three school locations this study aimed to provide insights into dropping out, behaviour common to many students. Consequently it may also be described as an “instrumental” case study, through which the development of greater understanding of a generic phenomenon can occur. There is no line distinguishing instrumental from intrinsic case study; rather, a “zone of combined purpose separates them,” Stake explained (2000, p. 437). The assimilation of case records from separate case studies posed problems in previous multi-site scenarios, and thus this research design adopts an approach which treats each site as an element in the overall case (after Sadler, 1981, cited in Ebbutt, 1988, pp. 357-358).

## **The Case Study Research Design**

Research design refers to the plan and structure of an investigation (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 33). It is the logic that links the initial questions to the data to be collected and the conclusions (Yin, 1994, p. 18). Five key questions structure the issue of any research design, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2000a, p. 363):

1. How will the design connect to the paradigm being used?
2. How will the empirical materials<sup>89</sup> generated allow the researcher to speak to the problems of praxis and change?
3. Who or what will be studied?
4. What strategies of inquiry will be used?
5. What methods or research tools will be used for collecting and analysing empirical materials?

These questions loosely guide the outline of methodological issues associated with the design and conduct of the drop out case study. This outline is followed by specific

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<sup>89</sup> This is their preferred term for what are traditionally known as data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, p. 25).

details of the case study of secondary school retention and drop out in three girls' state secondary schools.

### ***How Will the Design Connect to the Paradigm Being Used?***

An ecological perspective was selected to provide a conceptual framework within which to investigate the complex interactions between students who leave school early and their environment. Case study design allows for an examination of drop out in context, and thus was selected as an appropriate research design to gather the information necessary to answer the research questions. Case study involves the collection and recording of data about a "bounded system" according to Flood (reported in Fals Borda, 1998, and cited in Stake, 2000, p. 436) but Goode and Hatt (1952, cited in Stake, 2000, p. 436) acknowledged that it was sometimes difficult to say where the case ends and its environment begins. The case merges in with the context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw. This is because case study is naturalistic, a study of people and events in their own setting. Whilst acknowledging that the notion is challenging, Gillham (2000, p. 1) argued that a case, as a unit of human activity, can be studied, or understood, only in context.

The three schools were selected to allow for an examination of both the process of dropping out and the decision-making leading up to early leaving, for groups of students who differed in socioeconomic background and ethnicity. Within these school sites, a number of the girls who left school early agreed to participate in the study. Each of the resulting stories is a "mini" case study within the overarching case.

While on one level transferring from school to another education provider, whether to another secondary school or to study within a tertiary setting, is not dropping out of the education system, this is a question of perspective and intention. From a school's perspective, students who leave school before the end of the academic year for which they are enrolled have dropped out of school. They become part of non-completions data recorded by the Ministry of Education in a subsequent year. However, the final destination entered on institutional leaving forms by students (if they completed one at the time of leaving school), is often not what they end up doing sometime later. Therefore all the stories of early leavers have been included in this case record (whatever their intended destination at the time of leaving).

## ***How Will the Empirical Materials Generated Allow the Researcher to Speak to the Problems of Praxis and Change?***

A factor which usually distinguishes case study from other types of research is its focus on an individual unit, on one phenomenon or one site, although collective or multiple-case study is also recognised by some leading authorities (Stake, 2000; Yin, 1994). In the single case approach emphasis is put on in-depth study of a small body of empirical materials (cases and processes), with the researcher seeking settings where the processes being studied (in this case dropping out) are likely to occur. Because the goal is the particular and unique, there is less concern about sampling and selection of the case. Consequently, because of the difficulty of knowing how representative or atypical a particular case is, there are always issues associated with the generalisation of any conclusions reached in the study of one case, as discussed later.

Because, by definition, case study investigates people in natural settings it facilitates retention of the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real life events, focusing on their “idiosyncratic complexity” (Burns, 1994, p. 313). Thus the case study research design appeared to offer an appropriate working plan to assist me as principal/researcher to understand and accurately represent the reality of the case and to explore the situation of student drop out. The decision to select a case study approach is supported by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995), who claimed that case study is the most appropriate design for school-based research because it offers teachers the ability to conduct research in their own settings and to write about their findings in a way they feel comfortable with.

### ***Who and What will be Studied?***

To understand complex phenomenon it is “often useful to look carefully at persons and operations at several locations,” according to Stake (2006, p. v). Three school sites were selected to provide a range of settings to explore secondary school retention and drop out, a problem which they all had in common. In this way the schools are “categorically bound together,” forming a collection of cases embedded within a case, what Stake refers to as the “quintain” design of case study (ibid., p. 6). An “understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation” because, congruent with the ecological

framework adopted for this study, “the situation is expected to shape the activity, as well as the experiencing and the interpretation of the activity” (ibid., p. 2). This research was institutionally located so that the effects of individual, familial and school influences, and processes in decision-making about leaving school, could be explored within context and at the time which they occurred. This latter point was seen as essential to counter the critiques of retrospective studies. However, there were difficulties in ascertaining exactly who left school and when (detailed later), so this aspect of the design was problematic.

As a naturalistic form of research, case study seeks to find out about relationships and meanings. Key informants in this case study are the participants through whose eyes the case is to become known—the leaving students, whose views were triangulated with the perspectives of school staff and some parents. Although the case comprises several physical and social sites and numerous individuals the focus here is on aspects and activities related to drop out and retention, not on all facets of the case sub-sections. Indeed one of the difficulties associated with this approach is that as “the child is a working combination of physiological, psychological, cultural, aesthetic, and other features outside,” it is “not always easy for the case researcher to say where the child ends and the environment begins” (Stake, 2000, p. 436). Ebbutt’s consideration of problems encountered by previous multi-case study researchers led him to conclude that it was better to see multiple site investigation as one case (1988, pp. 358, citing Sadler, 1981) rather than as a collection of case studies. One advantage of this approach is that consideration of the whole collection of leavers’ stories as one case allowed for cross-site analysis in an integrated way. The present case study has been organised around the central issues of high school drop out and retention and so, although the case is singular, it is considered to be made up of three subsections (school sites), each with its own groups (leaving students, teachers, parents) and its own occasions, “a concatenation of domains—many so complex that at best they can only be sampled” (Stake, 2000, p. 440).

To explore the problem of secondary school retention and drop out then, a case was established comprising three state secondary girls’ schools which were selected to provide a range of settings and a diversity of student backgrounds for comparison and contrast. The focus was on the senior school, defined as Year 11 and above, because

students over 16 have an element of choice<sup>90</sup> in whether to stay or leave. The complex debates concerning gender gaps in achievement and retention are acknowledged, and the various arguments concerning single-sex and coeducational schools are recognised but their effects have been minimised by restricting this study to girls-only state secondary schools.

How the dropouts differed from other students was a question of utmost interest. This approach assumes it is the perceptions of the dropouts which are most important. Sampling and selection issues often arise in determining who to speak to but in this drop out case study the number of students who had left the three schools during the year (a total of 129), and who agreed to participate in the study, was small enough to allow all students so designated to be followed up. The students had their own view on why girls were leaving but so too did their teachers, counsellors, other school staff (such as home liaison and management personnel) and parents. The researcher in any case study is immersed in the context studied, taking on an interactive social role which allows observation of participants in many different situations (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 392), providing opportunities to collect data not usually available through other research designs. Case study researchers get to perceive the reality of everyday living from within the case. As the principal of one of the schools, I too had a view which has been added in to the case record from time to time. The (sometimes contradictory) perceptions of these key informants have been captured in an effort to obtain as accurate a “measure” of reality as possible.

### ***What Strategies of Inquiry will be Used?***

Education researchers aim to make a difference, to advance knowledge in their field. To do this they must strive to seek beliefs that are “well warranted,” those strongly enough supported to be acted upon (Dewey, 1966, cited in Phillips & Burbules, 2000, p. 3). Some methods of inquiry are seen as more “competent” than others; that is, better able to produce reliable, evidence-based research (Phillips & Burbules, 2000, p. 4). There is still debate in some quarters (e.g., psychology) as to the merits of the positivist research paradigm based on scientific method, on observations and

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<sup>90</sup> Students of this age did not require parental consent to participate in this study, so careful screening for age of leavers was necessary. Few of the leavers who were part of this study transferred to other schools if they were dissatisfied with their schooling experience, whereas younger students may have. This statement is supported by findings from a survey of all school leavers conducted by the school board of trustees early in 2003.

experiences. A growing number of researchers, the postpositivists, have moved away from the concept of absolute truth to an acceptance that even widely accepted beliefs may be false. They rely on multiple methods as a way of capturing as much of reality as possible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, p. 9). This paradigm holds that beliefs generated by rigorous inquiry are more likely to be true and that knowledge is developed through testing such beliefs.

Human knowledge is not based on unchallengeable, rock-solid foundations—it is *conjectural*. We have grounds, or warrants for asserting the beliefs, or conjectures, that we hold....but these grounds are not indubitable...[they] can be withdrawn in the light of further investigation. (Phillips & Burbules, 2000, p. 26, emphasis in original)

The strategies of inquiry are the skills, assumptions, enactments and material practices which the researcher uses in moving from a paradigm and research design to collecting and analysing empirical materials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, p. 22). In a case study they connect the researcher to the general approach, a range of methods and location in a particular material site—the case study setting. I was located physically in one of the school sites where I was principal but connected by “condensed field work” Walker (1974, cited in Ebbutt, 1988, p. 353) and email and telephone communications with the key informants at the other two sites. As well as the perceptions gained by interviewing key informants, other perceptions were gained from documents and school records made available as part of a multi-method approach to data gathering.

Researchers can be seen to take on many roles in qualitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, p. 4), including, like a quilt-maker or *bricoleur*, constructing from their interpretations of these perceptions the “pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation.” As bricoleur my role was to stitch, edit, “and put slices of reality together” in a process that “creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, p. 5). The resulting bricolage is an emergent construction “that changes and takes new forms as different tools, methods, and techniques of representation and interpretation are added into the puzzle” (ibid., p. 4).

### ***What Methods or Research Tools will be Used for Collecting and Analysing Empirical Materials?***

The main techniques used in a case study are observation, interviewing and document analysis (Burns, 1994), qualitative techniques which sometimes have been defined as feminist because they have allowed “women’s stories to be explored in their own words” (Graham, 1984, cited in Dupuis & Neale, 1998, p. 120). However, Yin (1994) argued that case studies are not limited to qualitative methods and may include quantitative evidence. Whilst some find the philosophical beliefs underpinning qualitative and quantitative research irreconcilable, “there is strong and essential common ground” according to Yin (1994, cited in Yin, 1994, p. 15). Dupuis and Neale (1998, p. 121) were also critical of either/or debates about qualitative and quantitative research methods and had some specific advice for feminist research pertinent to this study of girls’ schools.

We also need to look carefully at the uncritical acceptance of qualitative research as ‘the way’ to do feminist research....What is crucial for feminist research is that the range of questions asked about women and their lives be addressed through the use of diverse and sensitively handled research methods. (ibid., p. 126)

Similarly, Pring suggested a middle ground that accepts the notion of a socially constructed reality (or even realities) whilst recognising that there is some stability; that there are enduring features that may be able to be quantified: “The qualitative investigation can clear the ground for the quantitative—and the quantitative be suggestive of differences to be explored in a more interpretive mode” (2000, p. 55).

Integration of the different evidence made available by the application of these two research paradigms appears to be suggested in constructing a reality which is less open to the allegation of researcher bias than either that negotiated through the shared meanings of interpretive studies or derived by experimental findings in manipulated environments. An integrated “narratives and numbers” design, what Nash described as “elaborated sociological common sense” (2002b, p. 397), is therefore adopted in this study of high school retention and drop out.

This approach seeks to provide “an account of mechanism and process” constructed in terms of system properties, individual dispositions<sup>91</sup>, and individual action through what Nash described as the “structure-disposition-practice” (SDP) model (2002b, p. 398). This approach requires a description of relationships between the levels of system properties (as outlined in Chapter 2) and the linkage of these with the actions of the individuals and the “practices that structure action” (ibid.). In this case, access to “forms of action within social practice” (ibid., p. 410) is provided by in-depth studies of individual leavers (and associates) and quantitative analysis of leavers as a group. These are linked to narrative accounts of practice at school sites.

Methods used to collect data and gain insight into the meaning of student retention and leaving behaviour from a number of different perspectives included document analysis, written questionnaires, telephone surveys, and follow-up interviews and discussions. Investigations involved the leavers and other selected associates. Leaving students and the few parents involved generally met me at their homes, at their workplaces or in cafeterias and lunch bars, according to their choice. The latter venue posed some difficulties in tape-recording the interviews but allowing them to choose a place where they felt comfortable paid dividends in terms of the development of trust and accessing their time.

Both individual interviews and focus groups were held with teachers and other staff on the school site. Key informants included peers, parents, school pastoral care staff (careers advisers, guidance counsellors, deans, home liaison officers), teachers and deputy principals and principals, to inform the data and, later, as “member checks” to ensure the trustworthiness of the emerging findings. These data were supplemented by documentary evidence such as newsletters, marketing publications, and Education Review Office (ERO) reports. Pupil information from computer files and archived records (which included enrolment forms, academic reports and communications with parents) was accessed under supervision, and compared with that available from staff diary notes and deans’ pastoral care details. As well my visits to the other two school sites afforded brief opportunities to observe, first-hand, staff and student interaction within the context of daily school routines.

A major strength of the case study design is its flexibility and tolerance for

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<sup>91</sup> Dispositions are “acquired personal states, including those states of mind recognised as beliefs....academic self concept...aspirations” (Nash, 2002b, p. 404) and (broadly) attitudes.

adjustment as the research progressed. The inbuilt flexibility to allow for changes of plan (how many times did I travel to meet a student, only to find they had forgotten about the appointment!) and unexpected discoveries<sup>92</sup> came to be greatly appreciated as the challenges mounted over time.

Case study researchers do not begin with a priori theoretical notions (Gillham, 2000, p. 2). They operate instead in a natural setting and aim to maintain openness to what is observed. This is because it is not until they are on site, beginning to analyse the data with some understanding of the context, that they can see what theories or explanations make sense. And so it was in this research, where it was not until after data collection had been completed and the literature revisited that it became clear that a new conceptualisation of drop out in context, an ecological approach, was the most appropriate framework to apply.

Janesick (2000, p. 379) likened the research design process to the choreography of a dance, with a sequence of steps that are both open ended and rigorous, capturing both the complexity and feeling of the social setting under study, through a variety of different techniques. She used the metaphor of the choreographer to give an understanding of the research design process as a “lived experience,” in which the researcher is “situating and recontextualizing” the project and, as a result of shared experiences with the participants, changing the very phenomena being examined (*ibid.*, p. 380).

## **Methodological Issues**

Research design refers to the aims, uses, purposes, intentions and plans for the investigation, according to Hakim (1987, p. 1), whereas methods are about how to get there once the goal has been identified. Methods are the techniques actually used for gathering and analysing data in relation to a specific research problem, in contrast with methodology which is the analysis of how the research should proceed, including the strategy of inquiry and how theories are generated and tested (Blaikie, 1993, p. 7). The scientific community have identified three criteria by which a piece of research can be evaluated: validity, reliability, and representativeness (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 104). But these terms derive from a concern with measurement in science whereas most

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<sup>92</sup> After finding that no students' names had been forwarded to me for follow up from one school I discovered that a helpful staff member was checking with all leavers prior to passing their names on to me, to ascertain whether they still wished to be part of the study or not.

qualitative research is about meanings and interpretations. The case study approach, by definition, gave rise to many methodological issues of which case selection and representativeness, researcher bias and validity, reliability, generalisability, time in the field, and telling the story about dropping out were the most relevant to this study of retention and drop out.

### ***Selection of the Case: The Issue of Representativeness?***

Stake (2000, p. 435) contended that case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of the object to be studied. Selection for the study of a single case is usually purposeful (purposive), where selection occurs because the case exhibits the characteristics relative to the phenomenon under study (Wiersma, 2000, p. 285). In this situation, sampling to ensure representativeness is not an issue because one is never able to say in advance exactly what an instance is, when the next instance may occur, or how like the last one it may be (Psathas, 1995, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b, p. 371). Selection may also be theoretical, although most case study is typified by its emergent design, commencing like this one without any preconceived theories or hypotheses. This possibly has contributed to what Yin described as its reputation as a “weak sibling among social science methods” (1994, p. xiii).

Selection is sometimes merely opportune, as in this case study of student drop out, where I had an intrinsic interest in the case. In intrinsic case study particularly, there is the risk that the “insights into human or social processes” expected of what Yin termed an “exemplary” case study may be wanting (ibid., p. 147). Prior to selecting a case for study Yin urged researchers to do their homework with regard to the existing body of research, detailing what contribution the intended case might make. If there is nothing of significance likely to emerge then re-selection of the case should occur. A high level of knowledge about the phenomenon to be studied is therefore required of the researcher even before research commences. That this was the case here has already been demonstrated by inclusion of background information about my own school’s drop out and retention problems at the beginning of this chapter, and by the associated literature review (Chapter 1).

Intrinsic case study is undertaken by the researcher in order to understand and learn from the particular case in question and, as in the present study, there is typically interest in the case before the research begins. As a consequence there was not really a

selection of the case but, rather, the case “self-selected” because of its availability and its inherent interest.

To provide an internal validity check on the findings from my own school, two other schools were selected for comparison and contrast. The three sites provided a range of settings (large urban to smaller provincial) and a diversity of student backgrounds indicated, crudely, by school decile ratings. The complex debates concerning gender gaps in achievement and retention are acknowledged, and the various arguments concerning single-sex and coeducational schools recognised but their effects were minimised by restricting this study to girls state secondary schools. These additional sites showed how the phenomenon of drop out exists within particular schools. Although Vaughan (in press, cited in Stake, 2000, p. 444) considered that “differences between any two cases are less to be trusted than conclusions about one,” he acknowledged that such illustrations “can provide valuable and trustworthy knowledge.”

As well as seeking a range of deciles, ease of access played a major part in my selection of the cases for study. Whilst the schools’ locations were distant geographically, which posed some limitations on site visits, I already had some familiarity with the three schools prior to commencing the study, enabling me to move with some clarity of context quickly into the project. Access and hospitality are important aspects in determining selection of what to study within a case, for time is also an important consideration, Stake noted (2000, p. 446). I knew the principals as professional colleagues, and their interest in the research outcomes facilitated staff co-operation and enabled permission from their boards of trustees to be granted for commencement of the study in 2003. The opportunity to learn from the case, rather than its typicality or representativeness, was the most important criteria considered in deciding on the sub-units of the case: “Balance and variety are important; opportunity to learn is of primary importance” (ibid.).

### ***Researcher Bias and Validity***

Issues of objectivity, bias and validity are viewed differently by different approaches to social inquiry. Advocates of the constructivist position argue that social reality is produced and reproduced by social actors, that knowledge is subjective, relative to time and context, so “researchers can tell a story about some aspect of the

social world, but it is simply their story.” They also maintain that because this account cannot be replicated, notions of objectivity, bias and validity are irrelevant (Blaikie, 1993, p. 6). At the other extreme “realists” assume social reality exists independently of the observer, and that this reality is ordered and that these uniformities can be observed and explained. One of the strengths of scientific method is supposedly that it is objective, that it eliminates or at least controls the biases of the researcher. Social science researchers applying this methodology specify procedures to achieve objective, unbiased and valid research on the assumption that “value free” research is more reliable (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 53).

Wiersma maintained that, “regardless of the form of research or the ends to which it is directed, we want research to be valid” (2000, pp. 4-5). For research to be said to be valid it must be based on fact or evidence that is capable of being justified. Internal validity, the extent to which results are interpreted consistently, is the main focus of this section, and the issues associated with external validity, or generalisability, warrant a separate section.

In qualitative designs like case study, internal validity is taken to refer to the degree to which the explanations of phenomena match the realities of the world (Burns, 2000, p. 476; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 405); that is, the degree of fit between what the researcher records as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study. The aim of the researcher, then, is to provide an analysis that meets criterion of what Psathas (1995, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a, p. 371) termed “unique adequacy,” in which analysis provides a good fit in representing the instance or the case. Data is presented through an interpreter, so the aim of researchers is to observe and capture as accurately as possible the perceptions of the participants if they wish their work to achieve as near as practicable, internal validity. Over the entire duration of the present study decisions had to be made about what data to collect, who to interview, what documents were relevant, and what material to select for final reporting, so the researcher’s perspectives are highly influential. These choices have been made with the research questions and aim of the study in mind but case study seems always open to the charge of subjectivity<sup>93</sup>. Pring (2000, p. 46) explained the situation well, observing

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<sup>93</sup> Indeed, a critique levelled commonly at case study is that it lacks rigour because the biased views of the researcher have influenced the direction of findings and conclusions (Yin, 1994, p. 9). Case study is regarded with disdain largely because of the “role of human subjectivity,” according to Burns (2000, pp. 473-474). Whilst bias can also occur in other forms of research, case study appears to be more at-risk of such allegations because “the opportunity to advance personal causes is strong, whilst external checks are weak” (ibid.).

that researchers are influenced by their own values, “constructing connections, meanings, frameworks, through which experience is sieved and made intelligible.” Similarly, whilst it is acknowledged that the researcher must be open to contradictory evidence, Denzin and Lincoln argued that there is no such thing as value-free inquiry (2000a, p. 19): Instead they maintained that qualitative researchers must make clear their value commitments, identifying the “lens” that their paradigm or interpretive perspective provides.

McMillan and Schumacher (op. cit.) appeared to be in agreement with this sentiment, clarifying that objectivity in quantitative research refers to reliable and value free instruments, whereas in case study and other qualitative designs objectivity is about the dependability and confirmability of the researcher’s interactive style, data recording, data analysis, and interpretation of participant meanings. This notion is supported by Gillham (2000, p. 28) who recommended that researchers strive for a level of detached honesty which acknowledges their own place in the scheme of things. In this study the perspectives I brought as a principal allowed me to “write meaningfully...about topics that matter and may make a difference” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742) but it also “problematize[d] the distinction between observer and observed, insider and outsider” (ibid., p. 741).

The dual positionality as researcher and principal allowed the study to move beyond the concerns of drop out rates typifying much previous research. It allowed me to find out what was going on at a deeper level, to explore the meaning of dropping out within the context of school life and for the students themselves. I was not, as Lareau described her own field work role, “a stranger forced ...to observe the situation as an outsider [...which] prevented me from feeling accepted and integrated into the classroom” (1989, p. 207). For me, this was a lived experience in the field. As Whyte (1996, p. 11) explained, in situations where researchers live for extended periods in the community they are studying their role is far from objective because their personal lives are inextricably mixed with the research.

*[The researcher] has a role to play, and he has his own personality needs that must be met in some degree if he is to function successfully....A real explanation, then, of how the research was done necessarily involves a rather personal account of how the researcher lived during the period of the study. (Whyte, 1981, p. 279, quoted in Whyte, 1996, p. 9, emphasis in original)*

How the researcher “acts in the field shapes the contours of results” (Lareau & Shultz,

1996, p. 4). In this case my personal knowledge provided a unique viewpoint but undoubtedly it also affected the way I interacted with participants. My reflections on the personal experiences encountered in this study have added a further dimension to those provided by the key informants.

In the introduction to *Beyond Subjectivity* Lareau and Shultz commented that the author, Krieger, found that approaching the research of a community she had been previously part of was very difficult (Krieger, 1996). Sorting through her emotional reaction to interviewees was an essential part of the research process, as it was for me. In the present study two of the students found they were pregnant, one told stories of drug taking which I swore not to disclose to the school, one of the mothers interviewed died whilst the research was being written up, and a teacher revealed tales of a student's sexual abuse that she had discussed with the police but not with the parents. In the latter case I was asked for advice and reassurance which posed an ethical and moral dilemma for me. Similarly, the girls I interviewed often presented with problems (such as the need for financial support or how to find out what options for further study were available) which I could assist them with. Where this felt appropriate, I did so at the conclusion of the interview.

Krieger encouraged researchers to be assertive about using their own voice and vision in research accounts but stressed the importance of acknowledging the level of "involvement in one's work and with achieving some level of honesty in writing about that involvement" (1996, p. 179). She argued for the use of personal insights as a way of helping to understand others and in depicting their experiences. To "take the internal life and make it external is important" (ibid., p.180) she maintained but there are prohibitions against self expression within social science writing that tradition dictates should be about others and how we came to know what we did about them. However, there is now increased recognition of the "interactional and contextual nature of social research" (ibid., p. 181) and that "self-examination may...add something fresh and significant to the development of sophistication in social science" (ibid.).

The selection of my own workplace as a research site gave rise to a number of ethical issues<sup>94</sup> associated with power inequalities and also for the potential for role conflict (Snook, 1999, p. 77). Lareau wrote about the "strains of straddling two

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<sup>94</sup> The letter advising approval by the Massey University College of Education Ethics Committee and a copy of the ethics application can be made available to interested readers.

different worlds” (1989, p. 208), a conflict of time and focus I too experienced. In 2004 I moved back into the tertiary education sector, a career move which necessitated relocating to an area distant from any of the research sites. Working in a higher education institute, where the culture actively encouraged research, provided me with greater support and reduced some of these tensions. This move also resolved some of the potential ethical issues regarding follow up of students and parents from what had been my own school.

The interactive data collection methods used in this case study, such as the Telephone and Face-to-face Interviews, pose greater risks of potential ethical dilemmas than some other methods such as surveys. Students cannot be regarded as being on equal terms with the researcher, and certainly students are not on equal terms with their principal. This power differential was taken into account in the design and implementation of each stage of the research, as Cohen & Manion (1997, p. 352) advised. The resolution or avoidance of both researcher bias and ethical problems rests on researcher skill and planning, and the application of the ethical principles of beneficence, respect, justice, truth, and freedom (Clark, 1997, pp. 159-160).

When engaged in research with children the same principles apply but additional safeguards need to be put in place particularly with regard to consent (Massey University, 2000, pp. 25-26). Dealing with ethical issues requires “interpersonal skills of a high order, supported by humane personal and professional values,” Cohen and Manion (1997, p. 349) observed. They explained that the key to success is the ability to set the right tone for the investigation, one which allows the participants to feel a sense of trust and comfort in the process. No code of practice can cover all the ethical issues which may arise but in my dual role I needed to be particularly sensitive to the possibility of potential ethical problems because of the age of the subjects and the nature of the research topic, which gave rise to highly sensitive information being revealed, as already noted.

Positivists like Wiersma (1995, p. 102) have claimed that good research design is characterised by freedom from bias. Similarly, Yin claimed the researcher should be unbiased by preconceived notions, including those derived from theory (1994, p. 59) while Hopkins and Antes (1990, p. 454) spoke of bias as “not neutral.” In contrast, this inquiry adopts an interpretive framework which acknowledges my location in this case study of high school drop out and the duality of my roles. What I bring to this case study is “no longer a troublesome element to be eradicated and controlled but rather a

set of resources” (Olesen, 2000, p. 229). However, there are issues of researcher bias which need to be considered in establishing the credibility of research in situations like this, where the dissolving of the distance between researcher and participants “steps beyond traditional criticisms about researcher bias” (ibid.). This situation required a different, more reflexive and insightful approach, one which considers “what elements in the researchers’ backgrounds, hidden or those of which they are unaware, contribute” (ibid).

In the general literature on the topic, bias is most often equated with prejudice (Title, 1988, p. 392). However, Gillham differentiated prejudice from “preference,” defining the latter as what researchers want to find (2000, p. 27), where particular expectations they hold influence the research in a particular direction. It seems, then, that case study researchers are prone to interpreting evidence to support a preconceived position because they understand the issues and exercise discretion (Burns, 1994; Yin, 1994). This arises, Smyth and Hattam argued, because we read the world through a set of assumptions, socially shared and often unconscious, that frame knowledge and our relationship to it. Schools are “invariably premised on inequitable power relations,” they explained (2004, p. 13), so in dropout studies teachers’ voices tend to be heard above those of students, whose views are “easily disregarded on the grounds of immaturity, prejudice, pathology or mischievous intent” (p. 14). As a result dropouts are represented stereotypically as “depressed, helpless, and even without options...as losers” (Fine, 1991, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 15).

Whilst for a researcher to have a truly open mind is impossible, because “human intelligence is by its nature selective,” (Gillham, 2000, p. 27), steps can be taken to provide a check for researcher effects and to minimize researcher bias (Gillham, 2000; McMillan & Schumacher, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1984, cited in Sowden & Keeves, 1988). It is not surprising that many of the strategies suggested to minimize researcher bias are similar to those identified as ways of enhancing validity. This is because the researcher provides the key to consistency in the interpretation of results and for ensuring the case report reflects, as nearly as possible, the reality of the case. To enhance design validity the use of a participant researcher to gain an insider’s perspective to corroborate data, the use of multiple researchers to gain agreement on data collected by the team, participant review of data and analysis, recording of precise, detailed descriptions of people and situations and prolonged and persistent field work were suggested by McMillan & Schumacher (1997).

A commonly used technique to improve internal validity is triangulation. Denzin (1978, cited in Janesick, 2000, p. 391) talked of data triangulation (with the use of several data sources), investigator triangulation (with the use of several different researchers), and theory triangulation (the use of multiple perspectives to interpret a set of data). The adoption of an ecological model was congruent with the principle of theory triangulation, incorporating with ease the contributions which various theorists from the biological, psychological, and social sciences make towards the development of greater understanding of the school dropout problem.

Triangulation aims to ensure that the findings are well founded and applicable but there are many more than three points of reference in such accuracy checks in qualitative research. For this reason Janesick extended this notion, arguing that Richardson's (1994, cited in Janesick, 2000, p. 392) term "crystallization" is more apt to represent the myriad of different facets that are involved. Janesick maintained that "what we see when we view a crystal...depends on how we view it, how we hold it up to the light or not" (2000, p. 392). Richardson claimed that "crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic" through which, paradoxically, "we know more and doubt what we know" (ibid.). Because it recognises the many facets of any given approach to the social world as a fact of life, the more holistic approach of crystallisation appeared to be more appropriate than triangulation in the designing of a research strategy congruent with an ecological model of drop out. A "numbers and narratives" approach was therefore utilised in this study, incorporating many different methods of data collection (document analysis, written questionnaires, telephone and face-to-face interviews), three different school sites, and the perspectives of various key informants (students, peers, parents, school pastoral care staff, teachers, deputy principals and principals).

Key questions McMillan and Schumacher (1997, p. 404) identified to assist the researcher in assessing the degree of internal validity are whether the researchers actually observe what they think they observe and whether they actually hear the meanings that they think they hear. In other words, are the interpretations and the explanations credible? A research assistant collected data from my own school, for ethical reasons, and the opportunity to discuss with her aspects of the study over its entire duration allowed for some degree of investigator triangulation. Involvement in conferences run by tertiary researchers for their sector allowed me to gain peer feedback on the research strategy utilised (Coutts, 2005a). Presentations at other conferences

targeting secondary teachers and bridging educators facilitated peer review of preliminary findings (Coutts, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). These processes assisted in shaping the presentation of the varying and sometimes contradictory perspectives of dropping out.

The finely detailed accounts which typify case study are termed “thick” descriptions after work credited to Gilbert Ryle by Geertz, who explained that the significance of researchers’ work should be judged not only by their ability to capture details but the degree to which they are able to clarify what is going on (2001, p. 66). Bourdieu emphasised the importance of “*reflexive reflexivity*”; of the researcher monitoring “*on the spot*” the effects of the social structure within which an interview is occurring (emphasis in original, Bourdieu, 1999e, p. 608). But he also engaged in constant reflexion over a number of years. “Pierre Bourdieu did not really hear what these men were saying until a number of years later, after he had transcribed the conversation and listened to it carefully, repeatedly, and, especially, differently,” Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson pointed out in the translator’s preface to *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (Bourdieu, 1999f, p. ix). This process was necessary to enable “the everyday lives of ordinary people” to be translated into “an understanding of the social world in which they, and we, live” (ibid.). Bourdieu clarified that this process includes reflections on the research relationship and on the ways in which this may have had an effect on results (1999e, p. 608). In this study the use of audio-tapes in the Face-to-face Interview situation facilitated this iterative reflective process, allowing for both accurate recording of conversations and for the development of transcripts which offer “more than just ‘something to begin with’...they are a public record, available to the scientific community, in a way that field notes are not” (Silverman, 2000, p. 829).

Atkinson and Heritage (1984, cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 830) pointed out that the production and use of transcripts are essentially “research activities.” The close, repeated listenings to the tape recordings often revealed previously unnoticed recurring features of the conversations. Such analysis is “strongly ‘data-driven’—developed from phenomena which are in various ways evidenced in the data of interaction. Correspondingly, there is a strong bias against *a priori* speculation about the orientations and motives of speakers” (emphasis in original, Heritage, 1984, cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 831). Conversation analysis is seen consequently as “active interpretive work,” Silverman (2000, p. 827) explained. The process of reflexion

includes reflections on the research relationship, on the ways in which this may have affected both the results and their interpretation: “In these matters...one cannot trust simply to one’s own good faith...because all kinds of distortions are embedded in the very structure of the research relationship” (Bourdieu, 1999e, p. 608). Member checks were one way used in the present study to allow participants to review the material and thus to reduce the likelihood of charges of researcher bias and challenges to the credibility of the findings.

The issues of researcher bias and internal validity, then, raised complex questions, in part because the discussions traversed different ontological assumptions. Much of the debate has been about whether the researcher should, or indeed could, be objective. The integral involvement of the researcher, which typifies case study, can be seen as both an advantage and a potential problem. The knowledge which I brought naturally to the case study of school drop out and retention enabled greater sense to be made of data and better understandings about interrelationships to be developed but at the same time the preconceptions I held are acknowledged as having affected the research in a number of ways—from the way transcripts were edited to the selections of what to include in the final case record. Attention is now directed to considering aspects associated with the length of time in the field, which has been suggested as one of the ways of increasing internal validity and reducing researcher bias.

### ***Time in the Field***

When considering the issue of time in the field, the whole notion of what constitutes “field work” is raised. In the past field work was equated with “naturalistic observation” (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000, p. 673). Recently more collaborative types of field work, in which the observer interacts with members of the group through the adoption of a particular role, have also gained acceptance (ibid., p. 678). This has extended the concept of field work beyond observation to include other research activities conducted in the social settings of the site. Contemporary “concern over the particular” (Geertz, 1973, cited in Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000, p. 695) is one of the driving forces behind this move, which seeks to capture “‘reality’ in ways that could be said to transcend the individual researcher’s relatively limited capacity to interpret” (Angrosino & Mays de Pérez, 2000, p. 696). This raises questions about where the line is to be drawn between recoding observations from the field and interpreting them in the

retelling of the story: Richardson suggested that the act of narrative writing is itself a form of inquiry (1994, cited in Janesick, 2000, p. 388).

Lengthy and persistent field work enhance design validity because the extended data collection period provides opportunities for interim data analysis, preliminary comparisons, and corroboration to refine ideas and to ensure a match between research-based categories and participant reality, McMillan and Schumacher (1997, p. 404) argued. In this way prolonged time in the field has been seen to contribute to the confidence the reader can have in the case record. However, Stake questioned how long and how much of the complexities must be studied in order to gain an understanding (2000, p. 439). Maruyama and Deno (1992, p. 91) argued that time spent is not the central issue, suggesting that shorter studies may have stronger findings in educational research because the rate of change is so rapid:

Despite frequent complaints that schools are so bureaucratized that they cannot respond to the demands of today's society and children and are incapable of improving themselves without radical transformation...researchers hoping to find a stable environment in which to conduct their research may find the number and rapidity of changes within schools mind-boggling. (ibid., p. 93)

In longer studies there is the danger of finding that the processes that are the focus of the study have been overtaken by other events.

The issue of dealing with the copious amounts of data that a case study can generate is another aspect associated with the length of time spent in the field. Lareau described feeling overwhelmed by its sheer volume and “ambivalent and confused about how to write up the data ...which grew, literally, by the hour” (1996, p. 221). Whilst a case study plan can assist with the issue of how much data to collect, the analysis of case study evidence is the most difficult and least developed aspect of the case study methodology (Burns, 1994, p. 324). Burns suggested that researchers can gauge they have finished when they reach data saturation or the point at which the data coming in is redundant (ibid., p. 318). Other methods, and the ones deployed in the present case study, are to narrow the focus of study to a particular time period, or reduce the scope of the study in some other way. In this research into secondary school drop out the focus was narrowed by including only senior students who left between March and November 2003, and the scope restricted to the study of drop out from three single-sex girls' schools.

The decision to restrict the study to a particular time period, whilst based on sound methodological considerations, was also influenced by academic regulations governing the length of time for thesis completion. For two of the schools I undertook “condensed fieldwork” (after Walker, 1974, cited in Ebbutt, 1988, p. 353). This was possible because I already had familiarity with the other two schools and good relationships with their principals prior to commencing this study. The problems which might normally have been expected in developing “field relations” within the limited time spent did not eventuate (Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995, p. 129). Pre-existing relationships with senior administrators at all three schools, combined with the effectiveness of the strategy used to introduce this research to students and staff at the beginning of the academic year, meant that I did not generally have to spend long establishing rapport with interview participants, thereby making effective use of the time spent in the field.

Because of the emergent nature of case study research in practice, the issues used to organise the research process may or may not be those used to report the case at the end. In an attempt to avoid confusion Stenhouse (1984, cited in Stake, 2000, p. 436) advocated calling the product a “case record” to differentiate the process from the result but few researchers appeared to have adopted this. Case study typically evolves even in the last phases of writing, as the researcher selects content and emphasis for the final report: “More will be pursued than was volunteered. Less will be reported than was learned” Stake (2000, p. 441) pointed out. And so it was here. I made decisions about what to present in this report by balancing what was required to address each of the research questions with what was considered necessary for the reader to understand the case.

The Massey University thesis requirements established a word limit, and this was also a factor considered in selecting what to include in the case record. However, to do justice to the argument, to convey and give evidence of the complexity of the drop out phenomenon, it was necessary to go beyond this. Decisions about what to include in the case record also incorporated an ethical component, responding in particular to specific requests for confidentiality and omissions made out of a sense of loyalty to participants, where inclusion might have betrayed the trust which had developed

between us<sup>95</sup>.

Selectivity of this nature led Burns (1994) to accuse a case study approach of being subjective, biased, impressionistic, and lacking in precision. A further issue for Burns was that case study's "methodological rigour appears slight" (1994, p. 329). This concern appeared to be associated with the typically narrative presentation style which was seen as more creative than informative. Such critiques have led case study researchers to consider very carefully the "writerly act" (Geertz, 1988, cited in Brady, 2000, p. 954), and also to review how the perspectives of those whom they have studied are presented: "The research task requires both the act of observation and the act of communicating the analysis of these observations to others" (Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 38). Modern-day ethnographers seeking to understand patterns of behaviour and social processes are directed by Denzin (1989, cited in Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 61) to "first immerse themselves in the lives of their subjects and, after achieving a deep understanding of these through rigorous effort, produce a contextualised reproduction and interpretation of the stories told by the subjects." This is precisely the approach taken in this study, an approach which is described by Burawoy et al. (1992, cited in Vidich & Lyman, 2000, p. 61) as "extended case method," one in which the ethnographer is directed towards the "macropolitical, economic, and historical contexts in which directly observed events occur." Such advice is consistent once again with the ecological approach adopted as a framework for this research.

The case record is "inescapably fictional" (Brady, 2000, p. 953) because it is acknowledged that it is "something made, something constructed" (Geertz, 1988, cited in Brady, 2000, p. 953). But in this postmodern view, "ethnographic authority derives necessarily from a much more creative, self-interested, historically and culturally situated circumstance" than just having been there, referring to a situation "in which the author is inevitably a confabulator between his or her own experiences and those of Others [*sic*] in some mutually constructed communication" (Brady, 2000, p. 954).

Typically in case study reports researchers seek to portray their examination of the complexities of the case, of the inter-relations of the various groups, occasions and the coincidence of events. Van Maanen (1998, cited in Stake, 2000) identified many different presentation styles including: realistic, impressionistic, confessional, critical,

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<sup>95</sup> Here elements of the methods generally used to ascertain the responsible use of case material (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 9) have been applied: descriptions and referencing limited; some details changed; descriptions sent back to the schools concerned, with the opportunity for change.

formal, literary, and jointly told. The latter—and that adopted in this study of secondary school drop out—appears congruent with the ethos of interpretive study, in which the case is allowed to tell its own story (Carter, 1993, cited in Stake, 2000), through a report based on the shared meanings held by people within the study.

There are two forms which the participants' stories take in this case record: individual stories and "intertextual narratives" (Schiffrin, 2000, p. 3). These are detailed in a later section. Because these narratives have been constructed from my stand-point as a principal, "a situated location," the traditional concept of reliability, which includes the extent to which studies can be replicated (Wiersma, 2000, p. 8), has limited application. However various checks can be performed to increase the trustworthiness of the case record, as outlined in the next section.

### ***Reliability***

In quantitative research there is generally the expectation that there will be consistency in methods, conditions, and results leading to a judgment that the research is reliable; that it is trustworthy. There are two assumptions linked to the concept of reliability, according to Burns (1994, p. 270). The first is that the study can be replicated and the second is that two or more people can have similar interpretations by using the same categories of the study and the same procedures. Burns advocated for thorough documentation of all steps and procedures in the final report to improve reliability and to enable others to replicate the research. Thus this chapter includes a high level of detail about the research design and methods employed. However, the natural setting and ethical considerations pose problems for the replicability of case study because it is unlikely that similar events will occur in the same way and, by definition, case study is a non manipulative design.

The descriptive nature of case study research is seen as a strength in determining the degree of reliability because any disagreements or inconsistencies can be identified easily. The concept of reliability is viewed more appropriately as "authenticity" in qualitative research; that is, "do the participants agree with the conclusion you draw from what they tell you" (Professor R. Harker, Massey University College of Education, personal communication, December 15, 2006). To check out the accuracy of the results and my interpretations, and to corroborate emerging themes from my analysis, initial findings for each case study site were taken back to each of the three schools and

presented to guidance staff focus groups. It is acknowledged that there is “no single ‘correct’ interpretation” (Janesick, 2000, p. 393), and thus it was expected that member checks, which were one way<sup>96</sup> to allow participants to review the material, might bring new perspectives on the data

Another method used to corroborate the interpretation of the data was by sharing views with the typist who did the initial transcription from the audio-tapes. A similar sharing was ongoing with the research assistant. The employment of a research assistant to follow up some leavers was done to minimize charges of researcher bias and to overcome ethical concerns related to the conduct of research in my own workplace.

As a typically emergent design case study does not begin with as much design specificity as other research but detailing the context for the research, the problems to be studied and the informants can be seen to enhance reliability, especially if combined with triangulation strategies. Specifically, Burns recommended the following case study protocols for reporting: the purpose of the study, the issues, the setting, the propositions being investigated, the letter of introduction, review of theoretical basis, operational procedures for getting data, sources of information, questions and lines of questioning, and bibliography (1994, p. 319). These have been incorporated into the case record of this study. However, because the research focus here is unique, questions of generalisability arise.

### ***Generalisation***

Burns (1994, p. 26) has said that case study provides “very little evidence for scientific generalisation.” His argument assumed a study of a single case, and appeared to rest on the notion of representativeness: How typical is the case of other cases and is it legitimate to make a generalisation, to develop a theory, from only one example? Burns cited work by Piaget and Freud as notable and well-respected examples of theory development using a case study approach but concluded that it is up to the reader to decide how applicable a particular case study finding is to his or her own situation, and so it is here.

Sartre (1981, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b, p. 370) argued that to study the particular is to study the general. So, whilst this case study does have unique aspects it also resembles the class of general phenomena to which it belongs. What we learn from

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<sup>96</sup> People who participated in the Face-to-face Interviews had their transcripts returned to them and they were given the opportunity to make alterations.

this case is related to our comparison of how the case is like and unlike other cases, their similarity based on complexity or pattern, rather than on some arbitrary group classification. In this conceptualisation, the information gained from interviews with leavers is seen as “highly generalizable because it is ‘epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalization’ (Stake, 1978, p. 5)” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 23). In some cases “people find...certain insights into the human condition, even while being well aware of the atypicality of the case” (Stake, 2000, p. 443).

Demands for representativeness are less important in case study than is the assurance that the case in point has been described<sup>97</sup> accurately. As a consequence of adopting this approach, no attempt was made in this study to ensure that the leavers interviewed were representative of the entire population of senior leavers in 2003. The initial intention had been to select those students who provided rich data at the stage of the Telephone Interview for follow-up Face-to-face Interviews. However, the numbers who dropped out were so low in 2003 that follow-up interviews were able to be conducted with every one of the students who gave their permission and who could subsequently be contacted.

Each of these individuals is a “bounded system” and could be considered a case in themselves (Stake, 2000, p. 436) as “the child is a working combination of physiological, psychological, cultural, aesthetic, and other features outside.” Nevertheless, it is “not always easy for the case researcher to say where the child ends and the environment begins.” However, Ebbutt drew attention to the problems encountered by previous case study researchers in assimilating separate case records for the purposes of generalisation (1988, pp. 358-359). He concluded that “the *art* (my underlining) of assimilation is to see the multiple site investigation not as a collection of case studies but as *the case* (author’s underlining)” (emphasis and bracketed comments in original, Ebbutt, 1988, pp. 358, citing Sadler, 1981). Thus, this case study has been organized round the issues of high school drop out and retention and, although the case is singular, it is made up of three subsections (school sites), each with its own groups (leaving students, teachers, parents), allowing for cross-site analysis to be integrated throughout the case record. This implies “seeking explanations for patterns of regularities in the data but also giving close attention to irregularities as sources of

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<sup>97</sup> This principle did, however, pose significant ethical dilemmas in balancing readers’ right to know against participants’ rights to confidentiality.

theory,” Ebbutt wrote (ibid., p. 359): a systematic process which draws comparisons and derives generalisation about phenomena encountered at all sites. These “lower order” generalisations can provide “fruitful jumping off points towards the raising of generalisation at a higher level” (ibid.).

Stake was, however, concerned that the focus of case study does not become diverted from “the case’s own issues, contexts, and interpretations, its *thick description*” (author’s italics, 2000, p. 439). He maintained that “damage occurs when the commitment to generalize or to theorize runs so strong that the researcher’s attention is drawn away from the features important for understanding the case itself” (ibid.). The goal of intrinsic case studies such as this, where I sought to understand a particular case of interest to me through both my own lived experience and that of other informants, is to “write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 742). Case study researchers can “increase both propositional and experiential knowledge” (Stake, 2000, p. 442) if the detailed descriptions of the complex reality of the case study provide an experience which is very like a real life experience for the reader. He maintained that the experience afforded by the case record gets added to knowledge the reader already has, and from this a generalisation may (even unconsciously) be formed through a process termed “naturalistic generalisation.” In this way, through their experiential and contextual accounts, case study researchers assist readers in the construction of new knowledge. In the same way that the researchers aggregate associations to identify relationships and pass on some of their personal interpretations of events and relationships, readers also add and subtract, reconstructing knowledge in ways that are useful to them. Stake (p. 440) summarised the situation well, when he explained that qualitative researchers aim to connect the complexity of day-to-day life in natural settings to the “abstractions and concerns of diverse academic disciplines” with a resultant tension: “Generalization and proof...linger in the mind of the researcher” (Becker, 1992, cited in Stake, 2000, p. 440) but they do not replace the researcher’s focus on the case itself.

### ***Summary of Methodological Issues***

The strengths of case study design, with its focus on people and events in everyday settings and its emphasis on the development of shared meanings, generally leads to rich descriptions and deep understandings of events and processes. However, it

is interesting that the very *strengths* of this approach appear to be the focus of most *critiques*. Key concerns associated with the application of case study methodology to the research into drop out and retention arose from my dual role as principal and researcher in my own school. This necessitated the inclusion, within the case study design, of two other schools where the researcher was not involved as a participant and the adoption of a number of strategies which are detailed more fully in the *Application for Approval* to the Massey University Ethics Committee (November 2, 2001).

The integral involvement of the researcher is generally taken for granted in case study. This is an interactive, social role which allows observations in different situations. Coupled with the characteristic use of a range of close data collection techniques, such as face-to-face interviewing, the researcher's role leads inevitably to questions about the reliability and validity of case study. Whilst some researchers (Flick, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1990, 1995, cited in Janesick, 2000, p. 393) dismiss these concerns as being more appropriate to a positivist paradigm, there remains the issue of evaluating what confidence readers might justifiably have in the research and its interpretation. In case study there is acknowledgment that there may be more than one way of interpreting an event. Validity becomes a question of the adequacy of description, whether the research is well-founded and whether the explanation fits the description (Janesick, 2000, p. 393).

Often the case is not selected but, as in this study, advantage is taken of the opportunity offered to learn about processes that interest the researcher. In case study it is more important to ascertain whether the case exhibits the phenomenon under study than to be assured of its representativeness. The issue of generalisability is replaced by the notions of comparison and transferability, which it is left up to readers to judge, based on their perceptions of the authenticity of the results: "It is authentic in the sense that it is grounded in the circumstance of the reader's life and validated by his [or her] own experience" (Kemmis, 1980, p. 128). In case study there is no pretence at objectivity but the particular lens which the researcher brings to the research and interpretations needs to be made explicit. Through a research design which adopts not a triangulatory but a multidimensional approach (crystallization), the complexities of the case are able to be examined and understood in a deeper way.

Acting in the dual role of principal and researcher allowed me to add my own experiences as a legitimate data source. This duality held certain advantages but it also ran a heightened risk of allegations of researcher bias and created the potential for

ethical issues and role conflict to arise. It is clear that there is no such thing as value-free case research. What is important is that the value position and methodological approach adopted are declared and that participants and colleagues are used to corroborate results and check interpretations. In this way reliability can be equated with the degree of trustworthiness exhibited.

The special characteristics of case study create problems in applying the concepts of reliability and validity, which have greater affinity for quantitative methodologies. In case study objectivity is more about the dependability and confirmability of researcher style, data recording, data analysis, and interpretation of participant meanings. The naturalistic approach and emergent design of case study, which result in a less specific research design, are compensated for by detailed recording of the contexts, informants, multiple methods involved and procedures finally adopted. This chain of evidence, necessary both to allow for replication and naturalistic generalisation, forms the remainder of this chapter.

## **Procedures Used to Collect Data**

The three girls' state secondary schools selected to provide a range of settings (large urban to smaller provincial) and a diversity of student backgrounds (indicated by school decile ratings) are referred to by pseudonym in order to provide a degree of anonymity. Putu Secondary School was a large (roll approximately 2000) urban decile 9 school. The other two schools were in provincial towns: Repo was a medium sized (roll approximately 800) decile 2 school while Awa was a smaller (roll of approximately 500) decile 4 school. In each case the cohort of senior students was tracked over the year 2003, commencing from the time the roll stabilised on March 1 until the date that students went on examination leave from November 10.

The focus was on senior school retention because there is a greater element of choice involved in staying on at school after age 16. Students of this age did not require parental consent to participate in this study but parents/caregivers were advised<sup>98</sup> of the study through school newsletters and a letter and information sheet (Appendix C).

For research conducted within the school setting the board of trustees and the principal were required to give their approval for access to the site, including access to

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<sup>98</sup> If any parents/caregivers objected to their daughter being part of the project they were given the opportunity to advise me, but no one did.

student records and other documents<sup>99</sup>, and permission to speak with staff and students. Approval was granted for the commencement of the 2003 academic year. Prior to commencing the study a contact person for ongoing liaison was appointed, and together we identified how the project could run alongside existing leaving procedures with a minimum of extra work for school staff. An information-sharing session for the staff at each school followed. The feedback was very positive, and there was good support from staff for the project.

I spoke to all senior students about this project at the very beginning of the year in 2003, informing them about how they might be involved. Students were given an overview of the project<sup>100</sup>, and provided with the opportunity to ask any questions, such as “*What if I don’t want to do it?*”<sup>101</sup> At this time a letter of introduction and information sheets (Appendix D) were distributed with a request to complete and return a questionnaire, the “Intentions Survey” (Appendix E).

### ***The Intentions Survey***

The “Intentions Survey,” which was not part of the original proposal, was an example of how the research design evolved over the duration of the case study. It was introduced after discussions with my supervisors as a way of providing baseline data about the cohort of students under study. The Intentions Survey allowed for changes in students’ thinking over time to be identified, when compared with leavers’ later responses in follow-up interviews. It had the added advantage of raising awareness of the project, and students I followed up after they had left school generally remembered me speaking to them at assembly. Teachers helped collect the completed surveys which assisted in the excellent return from those present<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup> As well as the documents relating specifically to students, publicity materials, charters, newsletters policies and procedures, ERO Reports, self review material, meeting minutes and other written evidence of school functioning were analysed for operational differences between the schools. References to this material, and some details from the schools’ descriptions, have been removed to offer some level of confidentiality to the participating schools.

<sup>100</sup> All senior students were spoken to about this project at special assemblies held near March 1, 2003, the date set by the Ministry of Education for data collection on which schools’ funding is based. For ethical reasons, in my own school the presentation to seniors and the administration of the Intentions Survey were conducted by senior deans.

<sup>101</sup> In this case I advised students to note this at the bottom of the form, adding their name and year level only, so I could check against the roll who had been present that day. Absent students were briefed by the person appointed as my contact for each school and provided with the opportunity to complete the form on their return to school. That this was not entirely satisfactory was indicated by the fact that a few students completed two forms and some, who did not complete the Intentions Survey, later agreed to follow-up interviews when they left school.

<sup>102</sup> I was never able to accurately establish the participation rate because the names on the rolls provided by the schools on several occasions did not match the list of survey participants or correlate with leavers’ lists. However, the actual number of students involved in these discrepancies was low. Questionnaires typically have a low response rate, less than 26 per cent according to Hamilton (2003, p. 1) but the relevance of the questions to the students and the opportunity to conduct the survey at the school site appeared to give advantages in this regard (Munn & Drever,

Erikson was the first researcher to recognise identity as being the major personality achievement of adolescence and that constructing identity involves “defining who you are, what you value, and the directions you choose to pursue in life” (Berk, 2001, p. 390). This conception formed the basis for the Intentions Survey, which made the assumption (which I later questioned) that the individual was a “rational agent—one who acts on the basis of reason, takes responsibility for those actions, and can explain them” (ibid.).

Students are more likely to leave school early if they have no motivation to stay on, so the survey had a number of questions related to their engagement with the institution and future goals. The survey sought to elicit information about students’ intentions for study in the forthcoming year and their plans for the future. Why students had returned to school for a further year, and their short term and longer term plans, gave an indication of their aspirations (Nash, 2002a, p. 26) which appeared to be linked with both their stage of identity development and achievement at school (McLeod, 2000, p. 505). In line with integration theories of drop out (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 2005), which suggested that students not well integrated into the academic and social life of the school might not be retained, questions were developed to find out about the subjects taken (vocationally oriented or not) and the extracurricular activities students engaged in. Whether there had ever been a time in the past when these returning students had considered leaving school was also of interest, based on the work of West, Hore, Bennie, Browne, and Kermond (1987, p. 85). It seemed worthwhile finding out what it was that encouraged these “waivering persisters” to carry on.

Many of the questions in the survey were open-ended, to encourage students to identify their own ideas rather than be constrained by predetermined options. An obvious disadvantage of this strategy was the need to develop a coding system to record and analyse the data. Codes were developed from the main themes which emerged in the students’ replies and cross checked with my research assistant to ensure appropriateness (Appendix F). The research assistant coded and inputted the data to

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1999, p. 4). Strengths of this approach were that it collected information from a large number of people in a short time and it provided some degree of anonymity in the approach. Although names were put onto the forms, the students were assigned a code once the school rolls were finalised for the year and data was inputted by the research assistant under these codes.

ensure the confidentiality<sup>103</sup> of students, each of whom was allocated a unique student identification number (student #)<sup>104</sup> which has been used throughout the case report.

These data, supplemented by documentary evidence, formed the basis for simple quantitative analysis using Microsoft Excel. The numbers who dropped out, from where and when, are reported in the next chapter (Chapter 4). For students who later left school that year, the results of this survey provided a reference point from which to initiate in-depth inquiry into the specific situations which led to that outcome. Of particular interest were those leavers who had previously indicated their intention to complete the year and had career aspirations which relied on the gaining of qualifications. What made them change their mind?

### ***Documentary Evidence***

An early step in the implementation of the research plan was to establish exactly what data the schools collected already. It was thought that information required to establish accurate and comparable leaving and retention patterns (name, year level, school ID number, date of birth, ethnicity, records of achievement, parental occupation, qualifications on leaving, and date of leaving) could be ascertained from documents known to be in the school (student enrolment forms, student reports, and school leavers' clearance forms). The Privacy Act (1992) permits the release of such data, as long as reasonable steps are taken to safeguard students from identification in any research reports.

This was the first problem I encountered. Even though data collection was initiated after March 1 it was difficult to establish who was actually in the senior school at the commencement of the study. This was because of start of the year chaos and indecision by returning students, and the idiosyncrasies of the different computer based pupil data systems implemented to meet Ministry of Education reporting timelines under self-managing schools. Roll printouts did not match the names on the survey questionnaires. Similarly, the differing enrolment forms meant there was no possibility

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<sup>103</sup> That someone else handled this aspect was particularly essential for my own school.

<sup>104</sup> An undertaking to take all reasonable steps to protect their anonymity was part of the agreement made with participants. Thus in the case record, whilst direct quotes are used, individuals are referred to either by an identity code allocated and known only to me (Student #) or by role (teacher, student, parent, etc.). The schools have been given pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality as far as practicable. However, because teachers and students of the three schools were aware that this research was being undertaken, it is possible from the "thick" descriptions developed that they might be able to recognise certain people.

of developing a consistent data set<sup>105</sup> across the three schools. Furthermore, many students had not completed school procedures fully, filling in enrolment forms incompletely or failing to complete the leaving clearance form. So, even within schools, data was incomplete for the senior cohort. Data on students was fragmented and not retrieved easily<sup>106</sup> without considerable assistance from school staff.

### ***Socioeconomic Status***

The very large urban schools situated in poorer parts of big cities were those that reported particularly high drop out rates previous studies found<sup>107</sup>. In New Zealand the socioeconomic status of families has commonly been established using the updated Elley/Irving scale (Elley & Irving, 2003), which allocates occupations to six categories according to the average income and educational levels of full-time male workers established by the New Zealand Census, on the assumption that “degrees of occupational skill and responsibility are primary determinants of socio-economic status [SES]” Nash and Harker (1998, p. 42). However, a number of problems were encountered in its application to this study. Many students came from homes where the male adult in the household was not a biological parent, where mother was the sole caregiver, where parents/caregivers were unemployed, or where changes in caregiving arrangements and caregivers’ occupations were noted between enrolment and senior school.

School enrolment forms required information about the occupations of parents, although in many cases this data was incomplete or out of date because both family circumstances (for example, student #2126’s parents had split up since she started high school) and parents’ employment changed over the time at school (student #1540’s father was a computer consultant when she enrolled but later he was referred to as a company manager and then as a property developer). There was the opportunity to check details at interview but often this provided contradictory information (for

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<sup>105</sup> The computerised pupil files were run in parallel with separate paper-based filing systems which varied in design between schools. Sometimes there was a central filing system but in other schools each functional area down to the level of individual staff, such as deans, subject teachers and truancy officers (home liaison staff), kept their own student records using individually devised systems.

<sup>106</sup> Some files were missing from the central systems and there was no way of knowing, in some schools, whether the files were on a dean’s desk because there was no “document control” system apparent. At the end of the year one school instructed its staff to destroy all records of student behaviour problems, in line with its interpretations of the Ministry of Education stand-down and suspension regulations. At another school, when the dean left she destroyed all her records prior to moving on.

<sup>107</sup> Schools that served the concentrations of urban poor were faced with problems, such as high dropout rates, that correlated highly with both socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 30).

example, student #3138's mother was variously reported as a psychiatric nurse and as a nurse aid). I was reluctant to push for further clarification because many students had left home by the time follow-up interviews were held<sup>108</sup>. Dwelling on the sometimes sensitive issue of parents may have jeopardised open and frank discussions with students about their experiences of leaving school.

Similar problems have been encountered by Hughes et al. (2000, pp. 10-11). They also found that "occupations are not completely stable and people move from one occupation to another over time, have periods of redundancy, are promoted within a firm, leave a paid position to buy a business, and the like." This led them to acknowledge that "the question of how to best measure SES will always be open to debate given the complexity of modern family structures and the changing nature of the workplace and individual movement within it." As a result they averaged SES data in two parent families, although they acknowledged the critique that this method "obscures differences in material resources between one and two parent families given the same SES rating" (ibid., p. 11). Following their guide, where a change in occupation was identified the two ratings have been averaged out<sup>109</sup>. If the male parent was not present in the family home then the occupation of the female parent<sup>110</sup> has been substituted for the purpose of ascribing SES ratings in lone parent<sup>111</sup> situations. Several of the parents were adult students who would have been entitled to some financial support through student allowances or loans. These folk were added to a "beneficiaries" category, established following the practice of Nash and Harker to cover those receiving benefits and the unemployed (1998, p. 43)<sup>112</sup>. These strategies enabled the majority of leaving students to be allocated to a category that represented the occupational class position of their family, as shown in Appendix G and discussed in Chapter 4.

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<sup>108</sup> Indeed, many had left home sometime previously: Several students were living with other family members whilst still at school (for example, Student #2227 was living with grandparents and #1395 lived with her brother) and some were on independent youth allowance (Student #220, for example, lived in a flat with other young people).

<sup>109</sup> Where two caregivers are present in the family home, this process has been followed, even if one is not a biological parent.

<sup>110</sup> Based on advice from W. B. Elley and J. C. Irving (email correspondence, 15 June, 2007) that "women's occupations have changed so much in the past 30 years, and their profile is much closer to that of the male workforce" I applied the male index in these circumstances.

<sup>111</sup> Although it is acknowledged that this process did not take into account any financial support from an estranged partner.

<sup>112</sup> Because details were not available to clarify whether those stating "unemployed" as their occupation were in receipt of a benefit, only one category to cover all those not earning a wage was established.

## **Attendance**

Staff assessments of the impact of absences on retention was considered alongside attendance data in school reports (which compared the 380 half days the school was open, as required by the Ministry of Education, with recorded student attendance figures) because there was both variance in the interpretation of regulations between schools at senior level and in the ability of the schools' attendance monitoring systems to accurately monitor and effectively follow up on attendance, especially at subject level. Lack of clear policy guidelines and comprehensive records of attendance are perennial school sector problems well identified by Kerslake (1998, p. 9).

The ineffectiveness of attendance monitoring procedures hampered the implementation of drop out tracking because it led to uncertainty as to when some students, those who did not formally withdraw, actually left school. Many appeared to *fade away*, initially missing the odd period in a class they found difficult for some reason but gradually increasing absence from school for whole days, then weeks, until the school's attendance regulations kicked in formal leaving procedures. In such cases, parents were frequently unaware of the situation because their daughters left home in school uniform and commonly attended form times and attendance checking periods in order to avoid identification as truants and follow-up by the NETS.

## ***The Telephone Interview***

All senior students who left between March 1 and November 10 in 2003 were telephoned to request follow-up interviews. After this date most senior students were released by schools to complete NZQA external examinations.

Students' perspectives are often dismissed or treated lightly, Altenbaugh, Engel and Martin (1995, p. 9) and Smyth and Hattam (2004, p. 10) maintained. The reliability of retrospective studies is always questioned because of the influence of subsequent events on students' recollections of why they left school. The design of this study sought to overcome these limitations by tracking students as they left and triangulating their views with other data. A system was negotiated with each school which would allow a personal contact with students to occur as soon as they left school. On being informed by the school that a senior student had left, leavers were contacted by telephone to gain their story, to get some general information about them and their

reasons for leaving. However, this proved more difficult than anticipated because of the itinerant lifestyle of many of these teenage girls.

The Telephone Interview involved 13 questions (Appendix H) covering the main factors evidenced by the literature review: educational and employment record, experiences at school, reasons for leaving, involvement of parents, friends and teachers in the decision to leave and plans post-school. Where a student was not on the telephone, advice from the school office was sought as to the most successful way of contacting the leavers. This was usually by letter (Appendix I).

The Telephone Interview was piloted with a small group of Year 13 students from Awa High School in 2001 because these students were not involved as part of the case study. The aim was to ensure that the questions were clear and user-friendly and to gain feedback on the effectiveness of the survey in eliciting the information required. A past pupil, whom I thought would be likely to be able to gain the confidence of the leaving students, was employed as a research assistant<sup>113</sup> to conduct the pilot and the Telephone Interviews, and later the Face-to-face Interviews, with students from my own school. To ensure consistency of approach, training was provided and the pilot study formed part of this. The Telephone Interview schedule (Appendix H), indicates linkages with the research questions, although the naturalistic interviewing style allowed for freedom in following the participant's line of thinking. Each interview took between 15 minutes and half an hour. Notes were taken during the interview, with the interviewer being careful to record the exact phrases used by the student. These notes have contributed to thematic discussions in the report and they formed the basis for further discussions where a Face-to-face Interview was agreed upon. Permission to access that individual's school records was sought and the outcome recorded at the same time.

### ***Face-to-Face Interviews***

The 28 girls whose stories feature predominantly in the case record are summarised in Appendix G. These are the students who agreed to be followed-up in some way or another, after leaving school. Data about them were derived from a multitude of sources. Fourteen of the leavers from the three schools were willing to be interviewed face-to-face and, by triangulating their interview data with that gained from other sources, rich stories have been developed. A cameo of each of these students

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<sup>113</sup> Both the person who transcribed the Face-to-face Interview tapes and the research assistant signed confidentiality agreements.

appears in Chapter 4, adjacent to the site description of the school they attended.

Key themes which emerged from the Telephone Interviews provided a lead for more in-depth follow-up by way of the Face-to-face Interviews<sup>114</sup>, which were tape recorded and then transcribed. Once again, a naturalistic interviewing style was selected to allow freedom for the students to talk about what was of central significance to them in relation to the themes identified from the literature. Their teachers and their friends (where they were also leavers) provided triangulating data, using the same Face-to-face Interview protocols. In a small number of cases parents also provided their perspectives via Telephone or Face-to-face Interviews. To minimize disruption to the operation of the school, the time and venue of staff interviews were at the discretion of the individuals concerned. They occurred mostly in teachers' non-contact periods on the school site. In the case of students and parents arrangements were negotiated to suit them, and this usually involved visiting their homes or workplace. The latter resulted in some tapes with considerable background noise and, consequently, incomplete transcripts.

According to Bakhtin (1981, cited in Schiffrin, 2000, p. 10), "any act of reporting speech is both an appropriation of another's words and a transformation of the original act." Speech is reported in a variety of ways which vary in the degree to which they transform the original act, ranging from verbatim (direct) quotations [e.g., she said "*I'm sorry*"] to indirect quotations [e.g., *She said that she was sorry*] and paraphrasing of verbal action through speech act verbs [e.g., *She apologised*] (examples quoted by Schiffrin, 2000, p. 10). As Schiffrin explained, "Since speaking is the most pervasive way that people act, react to, and interact with each other, representing what self or other says can provide a sensitive index to both the quoting and the quoted speaker" (2000, p. 10). Criticisms have been levelled at previous dropout research because too few included student "voices." When student views have been sought, this information has been seen as less important or as "'surface' data as opposed to 'underlying' data, which are assumed to be more powerful" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, cited in Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995, p. 9). In this report students' accounts of their own experiences are paramount. In order to give weight and central position to the voices of the students, what they said is presented as verbatim quotes, recognisable by the use of italics and differentiated from the body of the text by indented blocks of speech or

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<sup>114</sup> Consent to participate in the Face-to-face Interviews was sought by telephone and confirmed in writing prior to the interview commencing. The consent form is included with the interview schedule in Appendix J.

narrative segments placed in quotation marks. A similar convention has been applied where the views of key informants have been sought to triangulate students' data.

The style of conversational speech, with its interactivity with another party and without the body language and context to support it, is such that when the participants received a copy of their interview transcription for feedback and comment many would probably have been shocked to see the number of *uhms* and other spoken-pauses, incomplete sentences and repetition. As Nash and Major (1995, p. 6) found in their study of New Zealand sixth formers, "students are rarely inarticulate, but when their recorded speech is transcribed it is possible to give that impression due to the constraints imposed by orthographic conventions designed specifically for written language." Following their lead, the words of the participants in this study have been treated with respect and edited sparingly in an attempt to retain as much of the context of their conversation as reasonably possible. On this point Nash and Major observed: "Many of these young people were extraordinarily articulate and that property of their educated personalities is easily destroyed by unsympathetic editing" (*ibid.*, p. 7).

A "*whole-text analysis*" has been applied to develop meanings, and later themes, from the transcripts (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 780). Themes were defined by Ryan and Bernard as "abstract (and often fuzzy) constructs that investigators identify before, during, and after data collection," and so it was in this study. My personal experiences, the literature review, and the transcripts themselves all suggested themes. In the initial phase no attempt was made to try to fit the interview transcripts into pre-existing categories. Many factors emerged as influencing drop out and retention, including: attendance, socioeconomic background, curriculum, achievement, conflict within the family or with friends, expectations of family and teachers, ineffective parenting, the number of school moves, students' motivation and self-concept, sexuality, substance abuse, teacher relationships, class size, negative school environment, suspensions, and lack of mental health service support. It became clear that these inter-related factors fell generally under four main categories: school-related, family-related, community-related, and student-related, determining the key elements within the ecological model. However the selection of what to include in the case report was driven largely by personal interest.

As a former school principal my interest was very much directed towards finding out what part the school played in students' decisions to leave without

completing the year. Thus, in Chapter 4, the school sites are described in order to contextualise any site differences in the patterns of leaving. Students' own stories feature here, and again in Chapter 5, allowing for the complexity of the interrelationships between people in the proximal settings of school and home to be presented. Mother-daughter relationships emerged as a specific focus for attention in the section which deals with the influence of the family (Chapter 5). This built on the powerful role my own mother played in facilitating my wider career opportunities. Because of my current position as executive dean in a tertiary institution, the role of careers counselling in career development also interested me greatly. Throughout all these stories the students' search for their own identity comes through again and again in a very powerful way. Once the decisions about what to report on in the case record had been determined, the data were then re-analysed to develop these themes further and link the different texts together in a coherent framework of meaning.

The Face-to-face Interview transcripts and records from the Telephone Interviews provided two types of narratives which have been used to illustrate the themes selected for focus in this report. As in the work of Smyth and Hattam, the voices of the student informants have been utilised as segments of the transcript material "spliced in at appropriate spots to make a point or stimulate a discussion" (2004, p. 29) and in the form of "Leavers' Portraits" in which the students' responses, explanations and conversations from a range of data sources are combined into a short "statement saying 'this is me and this is what I've been doing', that captured the mood, style and essence of the student discourse" (ibid., p. 30). This process required careful selections, rearrangements and some omissions but most of these stories have been told with little further editing of the students' language (see Appendix K).

### ***Focus Groups***

Member checks were provided through guidance staff focus groups. Initial findings for each case study site were presented to staff in the three schools to ascertain the accuracy of the results and interpretations, and to corroborate emerging themes from the analysis. The focus groups were the first opportunity that school staff had had to listen to the students' experiences of school and of leaving. Focus groups were selected for these "member checks" (Janesick, 2000, p. 393), because they offer "a way of listening to people and learning from them" (Morgan, 1998, cited in Madriz, 2000, p.

835) in a safe environment where they can share their ideas in a way “most participants find...more gratifying and stimulating than individual interviews” (citing Morgan, 1998, and Wilkinson, 1998, in Madriz, 2000, p. 835). They focus on the “multivocality of participants’ attitudes, experiences and beliefs” and “reduce the influence of the interviewer on the research subjects by tilting the balance of power toward the group” (Madriz, 2000, p. 838). Focus groups’ review of the material thus resulted in some fresh insights into the findings which had emerged at that point but also captured voices that had not been heard previously. Feedback from the three focus groups suggested that the research data were seen as “authentic.” Comments made by staff at these sessions have been incorporated into data which form the case record.

### ***Student Stories***

The multi-method approach described in this chapter aimed to produce student stories representing, as near as possible, the complexity of drop out by drawing on the experiences of the students who left and of others who knew them. Two different types of stories needed to be told: first, those of the leavers, the complex accounts given by the girls at the time they left school; second, “bigger picture” tales, which seek to piece together explanations in policy and structural organisation for the trends arising collectively from individual stories.

The first type of story revealed in the case record is what is termed a “Leaver’s Portrait” (after Smyth & Hattam, 2004, pp. 29-30). These are the leavers’ stories, centred around their experiences of dropping out from high school: They are bounded (they have a beginning and end), and they recount a specific episode tied to a particular time and place in the oral history. It is mainly from the data provided by the Face-to-face Interviews that the Leavers’ Portraits have been developed. A Leaver’s Portrait is a cameo of an individual student’s unique experience, which stands on its own as a storied experience of early school leaving with all the pain and suffering which this frequently entailed. As well some aspects of the girls’ stories have been selected as representing, particularly richly, one of the many overall themes which emerged from this study.

The second type of narrative is what has been described as an “‘intertextual narrative:’ a non-contiguous story that emerges across a set of narratives (or other discourse segments) that are linked in some way” by characters, type of episode,

interaction, or goal (Schiffrin, 2000, p. 3). Analysing an intertextual narrative is not just a matter of adding the specific narratives together, Schiffrin explained. Whilst the ideas which emerge are part of a logical analysis involving the weighing of evidence, in ethnographic studies the researcher commonly experiences feelings of being immersed in a mass of confusing data. The patterns that emerge “grow up in part out of our immersion in the data and out of the whole process of living,” Whyte explained but “since so much of this process of analysis proceeds on the unconscious level, I am sure that we can never present a full account of it” (1996, p. 12).

This contributes to the first of three major challenges faced in adopting this dual story model. First, there is the challenge of how to present ourselves as researchers, “choreographing” the stories we have collected; second, how to present the narrators (leavers) with their uniqueness and similarities; and last, how to present the voices of the teachers, parents and the others whose perspectives are sometimes complementary and sometimes quite different from those of the leaving students (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 120). To rise to these challenges it is necessary to “come clean at the hyphen,” Fine (1994, cited in Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000, p. 127) maintained, for us to explain quite clearly “who we are,” as we position ourselves in our writings. This is because “stories involve choice, selection and emphasis” (D. Thomas, 1993, p. 2). The preface to the thesis sets out, therefore, something of my own story, of my previous and current roles and my longstanding interest in the dropout problem.

Before moving on to the individual students’ stories, and the associated themes which emerge from them, the ecological approach suggested there is first a need to look more closely at the proximal settings in which these stories unfold. Chapter 4 provides details of the microsystems, of the local settings in which these young women went to school and lived a great deal of their lives prior to dropping out. This is followed by a description of the patterns which emerged through analysis of some of the more quantitative data, thereby establishing who left, when and why, reporting on dropout behaviour across the cohort and within schools.

## CHAPTER 4: DROP OUT PLACES, PEOPLE AND PATTERNS

The ecological framework was devised to investigate and to better understand the meaning of drop out both to the students themselves and to significant others. This was made possible by the case study approach, which allowed for an examination of drop out in context, of the exploration of school effects and influence of the education system, at the very time these effects were occurring. In this chapter the institutional settings of the three case study sites are first described, and then an analysis of the Intentions Survey results is completed. Together, with other documentary<sup>115</sup> and interview evidence, this provides a comparison of the characteristics of those who stayed on to complete the academic year with those who left school earlier.

In ecological systems theory the person is seen as developing within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, as explained in Chapter 2. This chapter showed that the social structures of the exosystem, such as the policies of the Ministry of Education and the degree of opportunity for employment within the labour market, do have an effect on schools and schooling practices. Benefit eligibility, tertiary education entry criteria, attendance regulations, and leaving requirements were just some instances identified of exosystem influences on high school drop out rates. These system level influences are mediated through the actions of “social agents,” the activities of people whom the student may never meet.

Parents, siblings, friends, and teachers with whom the student regularly interacts are the social agents found closer to home in the proximal settings, in the microsystems. These microcosms of the neighbourhood, family, school and workplace form a network (mesosystem) surrounding, and interacting with, the developing individual, who also may take several different roles within her wider intersection. Leaving the school setting and changing roles from student to that of mother, worker, unemployed benefit recipient, or whatever, is a movement through ecological space, a shift in context, or what Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) would describe as “an ecological transition.” In this chapter the application of a “numbers and narratives” approach (Nash, 2002b) reveals

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<sup>115</sup> Documents and some data have had references removed, and in some cases details have been altered, to preserve a level of anonymity for the schools participating.

patterns in leavers' transitions, and allows comparison of the characteristics of these folk to be made with those of the general body of students.

Impressions of the three girls' secondary state schools are presented alongside these patterns, to provide a situational context within which to explore the stories of leavers' transitions through the use of both intertextual narratives and Leaver's Portraits (as outlined in Chapter 3).

## **The School Site: A Physical and a Social Setting**

Each site within this case study is a complex entity located in its own situation, with its own special contexts. Each school has its own historical, cultural and physical contexts, despite national education policies and similar economic and political conditions. However, these have impacted differently on each site. One purpose of a multi-site case study is to "illuminate some of these many contexts, especially the problematic ones" (Stake, 2006, p. 12).

The school site can be seen to comprise a physical aspect (the buildings, equipment, and other facilities), as well as a social dimension. Both are affected by bigger picture policy changes, both affect the learning experiences and the lives of the students enrolled there. A simplistic view might attribute differences in the quality of education at school sites to inadequate resourcing or to poor management on the part of "poorly performing" schools (Education Review Office, 1998, p. 9). Whilst the situation is recognised as being more complex, it is still worth considering the resourcing context by way of introduction to the school sites which form this case study.

Under the regime of self management schools were allowed, even encouraged, to "augment" the funding provided by the government with "locally raised funds" (Education Review Office, 1998, p. 6). Not unexpectedly, the parents of children at higher decile schools were more able to pay school fees and to assist with such fundraising activities. Higher-decile schools were also more likely to be able to attract and retain bright, wealthy, full-fee-paying international students, as another way of adding to the school's coffers. It has become increasingly difficult for low decile schools to maintain school facilities because of these financial limitations but also because the parents drawn on to govern the school do not necessarily have the same level of business acumen available to higher decile schools. Consequently, the physical

state<sup>116</sup> of the school site often sends signals to the wider community about the status of the school, typically reinforced by the location of the school within a geographic area.

With the educational reforms came the implementation of parental choice. Decile rating, a crude index of community resources designed to enable targeting of funding to those schools in greatest need, was introduced at about the same time. Decile ratings became a kind of “shorthand,” allowing parents to quickly see which was the “best school” to locate their child.

Low decile schools serve students who are disproportionately minority and belong to families with low incomes, little job security, and little parental education. High decile schools serve students who are more likely to be Pakeha, or European, and more likely to come from families with higher income, greater job security, and greater parental education. (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 184)

The “flight” from low decile to higher decile schools resulted in ethnic minorities becoming concentrated increasingly in low decile schools, which also (generally) become smaller, as those parents who were in a position to exercise their right to choose, did so. In this way student mix became a “proxy for school quality,” with parents of all races appearing to make a judgment that “schools that successfully attract and retain higher proportions of white and economically advantaged students must be of higher quality than the other schools” (ibid., p. 197). This behaviour is explained by the fact that national student achievement results are highly correlated with school decile ratings.

These national trends contribute part of the wider context for consideration of the three sites within this drop out case study. Bourdieu defined the “site” as both the “physical” and “social” space in which an “agent or a thing is situated, ‘takes place,’ exists: that is to say, either as a *localisation* or, from a relational viewpoint, as a *position*, a rank in order” (1999c, pp. 123-124). In this way, physical space is symbolic of social space: “social space is inscribed at once in spatial structures” (op. cit. p. 126). In Bourdieu’s terms, dropping out from school can thus be conceived as a physical distancing from a site where the student has been subjected to experiences which made her feel alienated or out of place. The “social geography” of the school (Sibley, 1995, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 10) is another way of talking about the notions of

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<sup>116</sup> Needless to say, as the site descriptions show, none of the school sites in this case study showed the facilities issues experienced by some schools in the Northland area, where 82 per cent of schools are in the decile 1-3 category. The issues for Northland are complex (Education Review Office, 1998, 1999), but the comparison serves to illustrate the assertion that there is not necessarily a correlation between decile rating and poor facilities.

social and physical space. In describing the physical space and listening to the students' stories both these conceptualisations draw attention to how important it is to consider how the school environment effectively acts as the "landscape of exclusion" (ibid.).

Of the 129 students who left the three schools over the academic year in 2003, 28 agreed to be interviewed. Appendix G summarises the students whose stories feature predominantly in the case record. They range in age from some who had just had their sixteenth birthday to one who left at 20 years of age. There were slightly more European participants than Maori. These girls seemed to come from a range of family backgrounds, with parents' occupational ratings ranging from 1 to 7 on the modified *Elley-Irving Socio- Economic Index* (Elley & Irving, 2003). As well as the traditional two parent family structure, there were many other care-giving arrangements. About a third of the girls came from homes where mum was the lone caregiver but several girls had left home and were living independently by the time they were interviewed. A cameo of each of the girls who agreed to participate in a Face-to-face Interview, and a description of the characteristics of the schools they attended follows. To protect the identity of schools and participants some facts and details have been modified in these descriptions.

### ***Repo High School***

Repo High School was a medium sized (roll approximately 800) decile 2 secondary school situated adjacent to state housing estates in a location which was, until relatively recently, on the outskirts of a provincial city. The school was founded about fifty years ago and, although recent facilities refurbishment has now occurred, the school retained an austere exterior façade. However, staff friendliness and the students' pride in appearance were notable highlights. How did the principal get such adherence to the uniform code? "*Every teacher does it,*" she laughed. Similarly with standards of behaviour: An incident was observed where a student was swearing to another, as part of a corridor conversation with a friend. The principal asked discreetly to see her in her office at recess. At the meeting, the student was asked: "*Why have I asked to see you?*" She replied: "*Language*" with downcast eyes. "*Yes, I was embarrassed in front of our guest.*" At this point the girl apologised and, with a final remonstrance "*Don't do it again*" that was the end of the interview and of that incident. However, it was quite clear to me, as I am sure it was to the student, that if this same student was caught again

there would be no further leniency. The standards were set, by example, from the top down: The principal was always well groomed and immaculately dressed, and expected her girls to be the same.

The school occupied a large, well planted campus adjoining a community park and another school. It was a traditional school which valued its past, as indicated by displays of old girls' memorabilia in the foyer and a mural showing historical school activities in the assembly hall. Regular assemblies were still held and recognised as an important part of the school life by both staff and students.

The principal of Repo High maintained that one of the things that made this school special was "*confident young women learning together in a supportive environment.*" She saw school assemblies as an important event where student successes could be celebrated. The best part of her job was "*watching young women succeed beyond their expectations.*" One of the features of this school was "*the stability of the hard working, committed staff which in turn leads to a sense of security in our students.*" Involvement in literacy and ICT<sup>117</sup> initiatives were examples cited of the willingness of the staff to embrace change, in order to enhance the learning opportunities of students.

Open Day promotion acknowledged the "difficult task" parents were faced with in selecting a school for their daughter. The prospectus assumed that this would be based on "the best educational choice....where she is acknowledged as an individual." However, Beaven (2002, p. 113) concluded that "a number of factors play a role" in parents' decision-making about schools, and the "educational value of a school is not the only criterion," a point acknowledged by staff: "The school is unapologetic about setting high standards for students for both behaviour and appearance. Parents regularly feed back that this is the reason they have chosen this school" (School statement to ERO).

Staff believed they cater for the needs of the individual: "By providing a safe emotional and physical environment and diverse opportunities to achieve, our students can realise the potential they possess and we can truly implement our mission statement... 'providing quality education for the young women of [the district]'." The

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<sup>117</sup> Information and communications technologies (ICT) initiatives included the use of computer assisted learning and the availability of equipment, such as digital cameras, to extend the range of data sources students could draw on in their learning activities.

Education Review Office (ERO) reported positively that “[Repo] High School is highly effective in making a difference for young women” and that “students receive a high quality education in a very supportive environment.” Staff aspired to empower students “to be useful and socially aware citizens of Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.” Their vision was that students would “have high personal expectations and commitment towards achieving success.” As part of its marketing campaign the school enlisted support from a very successful past pupil who highlighted that the thing she appreciated most about the school was its supportive environment. She reported: “Because the school is relatively small, students can get involved in extra-curricular activities without feeling overwhelmed or intimidated. Teachers get to know their students and take an interest in their progress.”

What was interesting about this comment was the emphasis on the small school size as being a benefit because at the time of this study the school would have been classed as medium sized by national standards. The school had grown by 40 per cent over the last decade and, although the majority of students came from the city itself, a significant number came from outlying country areas. The majority of students were of European descent but, as the school grew, the numbers of Maori and Pasifika students increased disproportionately. Whilst the change in the school’s ethnic composition was congruent with the trends observed in other lower decile schools, the increase in the total school roll was not. A long-time resident from the area suggested that this was accounted for by both real growth in the total city population and the advent of a new principal, whom she felt was really “making a [positive] difference” (B. Carding, personal communication, December 16, 2006).

Indications that the population profile was changing were seen in the decile rating of the school, which dropped over the duration of the project. It could be assumed that the growth and change in the composition of the school community would have put considerable strains on the school’s capacity to deliver engaging education to an increasingly diversified population. However, staff believed that they were able to create a sense of community within this culturally diverse group of students and to support student achievement in a well-managed, caring environment. This stance was substantiated by ERO reporting which showed this school’s students “achieve very well in National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), compared to students in other schools nationally and particularly well when compared with schools of the same decile.” The year 2002 was the first time NCEA had run across all state secondary

schools at Year 11. Overall, the principal felt that Repo staff had made a smooth transition to the new system of national qualifications:

*[They] are proud of the achievements of students. Our decile rating should place our results to the bottom of the province but instead we find that our results regularly rank ahead of schools with a much higher decile [and] benchmark indicators also indicate a pleasing level of success with student retention and achievement.*

The school's achievements were all the more remarkable in the context of their students' previous academic performance: "As a decile 2 school, the average entry levels<sup>118</sup> of our students are low" the principal said, verbalising the widely recognised correlation between family background and school achievement. "For Maori students this is particularly evident," she added. This school's NCEA external achievement standards pass rate for Maori was 10 per cent higher than the national average for Maori in 2003, which was particularly outstanding.

However, the percentages achieving by year masked a low retention between levels in the senior school. Even those students who did achieve well in Year 11 frequently "faded," as they progressed in senior school, many leaving before completing five years of secondary education. Thus, despite the principal's determination to "encourage a strong academic focus which will be targeted to the unique learning needs of young women" and her desire to see each student achieving "to the maximum of her academic potential," many students dropped out of school without gaining qualifications. In 2003 there were nearly 400 girls who returned to study at senior level. Of these, 14.8 per cent left before November 10 that year. Leavers' data gave the impression that Maori were not significantly over-represented. However, only 10 per cent of Year 13 students were Maori in 2003 and few met entry requirements for university. Several staff cited an example (which had occurred only the week prior to my first visit to Repo) of one particular "young Maori girl, very bright. [We] tried everything, spent three years on her, wasted." The "draw" of the paid work force was the reason given for her leaving: "The packhouse, \$11.50 per hour was very attractive to a sixteen year old. Had Mum in. What to do?"

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<sup>118</sup> This conclusion was based on the results of Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) results for reading, vocabulary and comprehension and for mathematics.

Why did the school have difficulties in retaining its students, particularly its Maori girls? To answer this question we must turn to the key informants on this site for their perspectives (Chapter 5). At this point, though, it is timely to introduce each of the young women who agreed to participate in the Telephone and Face-to-face Interviews and to whom I am very grateful for so willingly sharing their stories.

### **Key Informants at Repo High**

The key informants are “those informants through whom the case can be known” (Stake, 2000, p. 439). At Repo High, along with the principal, deputy principal, home liaison officer and guidance team members, they included seven of the leavers who were willing to be interviewed face-to-face and two leavers’ parents. A cameo of each of the key student informants from this school follows. A summary, which includes background information such as ethnicity and socioeconomic background of these and the other leavers who participated in this study, is supplied for comparison in Appendix G.

#### ***Cameo student #2324***

“*My parents*” were the reason that this Year 11 student returned to school. She had planned the following year to be in an “*office administration course at [polytechnic]*” and in 10 years time, she aspired “*to own a house, maybe be married or have a career. [I] won’t have kids till I’m married and really want them and ready for them.*” She had never felt like leaving school, yet stayed on at school only until her sixteenth birthday. So why did this student leave early? “*Mum’s boyfriend didn’t like me. He gave [an] ultimatum to her—me or him. At that time school wasn’t for me. Only the dean didn’t want me to leave. It was my decision in the end and they had to accept that.*” This student’s story features as a Leaver’s Portrait in Chapter 5.

#### ***Cameo student #2227***

Another Year 11 student who left school very soon after her sixteenth birthday, this girl’s only reason for returning that year was because “*the law says I have to till I turn 16.*” She was one of the few Maori students participating in this study, as Appendix G shows. She had not been enrolled in a full academic programme but had always planned to “*leave and go to [polytechnic] or go get a job.*” She was preparing for employment whilst still at school. Her programme involved employment skills, and

she worked in the school canteen and also at the Warehouse, as part of the Gateway<sup>119</sup> scheme. She moved into a full-time position at the same place on reaching 16, when it was made clear to her by the school that she would get expelled unless she took this option.

*[I was] suspended three times, then going to the board. Snapped smoking and not allowed on the field for a whole year, so went on the field anyway. [School was] boring, had other things better to do. Stress with mates, getting up early and school work.*

In the future she imagined she would be:

*Getting my cheffing degree, get a job. I was interested in food and technology and got straight A's in that. I didn't go to school except on those days that I had this. I wanted to do a cheffing course. Mum helped. It would have been cool if I could have gone to courses at school. Work experience helped and that's how I got the job at the Warehouse. My dad got me into cheffing—all my brothers are chefs. My grandparents and mum are supporting me. I didn't see dad for 3 months but we talk on the phone. I used to live with dada. It's better now with mum. Less bugging...it's alright.*

### ***Cameo student #220***

This student had left in 2000 but subsequently returned in 2003 into Year 13 only to leave again part way through that year.

*[I was] a bit immature, more interested in partying and drinking, even while at school in [the] week. Tied up with hangovers. My [parents] tried to say that I should stay at school—that I cannot go on personality and looks—there was a need to have something behind me. I was pregnant, yes. Well, I got involved with a guy. I got into trouble and I fought my own way out—virtually left school to have my baby, which I found out after that I had no option than that, so, I terminated [the pregnancy]. I thought I didn't have to go back to school now, I could get a good job without it. And I thought my only option was just to live with him, and have a job and yeah. And no, I did not get the jobs that I wanted. I got sick and tired of working at supermarkets and fast food restaurants and then being called a “loser” by people. Sick and tired of crappy jobs. I had*

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<sup>119</sup> A financed scheme introduced into targeted lower decile schools to facilitate students gaining work experience.

*ambition to do something else, something which used my brain. I had some Form 5 and 6 qualifications but as soon as I said I'd left in Form 7...but when I went back to school, they saw I had the guts to go back. I got teased a bit, swallowed my pride. [There was] a career path in administration. Yes, the opportunity wouldn't have come. This impressed them, plus ambition. They wanted someone who wanted to go further.*

### ***Cameo student #2286***

In the intentions survey this student said she thought about leaving every day.

*Everyday at this school [but] I'm under age and can't leave. It was like the beginning of the year—I was just going to leave then but I was under age. There would have been so much drama to go through, meeting the counsellor and stuff, so, I had to stay on.*

She said she was having difficulty coping with certain subjects and not getting the sort of help she felt she needed. She was also being “picked on” by teachers, particularly about her hair but also in class.

*You weren't allowed to be yourself. You couldn't act or be myself at school. And I couldn't dress the way I wanted to. [But] probably the main thing was they wanted me to act like someone I wasn't, at school. As it came to the middle of the fifth form, the whole hair thing came, and I was getting into more trouble and, it was just getting more and more annoying and so I decided when it came to the beginning of October, that I was leaving, the day after my birthday.*

This student's Leaver's Portrait is also featured in Chapter 5.

### ***Cameo student #271***

This young woman was one of three Maori students who agreed to Face-to-face Interviews. She had felt like leaving school during both Years 11 and 12 of her senior schooling but made a decision to stay because of her teachers. She had returned to Year 13 because of “a teacher who wouldn't give me a leaving form. Good choice though.” At the beginning of her final year at school she was still not sure about her plans for the following year but thought she would enter the paid workforce until she had decided what to do. Her parents, who were going through a separation at the time, did not oppose her leaving school. In contrast with the intentions survey response, once she had

left school, she had a very clear idea of what she wanted to do in the future: “teaching, hopefully.”

*I'd just had enough of just school, everything about school. Sick of it. Everything. I just had nothing else to do at the time, so I thought I'd go back that year because I was going to do a computer course but, I changed my mind about that, and ended up going back to school but when it came to July I didn't want to continue. At the end of that year I had, 'cause I want to be a teacher some time in my life, I had English and Maori, and that's what I wanted, and PE. And I had got those three subjects for 6th Form Certificate, so I thought, well, what's the point of going back to school? Even though I could've continued all three of them into seventh form but I didn't want to go back to school. I had just had enough. I didn't want to go back. I didn't have a positive attitude towards it anyway. I mean, if I did, I could've put my mind to it and just got to it but I didn't.*

### ***Cameo student #2126***

This Year 12 student returned to school, “because I had to, no job at the mo.” Her plans for the following year were to be “leaving school, working [and] leaving home.” She felt like leaving school “yesterday, most days” but by April:

*I had just got back and decided I'd just had enough. Yeah, I got sick of it. At the beginning of the year like, the teachers were paying more attention to what I was doing wrong, than what I was doing right. You know, there were other people who were doing worse things than me and I just got so sick of it and ugh. The teachers, the way they talk, like some of them were very hard to understand. Yeah. Oh I just like felt like I'd had enough. Mum was really supportive and she helped me find a course. I was helping mum— you know, till I decided what to do, what course to do. And I didn't do much until I started my hospitality course. It was good. Yeah, I'm working now. And I'm trying to find another job as well. I mean, I'm trying to find a full-time job. And then I mean, I might go back to [polytechnic] and try and do a full-time business management course, I think I would enjoy hotel, motel management.*

Mum explained that the problems at school were because her daughter “went with others who were undesirable. She lost it in the end and got bored, totally bored.” You “cannot go back. She has so much potential—a good head on her shoulders, so I'm

*hoping she will find a gap and get in there.*” She dropped her previous friends and tried to fit in, mum explained. She was working part-time as a commercial cleaner as she did not want to go on the dole. Mum was proud of her for taking this stance.

*It was better than nothing [but] she’s got far too good a brain for this. Most of her friends are going to university now. She wants a career, she wants to do journalism. She is also interested in hotel reception, wants a career, not a job. Everyone wants previous experience, cannot get work these days. They’re not giving her a shot. She’s got it there. Someone needs to give her a go.*

Mum was confident that if she just keeps applying for jobs, that eventually she will get one: *“she’s such a neat lady, turned out a nice lady.”*

### ***Cameo student #2348***

Another young Maori leaver from Year 11, this student returned to school because *“I had to come.”* She planned to *“make it into Form Six,”* with university a five year goal. She felt like leaving school the year before but had returned so that she could *“get a good job in the future.”* She played netball and soccer as sporting interests at school, *“loved dancing, liked teaching other people ‘hip hop’ dancing.”* She watched television to get ideas to which she put her own moves. She got positive feedback about her skills in this area: *“Lots of people have said so—my family and close friends.”* She had initially wanted to be a choreographer: *“Still want to do this.”*

Despite these high aspirations, she ceased attending and was taken off the roll four months before she turned 16. School was *“a bit too hard. [I] didn’t want to learn things not involved with [my] future.”* She had been hard to track down as she had commenced orchard work whilst still at school: *“Right now I’m thinning [apples].”* Because of frequent absences, she had finally been referred to NETS for follow up.

*Wagging too much. Only cared about my boyfriend, not on the scene now—nope—yeah (sigh). Slipping away [in Year 11], Yeah, that’s when I started skipping school. None of them knew where to find me. ‘Cause I’d had three chances. I really used them all up and man, all for wagging. The assistant principal, she always tried to help me to stay and she used to tell me what I’d get out of it to stay, or what am I going to get out of it if I keep on going and drinking and doing other stuff. It got into my brain and stuff. I was thinking ‘No, that’s it, I’m going to keep on coming to school.[But] I was having too many late*

*nights. I couldn't get up for school, drinking heavily and that's all I cared about. Boyfriends and alcohol.*

On leaving school she went to Australia for about a month, thinking she might get work there. However, it was then that she had realised that she wanted “*to do something with her life*” and came up with the idea of doing a retailing course. The assistant deputy principal had “*helped out, getting a course. She was awesome to me and helped me through a lot of things.*”

### ***Awa High School***

Awa High was a decile 4 state girls' school, which its marketing publication described as a “centre of excellence in teaching and learning....devoted to the education of young women for over 100 years.” The school aimed to provide “a physical and intellectual environment which promotes the achievement and personal growth of every student.” With a roll of about 500 students (about a quarter of whom were Maori and just over one per cent were Pasifika) the school was considered by staff to be “small enough to allow individual attention for each girl but large enough to offer a diversity of opportunities and challenges.”

The “excellent facilities and spacious grounds are in a tranquil suburb of the city,” situated on what would have been the outskirts of town at the time the school was relocated there, about 50 years ago. The school was flanked by houses of a similar age, or older, and there was state housing immediately behind the school's back border. The majority of the school's population came from this area. Together with those who came by bus from another low socioeconomic area several kilometres away (arising from the establishment of school zones within the town), these students accounted for the lower decile rating of the school. The rest of the school population was composed of the (generally) more affluent boarders.

The Education Review Office reported that the school and adjacent hostel buildings and grounds were well maintained, the result of an “ambitious programme of property development.” Recent refurbishment included the two gymnasiums, swimming pool, tennis courts and “a purpose built technology facility with state of the art equipment....Sustained efforts to provide an attractive, well-resourced teaching and learning environment has enabled them to provide students with high quality learning facilities and to cater for the needs of students with physical disabilities.” The central

gateway to the school was a particular source of pride: Once a staff car park, horticulture classes designed and planted out the gardens which fronted this area. This change signalled a shift in philosophy to a more student-driven outlook.

*I can recall vividly the first time I was taken on a conducted tour round this school. As I was escorted round the maze of hallways all painted brown at the bottom and a dingy cream at the top, I was advised by the assistant principal, who had been there 20 years, that these were “functional” colours which would not show the scuff marks girls apparently made with their shoes as they made their way from class to class. There were no pictures on the walls, no students’ work. It was all quite depressing, so much so that I wondered whether I could ever take a job there. The two-storey concrete rendered classroom blocks presented the same austere face, the darker damp patches on the grey walls of both buildings evidencing the ravages of time and a few earthquake cracks, for the buildings had never been sealed or painted. With the netting fence all around, the steely façade deserved the name “Colditz,” although the architect I engaged to assist with brightening the place up and building some new facilities thought this name might have developed with respect to more than the exterior presentation of the school. At the “Year of ’53” reunion, some of the Old Girls’ Association members told awesome tales of public hair cuttings and other draconian activities [as forms of punishment] which seemed to support his contention. (principal)*

As part of a strategy aimed at smoothing the transition to tertiary and employment the Year 13 students wore mufti (not a uniform), and signed in and out of school if they needed to be off campus. This did pose some problems with monitoring attendance, and this year group were renowned by teachers for being less motivated than other seniors. According to a senior dean the introduction of NCEA exacerbated the problem because bright students appeared to work until they met the required credits for university entry and then “coast.”

Just under half of the Year 11 students who started school two years prior gained a Level 1 NCEA qualification. This pattern was repeated in the subsequent year, with just under half of the Year 12 students starting school three years earlier gaining a Level 2 qualification. Data from this “within year” study of drop out and retention indicated

that leavers were almost equally distributed across all year levels. Of those who left 15 per cent were Maori, half of whom left from Year 11 with few qualifications.

*There was no particular pattern—people left for a variety of reasons but generally [for] what one might call “understandable” [reasons]. Some left to take up job opportunities but in many cases those leaving had, in my opinion, probably reached or exceeded their “potential” and were ready to leave. For many of these students they were unlikely to meet with further success at school, and they were seeing this themselves. Once one discounts internationals returning home and students whose families were moving to another area, and hostel students whose parents had made decisions resulting in students leaving the hostel, very few students actually left school. If we then discount those who left for employment or training elsewhere, plus those who left due to health matters, there is almost no drop out at all, in the sense of students simply stopping attending with no sound reason. (senior dean)*

The adjacent hostel accommodation was managed by the school as a stand-alone financial entity. This additional responsibility posed some unusual challenges for the school, which need to be considered in the analysis of retention and drop out rates for this site. Many of the school’s boarders came from affluent farming families, posing problems in integrating two completely diverse groups of students: the boarders and the daygirls. Socioeconomic differences led to problems between the two groups, exacerbated by the way girls characteristically dealt with such issues: “*Girls are more catty than boys,*” one teacher observed. Another explained that these problems had their origins earlier in schooling: “*The [social] class thing is right down at primary.*” Problems between rival factions at the hostel occasionally resulted in board disciplinary action, with inevitable consequences for the school roll despite attempts to find alternative accommodation for students while they were suspended from the hostel.

Whilst “*we haven’t had many hostel students leave last year,*” two hostel students did leave for financial reasons, brought about by changed family circumstances, according to feedback from the hostel manager:

*The father didn’t have a job, so they found it very hard to keep the two girls at the hostel so in the end they moved from [rural area] to [city] and they rented a house and the children left the hostel. (hostel manager)*

There had been a change in hostel clientele over the last decade, according to school staff: *“The hostel, over half of them are here because they don’t have a family, they are CYFS or their families don’t want them at home.”* The girls say, *“I live at home with my parents, you don’t.”* This change resulted in increased tensions within the school and also posed difficulties for teachers in responding to a greater diversity of students’ needs and interests.

*The kids you used to get, [they] used to do everything, be sporty, academic and read, you know, full of life. But the ones you get now, well not all of them, they feel school is a punishment. It’s the “want” to do it. A few go to the gym. This is to do with what friends do.* (Awa focus group)

It was students’ ability and their lack of motivation to be engaged which were the primary problems: *“The ones who are left out are the students leaving.”* Another teacher explained: *“You have the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots.’ The ‘have-nots’ have gone. The farmers’ daughters are still there, they don’t have another option.”* As the roll declined with changes in the rural sector (by approximately five per cent over the preceding five year period)<sup>120</sup> changes occurred in both the socioeconomic background<sup>121</sup> and the ethnicity of the student population teachers noted. Catering for the needs of an increasingly diverse range of students posed challenges for teachers, hostel staff and school administrators alike.

### **Key Informants at Awa High**

Only two of the leavers from Awa High, who were willing to be interviewed face-to-face, met the criteria for inclusion in the study. This may have been because of a lack of clarity in instructions given to the research assistant about ages and cut off dates for examinations. Another factor was that this school was the smallest of the three sites, and had a low drop out rate, so there were few students in the leavers’ pool to follow up. Six leavers were international students returning home and two left from the hostel for other geographic locations, making it difficult to track them down.

Both of the leavers interviewed (their cameos follow) were happy for their mothers to be interviewed. These parental viewpoints provided particularly rich insights into their daughters’ transitions from school. Other key informants at Awa High

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<sup>120</sup> According to SchoolSMART benchmarking data available to school management via the Ministry of Education.

<sup>121</sup> A senior staff member noted that “when I started in 1990, or whenever, there was the first decile rating. It was 7 at [Awa].”

included individual staff (hostel manager, senior deans, NZQA principal's nominee) and a focus group conducted with members of the guidance team.

### ***Cameo student #3333***

*I'd thought about [leaving] but I'd never really talked about it to anyone. After the Christmas holidays, I didn't really want to go back. I had it in my head that I was going to leave school whether mum would like it or not. I knew I was pregnant since about February/March. I had to have a test to see if it was real. My mum and I decided together that I should leave. [Boyfriend] didn't really want me to leave, he wanted me to stay at school. I'm still with the young parents school programme. In fourth form and third form but then towards the end of fifth form, that's when I started getting bored and started skipping school [more often] to see [boyfriend] and other friends. I had my friends at school, then I had my friends at other schools that I was closer to. Oh for about, say the whole year, I'd been going just on and off, like a couple of days a week. School just wasn't doing it for me anymore."*

It was at this stage, the end of Year 11 (fifth form), that her mother started bribing her to go to school. She would give her \$20 a week to attend. *"Then I met [boyfriend] and started spending more and more time with him."* He was slightly younger than her but had left school already. He was the father of her baby.

*This is just an excuse I suppose but school is such a formal environment where you sit down, someone tells you what to do. I didn't really have much of an interest in school but because my friends were quite good and that, I just followed along with the pack. Science was my favourite, because I like the subject. I wasn't top of the class or anything but I was passing everything. I'd like to be a pharmacist or a chemistry-something. At the end of fifth form I'd done the exams but I wasn't putting my best in and I didn't turn up to many classes. Yeah, with the external exams, I turned up to all of them but all the internal exams you have during the [year] (Pause). We were told we were going to be having internal assessments but I don't think anyone cared because we were so used to having the big exam at the end of the year. I understand NCEA now so much better than I did in the fifth form.*

On the teen parent course:

*They expect the same from everybody. They don't take into account that everybody's different. It's really good because I can work at my own pace and they don't really*

*hassle you about it. You just get given like, say you choose [topic] you get a set of work per week of each subject you choose and, say at one o'clock you're not feeling like working, you can put it away and come back to it later. You're at school four hours a day, four days a week so I do most of my work there.*

### ***Cameo student #3167***

This Year 12 student had returned to school “*to get a better education,*” She planned to return for Year 13 for the next year, and in five years time imagined she would be “*looking after children. So I can pass childcare.*” She left for “*a childcare course at the raceway, a local course, to get my certificate, just to get out of the school. It didn't mean anything....I didn't learn anything.*” Teachers said “*Go for it,*” they were “*supportive.*” Friends were “*the same, a couple of them wanted [me] to stay, said to finish and go into Form 7.*” She had left because of “*Getting suspended and stuff, swearing at teachers and stuff like that.*”

The childcare course was a positive experience in contrast with school:

*Oh, it's really good. They explain things a lot easier and sometimes they just use one-on-one teaching, you know. They treat you like an adult and respect you like an adult. It's a lot easier going than school. They don't treat you any different to other students. Wasn't happy at that time, the way [deputy principal] jumped to conclusions and stuff like that. She's so uptight and disrespects the students. Checking for correct uniform, correct socks, getting pulled out of class to check socks, for stupid little reasons. Going through [my] bag in the middle of the field to check for drugs. She had no right. I thought she was quite rude. When we had drug dogs at school she was onto me first. She picked on everyone who smoked. Not always us who were naughty. She thought if one had drugs, then we all would but she couldn't prove that. She always used to pick on us. Was nice when mum was in school but when she left she was real mean to us, picking up rubbish, gum with no gloves, I had to do this on detention. I said “no—get fucked because that's how you get sick.” I have grown out of school. Treating us as though we are stupid. Listens to only one side of the story. Wasn't learning anything, getting into trouble. I ended up sitting outside [deputy principal's] office all day, doing nothing. If she wasn't there I'd have stayed at school.*

## ***Putu High School***

A high decile (10) school, located in the heart of an urban area, this school had been providing education for girls from the wider city area for more than a century. The double-storey historic buildings were dwarfed by the more recent multi-storeyed classroom blocks behind it. The buildings were crammed into a very small site, and the school's reputation for excellence within the community had been achieved despite the severe constraints of space. The initial impression of the school was that this was a "no nonsense" place, very traditional but not unfriendly.

The school was like a "rabbit warren." It was difficult to find one's way around without the helpful and so polite young women, formally attired in their blazers and skirts and, of course, the assistance of the teachers. There seemed to be two types of teachers in the staff room: those who had obviously been at the school for a very long time, who appeared quite rigid in outlook and who you could never imagine smiling<sup>122</sup>, and then a new up-and-coming group, well qualified, passionate and fun. As a very high decile school, there would not have been any difficulties in attracting and retaining good staff (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 241). The group who contributed most to this research were on the guidance team; they certainly were diverse in their backgrounds but they worked well as a team and had the girls' interests at heart.

The school encouraged students to pursue excellence in learning, sport and cultural activities, and in service to others, according to its prospectus. Despite the limitations of the location on the physical space available, the school boasted more than 25 different sports' codes and two gymnasias. The school had a major goal of positioning itself "at the leading edge of education," and staff were very proud indeed of the innovative work they had done in applying technology to learning. The school's mission was to "prepare young women to go out into the world as independent thinkers with respect for themselves and others," with "the confidence to accept and respond to challenges," and with "an enduring passion for learning."

One effect of the introduction of educational reforms was that "students gravitated from low-decile schools and toward high-decile schools" and so the former shrank whilst the latter grew (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 184). The fact that the rolls did not expand even more than they did in the high decile schools reflected capacity constraints

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<sup>122</sup> When I did my teacher training in 1973 I recall having a class debate about the "don't smile until Easter" advice commonly given to beginning teachers who were attempting to establish credibility in their first school placement.

more than anything else. Because of the popularity of Putu High School, there was pressure on real-estate in the home zone area. Applications from out of zone students were supposed to be balloted to allocate the limited places remaining (but this had never eventuated because the school was at maximum capacity through home zone enrolments). The net effect of introducing a cap on school size was to enhance further the desirability of attending such schools, as the principal explained:

*We've actually taken no students from outside the home zone into the school, because the retention rate's been so high. I presume it's partly the demographics and the demographics changing but also we're seeing it's the place where students want to be and, in families, where they want their daughters to be. So if parents haven't chosen private education, we end up being the preferred destination, which is a lovely place to be but it's hard for other schools for whom that isn't a reality.* (principal Putu High)

The school had to introduce strict measures to be assured that people were indeed from the zone, as the Leaver's Portrait included in this section (student #1261) indicates.

The school roll in 2003 was nearly 1200, of which almost two thirds were in the senior school, distributed almost equally by level. This distribution suggested strong retention or else high rates of transference<sup>123</sup> from other schools at senior school. The mid-year return to the Ministry of Education and feedback from the principal showed that both of these processes were at play, with more students coming into Year 11 and 12 but a drop off in numbers in Year 13.

*The retention rate is very high. I would imagine it would be close to 95 per cent, probably. Part of that figure is affected by the fact that some girls leave while some other girls join the school at fourth form [Year 10]. National stats aren't tracked from the kids' later years. They're tracked from the numbers, so there is movement [out] but by and large, the girls stay on for five years.* (principal of Putu High)

Data from my "within year" study of drop out and retention indicated that only seven per cent of senior students left before end of year examinations: Few left from Year 11, more from Year 12, and the majority from Year 13 (60%). The school was particularly proud of its diversity, with 45 nationalities represented in the student community,

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<sup>123</sup> At the beginning of 2003 there were 50 overseas students. Most were full-fee-paying internationals, but by mid-year this number had increased by a further 10.

although the majority of the school population were of European decent and 10 per cent were Asian.

*There's a very wide section of girls who go here and I think that's one of the lovely things about the place, that there's a whole spectrum of society It's showing within the bounds of the girls who attend.* (principal of Putu High)

Maori formed just under 10 per cent of the school population. Retention for this group was generally quite high, with only a few individuals leaving school in Year 11 or Year 12.

Almost all of the leavers from this school had earned some credits towards National Qualifications (Appendix G shows these details). “The [school] has long been noted for academic excellence” and “all senior students are encouraged to enter for external qualifications and [the school] enjoys a high level of success in these” (School Statement provided to ERO). That this school’s “performance sits consistently alongside that of the highest performing schools in [the district]” is supported by the Education Review Report: “Achievement data for 2003 and 2004 show that high percentages of students in Years 11 to 13 gain Levels 1, 2 and 3 in the National Certificates of Educational Achievement and that, overall achievement is well above national levels.” As the principal stated in the first parents newsletter of the following year: “*We are, once again, delighted with examination results [in] University Bursaries Examinations and very pleased with results at NCEA Level 1 and 2.*”

Whatever school outputs Putu High was measured by, whether it was academic achievement (as indicated by students’ highest attainment on leaving) or retention rates, this school could be judged to be performing very highly. However, the correlation already established by other researchers between achievement and the socioeconomic background of the family would suggest that this was no surprise. In a message to the parents of prospective students, the strengths of Putu High are described as providing opportunities for students “*to excel in academic, cultural and sporting activities in a friendly environment where respect for traditional values is enhanced by modern technology and teaching methods.*” From my observations, the whole school was geared towards these ends. For the few students who did not have their sights set on university, alternative pathways were being explored. The girls who left school early were seen as “*quite different from probably the best of the girls almost, in the bunch*” according to the deputy principal. That is not to say they were not academically able, as many of them were. Most had just simply “*outgrown*” what the school had to offer

them, and subsequently found the academic culture of the school difficult to fit in with, as the following cameos illustrate.

### **Key Informants at Putu High**

The key informants at Putu High included five of the leavers who were willing to be interviewed face-to-face along with the principal, deputy principal, transition teacher, and members of the guidance team. One leaver's parent made her views known over the telephone. A cameo of each of the key student informants from this school follows. A summary which includes all the leavers who supplied information for this school, and for the other two school sites, is appended (Appendix G).

#### ***Cameo student #1388***

*I hated school. I couldn't stand it. I passed NCEA with 100 credits, didn't think anyone was expecting [me] to pass, teachers or parents. [I was] surprised, delighted. I hated school, not just because of the teachers, it's Putu High, it's the school, it's the people, being an all girls' school it was bitchy. At school you feel like shit. It got to the end of me and I didn't enjoy it anymore. I'm not blaming anyone about my schooling really but, I don't know. They would support you but wouldn't try and teach you. Like, I used to think the worse of this teacher because I'd ask her a question and she'd turn around and goes "Well, you're not going to learn anything if you keep asking questions," like that. I mean, you had to ask questions if you don't know what she was talking about. That's why I stopped going to maths in the first place because she wouldn't answer my questions. I thought, you know. I couldn't do anything so I just thought, "Aha, she can get..." you know. I just won't do it then. So many like, all my subjects were like that. I don't know. In the end I just didn't show up to any of my classes. I think teachers are really rude. I just was sick of it. They (sigh) I don't know. You know, like, 15, 16 year olds, you know, they're becoming independent, they wanna do something. They don't want to be treated like a little kid. You know, we all smoke, we all drink, you know. It's because we want to be older than we actually are, and when they're treating us like we're 10 and talking to us like we're 10. They're not going to teach or talk to us and we're going to rebel against them and we're gonna, you know not turn up and that sort of thing and I think that's what happened with all of us. Yeah.*

***Cameo student #1123***

A Year 13 student, she was heavily involved in a range of sporting and cultural interests in the school. She had felt like leaving school in Year 12 as she *“hated the work load, hated the work and hated the rating system.”* She returned subsequently because of *“my poor results and social benefits.”* In the junior school she *“did reasonably well at school.”* The school had *“stressed choices and good qualifications.”*

*[Got] five School Certificate passes and 85 per cent for English but then found it boring and repetitive and nothing to keep me interested. Not much fun. I enjoyed it prior. I did get what I wanted from school. I had a really good time but by Form 6 had grown out of it and needed something new. I was working a little bit, only stopped to play sports. I did well, and enjoyed Form 5, socially and academically but needed something new after that. I felt I was learning the same thing. I hated it all. Everything. Only thing I liked was PE and only class I attended. Felt had learned the same thing for five years and getting nothing out of it. It was the school routine that I started hating. I needed a break and a chill out, so I could have time to think about stuff. So not stuck in a rut not doing anything.*

***Cameo student #1540***

*Yep, my birthday, I quit the minute I turned 16. I wasn't sure whether I wanted to be back in sixth form. I just thought I'd better go back and see what it was like and if I didn't enjoy it, see what my options were. I was a bit scared of leaving school (little laugh). A bit worried about not having any qualifications and stuff like that but I wasn't enjoying it and didn't like being there so (pause). I had one friend I was able to talk to. She understood. She was kind of going through the same phase. She's still there. I think that [her] parents were more worried about her, more harsher on her, whereas my parents didn't mind if I didn't stay there and they could see that I was unhappy. She didn't mind it as much as I did. I wasn't happy there, at school. Half the reasons were some of the people there. There was too much bitchiness, too much, while I was there. I had a very big fight with one of my best mates and everyone seemed to side with her over me. [I*

*left] at the time it was going on, Yeah. (laughing) It wasn't the main thing but it wasn't making me happy being at school, arguing with my best mate. [It was] mainly students but the style of teaching was not appropriate for me. People need help and sometimes if you don't understand, support. They didn't bother with you, so I never did the work. At [my previous school], which is a private school, there were less students to a class so you had more attention. At Putu, you have to motivate yourself and you don't get as much care from the teachers. From going from there to Putu, I just stopped. My motivation to learning stopped. I sort of didn't care. There was no one there still sort of pushing me, the teachers didn't care because I didn't understand and needed help but everyone needed help. I didn't want to stay at school anyway.*

### ***Cameo student #1395***

Only one of the leavers from Putu High identified herself as Maori. She was a Year 12 student, just a few days off being 17, when she left school. She did not identify any sporting or cultural interests on her intentions questionnaire but she was working part-time. She had felt like leaving school on previous occasions “*because all of my friends are much older and they work and have money while I'm stuck at school in day and only have part-time work.*” She had returned to school because of “*my mum and career options, the nursing degree I'm going to do. Says I have to do six months of sixth form.*” After leaving, she had enrolled on a foundation studies course at a polytechnic, in order to fulfil this plan.

*I wanted to go nursing and with foundation I can do this or psychology at Vic[toria University], so going to do psychiatric nursing, better than going into Form 7. I didn't like school—too many rules. Like being able to work how I want to, not in time. So at Tech I can do it when I want to. Yes, I wanted to do this from the beginning of last year—psych degree or psych nursing. I found out about different fields, that I can travel overseas. I got no help at school. One of the teachers tried to stop me so I went to Tech and the programme manager at Tech told me the options. It depended on maths [performance]. I got more information on degrees and decided one month ago to go nursing—whilst on the course. I didn't like school and didn't want to be there and feel lucky I can do this at my age. Usually they don't do this. My sister helped me about it. She knows the tutors. My maths were good and this helped me. My parents were*

*supportive. Mum wanted me to go to school and if I wanted to leave I had to study. I don't live with dad. One teacher tried to dissuade me. The counsellor and my science teacher were the only ones who tried to help me because they saw I was beyond being at school and they helped me ring up [the polytechnic] and talk to the programme manager. All the rest were unhelpful—they tried to ring up and say I had not been attending. Yeah. It did because the way that I was taught was better than at school. Oh yeah, in terms that it is an entry course: nursing, applied science, sociology and psychology, only six months and that way I can start my nursing degree. I find the work conditions easier [at polytechnic], they give home phone numbers and come in at weekends to help if you need it. Workload is really easy—others found it hard—they're older and not been at school. If you're writing a report they'll check it over to see if it's alright. Yeah. The people are actually great. They didn't tell you what to do.*

In five years time, she imagined she would be “*psychiatric nursing for [named region] Maori mental health or overseas or doing a photography course somewhere.*”

### ***Cameo student #1261***

*I got there and things went downhill. I didn't get anything from [Putu High]. I hated it. I don't want to get into exactly why—I tried. I want to go on to a course at [polytechnic]. It takes three years. I'm interested in counselling children. Scholarship at polytechnic [was the biggest influence on me leaving]. It was good to know they knew you could do it. Got a Certificate in Computing [after the] 16 weeks [STAR] computer course. Parents [were] wary at first but understand now. They said I had to find something before leaving. Friends were good, although there are always some who say “dropout” and stuff, you know? If I'm really enjoying what I'm doing, I might go on to higher levels next year, Bachelor of something. Balancing between drug and alcohol studies, counselling or computers.*

This student left school halfway through her Year 12 programme but was subsequently successful in the tertiary system. Why did this young woman drop out of school without achieving anywhere near the level she was capable of? This question is one that could be asked of many of the students who left school over the 2003 academic year. To gain some understanding of the complexity of factors that contribute to an adequate explanation of this student's early leaving, this student's story features in the following Leaver's Portrait.

## **Site Effects on Student Drop Out**

This Leaver's Portrait has been selected to show how site effects, amongst a complexity of other factors, contributed to the drop out process. It is the dynamic interplay that exists between the student and her school setting which informs us about the real nature of what characterises a particular situation (after E. Thomas, 2000, p. 41). Here, in accordance with the ecological framework, this student's early leaving behaviour is placed in context—situational but also “interpersonal, sociological, cultural, historical—and above all, *theoretical*” (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 2005d, p. 43). The latter reference in this quotation was made specifically with regards to Lewin's<sup>124</sup> psychological conception of space “not as it exists in the so-called objective world...but in the mind of the person.”

**Leavers' Portrait # 1261**  
**“She treated me and my**  
**mother like actual trash.”**

*I went to Putu High and I started in the fifth form. Yes, we just moved down to be closer to our family and things like that, you know, it wasn't that far but yeah. The reason I didn't like it was because it was just the people there, they were nice, you know, you had your friends you know (sigh) but it was kind of biased in a way really. My friends we sat on the field and we smoked, you know, and people would go judge us for that. Not only students but as well, the teachers. For example some of my friends swore at a teacher and she'd get cut down or something, where another student would do the same and she'd just like, you know, apologise and everything would be alright. Yeah, I mean we felt we got kind of judged by the students as well as the teachers. It was like, I don't know, a kind of discrimination in a way but it was really unfair on how you got treated there. Just 'cause you were in one group of friends you were considered as, you know (pause) when we weren't, you know, we were fine students but we weren't kind of given the same opportunities as others you know. Another reason was, I just found Putu High was just so incredibly catty, the girls definitely, and one of the teachers as well. We had like, the office lady, she was horrible. Like when I*

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<sup>124</sup> Bronfenbrenner acknowledged utilisation of Lewin's psychological conceptualisation of space in the development of his own model of human development.

*came in it was like my third day to get a uniform or something like that, she just treated me and my mother like actual, actual trash, like dirt off the ground, you know, just because you lived in [name of outlying suburb] and she was just...(pause). Way people treat you, whoa. Just actually, just absolutely amazing. They weren't going to let me into the school because they didn't really believe I was moving here and we'd already bought a house you know and my mum had to go to the Education Department because of that. And the other reason I didn't like the school was because I think the discipline was really, you know, weird, and you hardly ever got punished there. You know, at a school you're not allowed to sit there and smoke cigarettes you know. Our teachers would come up to us, some but not all, some of them would come up to us and be like, "alright to smoke but put your cigarette butts in the bin" and stupid things like that. As well as drugs, like no way could the teachers not know, because there's pot being smoked everywhere, you know, and you can't have that in a school environment. Yeah, yeah and I think the way you got treated, if you were a smoker and hung out with that group you got like, you were considered as one of those "bad field [girls]", you know, and didn't trust you and that half of us, you know. I can honestly say some of those girls aren't the nicest in the world but then again, there are different people. They don't have to treat other people so unfairly. They just get, you know, put down, because of the people they hang around with. Yes, and I thought that was really bad. Heaps of my friends have left school, and they all had the same, you know, thinking of it as what I do. At school it's got like this little environment. Like, it's really hard to explain I reckon. Yeah, and (sigh) it's really hard I mean, some people go there and they absolutely love it, you know, it's their life, to them. But, I mean, then there's a large majority of people that can't stand it because of just the way it is. There's something about it that's like, you know, it's either you're IN or you're OUT and there's actually something, something, that's not right there. It's just something that I can't honestly explain. It's like, supposed to be like a public school where you go there (laughingly) and there's nothing wrong with a public school, I mean. Yeah, well, it kind of comes across that way, whereas it's supposed to be, you know, like public, not up there you know but it is, and that's just the way they come across like that. Like, maybe it's just me, like, coming from a school you don't have to do all these special things, you know, like*

*assembly, you know. I don't know anything really. I didn't mean anything major by that but it was things like how you had to stand up when a teacher walks in, you know, that. Yes, well just like, not all teachers. Like mainly the principal and vice-principal or whatever it's called. But it's probably just the way I have been brought up and how I've been brought up to go on to this sort of environment but, I mean, that's just my opinion. For some reason, I got really depressed at that school because of the horrible environment to be in and I just don't like being in that sort of thing. I couldn't get on with my work there. I didn't get fifth form, I didn't get, I didn't get anything, and, you know, that's not good for me like. I don't like looking back and people ask you, "What did you get at school?" and it's kind of, you know, really disappointing and it doesn't make me feel very good about myself, no. Yeah, some [teachers] were like "Oh, you're going to be a bum," kind a thing. Others were supportive, yeah, some of them were but overall the majority just thought that we were a bit silly, you know, leaving school and going to do computing, (laugh) but I don't think that at all. I think it's the best thing I have ever done for myself. No point dwelling on the past. Look to the future, I reckon.*

In the ecological model of drop out, the innermost levels in which the students spend most of their time, and the broader environments that contain them, are located within particular historical, social, geographical and cultural contexts that influence the nature, structure and function of all other levels of the environment. How policy change affected the school site, and consequently impacted on this student's dropping out, is particularly well illustrated in this narrative.

Student #1261 refers to difficulties she and her mother experienced at the school during the process of enrolment. This was because, at that time, they had an "out-of-zone" address. Her story evidences how "successful" (equate with big) schools, such as Putu, established home zones and enrolment schemes, allowing them to become increasingly selective in their student intake. An élite culture developed at Putu High, more like that of a private school, in response to the expectations of parents and of the majority of girls attending. This leaver's story is that of a girl who has been subjected to experiences which made her feel she did not fit in. Her testimony illustrates the conceptualisation of school as a physical and social space, and dropping out as a

consequence, a physical distancing, from the school site where she felt alienated and “out of place.”

The student’s family relocation results in a change of school, from a coeducational school, which was “*more laid back*,” where she “*really enjoyed it, good mates. Grades were not great but a good social life*,” to a higher decile school, with its focus on achievement and different school culture. At Putu “*my subjects slipped completely. I didn’t even go [to school] pretty much.*”

The school site is where students receive their secondary education, which is both that body of knowledge required of the official curriculum, and where they learn about their place within a stratified society, as part of the “*hidden*” curriculum (Openshaw, Clark, Hamer, & Waitere-Ang, 2005, p. 188). As in this story, the hidden curriculum teaches “the class, ethnic, and gender values that uphold the status quo” (p. 189) through the daily activities, the practices of teachers, the natural order of things “inherent in the total administrative, systemic, and pedagogical arrangements of the institution” (pp. 188-189). It seems that the “bad field girls” recognised that they were not in the inner, favoured circle, and sat physically separate from the other students at recess. Those at the very fringes of the school community, those students feeling most alienated, were also skipping the odd classes they didn’t like (often, it seems, not picked up by school systems) and also “wagging”—that is, taking whole days off from school (which of course was more likely to bring them to the notice of school authorities).

This student had a different value set from the girls at this new school, not just in regards to drugs, which she mentioned but also in regards to sexuality:

*It’s like my second day at school and [students] brought up all the stuff about having sex and things and was thinking whoa! (laugh, laugh) You know, what’re you doing sort of thing, you’re young.*

This student felt out of place with the “in” students, whom she found “*snobby*” and “*up there*,” but also she felt a lack of acceptance by (not all) the teachers, some of whom were “*pretty horrible*.”

*They would sit there and well, like “You’re silly—you can’t do it.” Maybe not say that in the actual sense of the words but you can tell by the way they talk to you and turn around just you know like they give you the impression that you’re useless pretty much, and you couldn’t do it.*

It appears that it was the condescending way that she was treated, a lack of encouragement, and low expectations about what she was capable of achieving, which were the issues, rather than anything specifically said.

*I think it's also got a lot to do with nerves, or willpower. If you're willing to fight against them, and show them that you're not, you know, what they think you are.*

So here we see firstly a difference in values and secondly a difference in beliefs, cultural aspects of the school environment (or school climate), according to Tagiuri (1968, cited in Cavanaugh & Dellar, 1997, p. 3). The “social geography” of the school is another way of talking about notions of social and physical space. Out of this approach Sibley developed the idea of “geographies of exclusion” (1995, cited in Smyth, 2001, p. 10), based on the concept of school culture, to explain how such exclusionary practices as this occur as part of the day-to-day activities of a school, and as such are concealed.

Like many other organisations, schools have clearly distinguishable identities manifested not just in the architecture and artefacts of the school, as I tried to convey in the limited space afforded to the site descriptions but also “in organisational members’ patterns of behaviour, thought and norms” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 3). These are shaped by the way principals and teachers “reinforce, nurture, or transform underlying norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions” (p. 4). So, in this story, we see that the response of the other students is in keeping with the reaction of some teachers who, it seems, expect student #1261 not to succeed with her particular background characteristics, coming from a home with an out of zone address and where the mother is a lone parent.

When school authorities talk generally of their students, they usually have a particular group of students in mind: it is this group that determines the contextual boundary of the school’s geography; it is this group that the school’s discourse about students implicitly refers to; it is this group that gives meaning to how the school thinks of its purposes and its activities; and at this deep level, it is this positioning that makes other groups invisible or superfluous. (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 184)

Right from her first encounter with the school, it was made clear to this student that she did not fit the typical Putu student mould: The way this student and her mother were treated by the office staff, the apparent inconsistencies in the application of school rules,

and the fact that staff had not been following up her many absences from class, could be interpreted as other examples of exclusionary practices.

Feelings of alienation developed as a result, and she became so strongly “*turned off*” by the culture of her new school environment that she started “*faking all the sickness*” and then wagging school: “*I got away with wagging pretty much half of the year in fifth form.*” This normally vivacious and outgoing student became dispirited. “*I considered the girls quite snobby and like, really judgmental you know, so, I was really quiet, I got really depressed and turned really shy.*” Silence and passivity result from feeling powerless. Thus Smyth and Hattam consider that a reconsideration of the power differentials evident in most relationships and a sensitivity to students experiencing alienation are necessary to improve young people’s chances of success at school (2004, p. 13).

The feelings of alienation for student #1261 stemmed from “*the way people were, and the things they did, I was just like, whoa (laughingly). I’d never been in that kind of environment in my life.*” One example she notes as rather odd—the requirement to stand up when teachers and senior administrators enter the room—is a mark of respect, what Bourdieu refers to as “the respectful demeanour called for by grandeur and height” (1999c, p. 126). Although a common practice for earlier generations, it is not as commonplace today. This practice would suggest that Putu High was very traditional in its approach and hierarchical in its administration. This conclusion is supported by the comments this student makes about the treatment she and her mother received from the office staff. Spatial structures, as well as school practices, convey who holds the power within a setting.

In this Leaver’s Portrait, then, different ways of conceiving and talking about the social and physical space have been brought together to afford a better understanding of why it was that these site effects had such a powerful influence on this student (Bourdieu, 1999c; Deal & Peterson, 1999; Smyth & Hattam, 2004). Like many of the students in Roderick’s (1993) study, the transition between schools has been difficult for student #1261. She never makes the critical adjustment to the new social milieu, she does not feel part of the culture of the new school, and she feels powerless to change the situation she finds herself in. She makes friends and has some positive relationships with teachers: “*I had this teacher who was actually amazing. She was a great teacher. She was awesome.*” Despite the support she gets from these relationships, and from home: “*Yeah, my mum and me are really close,*” she “*just can’t handle anymore*” and

thus leaves school before completing Year 12. The major cause of her dropping out was she “*hated it—the school, everything about [Putu]*” but mostly it was “*because of the horrible environment.*” That is from her perspective. However, as she herself acknowledges, for some other students Putu was “their life” and they “absolutely” loved being at that school. These differing viewpoints indicate that it is how the girls’ *experience* the school which is the significant factor.

One of the advantages of the ecological approach is that it facilitates the inclusion of other viewpoints, that of key informants and of different theoretical perspectives. In particular Bronfenbrenner’s later reformulation of the structure of the environment and its role in the developmental process suggested that researchers should place a greater emphasis on the psychological dimension (Bronfenbrenner, 2005d, p. 44). Taking this challenge, it is interesting to track back over the period when the ecological transition from schoolgirl to tertiary student was occurring and view the changes in student #1261’s thinking, the evidence for her growth and maturation as she develops a more adult persona.

In teachers’ assessments she is “*a capable student who is working below her abilities.*” She enjoyed her first high school: “*I really enjoyed it, good mates. Grades were not great but [I had] a good social life.*” The careers advisor, who had also been her dean the year before, noted that she had moved schools as a result of a marriage break up. She was surprised to find that this student had left school because she was “*bright and bubbly and [had] good social skills and she looked like she was coping and reasonably happy.*” Similarly the deputy principal remarked about the changed family circumstances, noting that at the enrolment interview this student had come “*lacking in focus and effort*” which caused her to consider “*whether the marriage break up or whatever might have had more of an impact on her than she ever talked about or acknowledged.*”

Certainly this student never mentioned any problems in this regard, although she did remark that she had not wanted to go to Putu High when they sold the family home and needed to relocate. She probably did not want to shift at all, the way she spoke about her previous school: “*I grew up with everyone from there.*” This move was not just a move from one high school to another. It also involved leaving the neighbourhood setting, where there were longstanding and valued relationships (“*I had all my friends*”) as well as the splitting of the family (her younger sister has still not moved back to live with mother at the time of the Face-to-face Interview, although apparently this is

planned). If she had to shift at least she could go to a similar type of school; a coeducational school was her request. However, her mother had been an “old girl” of Putu and wanted her two daughters to follow this tradition. She possibly thought that the school’s emphasis on academic excellence might assist her daughter to do better at school, as the daughter even admitted that at her old school her “*social life kind of got in the way a bit.*” Whilst her “*subjects [had] slipped completely*” at Putu, on the polytechnic course we hear that she is “*really enjoying it*” and also achieving well academically: “*I did so well for myself, and every assignment I got was over 90 per cent.*” Over time there had been a change in how she views learning, and her academic self concept, associated with experiences she has had with different education providers, their different ways of doing things, and her academic performance.

That development has occurred, and is occurring even during the interview, is evident from the reflective way this student speaks of her own experiences at Putu. Initially it seems that it is the school that is to blame for her dropping out: It is everything about the school environment, from the way she and her mother were received by the office staff, to the way students have to stand up when teachers enter the room. She reports negative experiences related to assemblies, the snobby students and judgmental teachers. From the moment she arrived there, she said “*things went down hill.*” She does not talk about the positive side, the fact that she had made good friends there (friendships which continue post-school) and that she did have support within the school staff (the deputy principal described her as “*a bit of a sweetie*”).

Later she shows greater balance in her thinking, acknowledging that “*some people go there and they absolutely love it.*” She has analysed the differences in the learning environments and what it is about the polytechnic experience that enabled her to achieve. She concludes that some of her recent success is attributable to her own change in attitude, and acknowledges that at school “*I would try some of the time but I can truly say, yes but I didn’t try hard enough half the time.*” With great insight she concludes that there are two dimensions to her success: her own motivation and the learning environment. “*Yeah, I’m able when I’m in a positive environment and I want to do things.*” This new-found success has given a fillip to her self-esteem, and she now feels confident about doing “*something with my life, make something of it...I’m going to turn around and do it. I know I can, so no point in holding back.*”

These sentiments indicate how student #1261 has achieved a greater confidence in her ability to shape her own future. Drawing on 10 years of research to consider how

an effective learning culture can be achieved and sustained in schools, Hawk explained that “students are more actively involved in their learning when they have self-efficacy, the belief that they can make a significant contribution to their own learning and development” (2000, p. 2). When this is successful students take more responsibility for their own learning, have more confidence, and in this way success breeds success. However, in student #1261’s case, she needed to leave the school environment before experiencing this sense of success and the realisation of her own part in it.

This Leaver’s Portrait shows how site effects, amongst a complexity of other factors, contributed to the drop out process. What is evident in this story is that:

the space is not physical but *psychological*—consisting of the environment not as it exists in the so-called objective world...but in the mind of the person, in his or her *phenomenological field*—including, as especially significant, the world of imagination, fantasy, and unreality. (personal interaction with Lewin, quoted in Bronfenbrenner, 2005e, p. 43)

As we look at more Leavers’ Portraits in Chapter 5 the centrality of the psychosocial person in the ecological model, the complexity of her interrelationships within the environment and the importance of the student’s perceptions of her context as evidenced here, will be reinforced. However, before we shift direction to explore new themes suggested by the stories of other students it is valuable to consider, by way of closure on this theme of site effects, some remarkable similarities and striking differences between the school sites.

### ***Symbolism of School Sites***

In the ecological framework, it has been stressed that the notion of the school environment is much more than merely the grounds and buildings. But in labouring this aspect, the point that the physicality of the school environment does itself communicate meaning should not be lost. In their curriculum, all three schools had a strong focus on sports and on technology and these emphases were reflected in the facilities provided for these activities.

Cutler supported the claim that the architecture of schools reflects important beliefs as to the purpose of schooling, explaining that “in the late nineteenth century, schools were often fashioned after factories, communicating a working atmosphere of efficiency and production” (1989, in Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 63). Certainly, the

design of classrooms has not changed much in the last hundred years (although some schools built more recently might belie this statement), and indeed the majority of facilities at all three sites in this study conveyed this “working atmosphere”.

Assuming that a student entered high school at 13 years of age and left as soon as she was legally able to at 16 years old, it is likely that she would have spent in the vicinity of 4,200 hours of her time at school—more, if she was involved in many extracurricular activities or if she was a boarder. Much of this time is spent in school buildings, so “the physical setting and the school’s symbolic appearance have a lot of time to exert influence” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 63).

The formidable lists of previous head girls and top scholars, painted in gold on varnished wood plaques in the hall, are symbols of what these traditional girls’ schools stand for and such symbols play an important role in “cultural cohesion and pride” (ibid., p. 60). Displays of cups and old girls’ memorabilia located typically near the school’s reception area reinforced this sense of achievement, leadership and history. Similarly each school’s song and coat of arms, emblazoned on uniforms and stationary letterhead, provided “cultural rallying points” (ibid.).

The signals of authority and position power evidenced by the physical layout of the sites were reinforced by the schools’ day-to-day procedures: for example, all three sites boasted formal halls where assemblies were held. In these important ceremonial events the whole school community came together—teachers and students—to celebrate students’ successes, to reinforce school rules (particularly for uniform), and to strengthen the culture of these traditional girls’ schools. student #1261 of Putu school disliked assemblies but not all students felt this way. The description provided by a student from one of the other schools conveyed a typical assembly format:

*I always liked assembly. I don’t know why, I just used to get excited about assembly on a Monday morning. I don’t think any kid likes assembly but I did, yeah. Just, like, hearing all the news in the school, about what people have been doing. Or else we had like, special things. Like the head[mistress] might give a presentation or, we’d have a cultural group or something like that. Just things like that. Yeah, well, that’s the one time the whole school comes together. A sort of the school spirit I suppose.* (student #2324)

In assemblies the teachers sat up on the stage, looking down on the rows and rows of students below them in the body of the hall. This seating arrangement was another indicator that school halls are sites where “power is exerted and exercised” (Bourdieu,

1999c, p. 126). Then the rituals of the assembly itself, handed down over the years, added confirmation of the authority vested in the principal, her staff and her prefects. Her motivational speech, the deputy principal's harassment of the naughty girls, sports and cultural notices delivered by those senior students whose exemplary behaviour allowed them to become prefects—all these actions conveyed a reverence for tradition, for pride in the school, respect for teachers and for the school rules. Assemblies were places where values were espoused and beliefs tested. They provided an opportunity, for both staff and senior girls, to exercise control and reinforce their authority.

The power differences between teacher and learner are reinforced “ideologically and spatially” not only through assemblies but also, Smith suggested, through the curriculum and texts used and the way furniture is arranged in classrooms (1997, cited in Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, & Tiakiwai, 2003b, p. 8).

Ideologically, in that the teacher is seen as the “font of all knowledge”; the pupils, in Locke's terms, the “tabula rasa”, the empty slate; where the teacher is the “neutral” and objective arbiter and transmitter of knowledge. Knowledge however, is selected by the teacher...far from being neutral, these documents actively reproduce the cultural and social hegemony of the dominant groups at the expense of marginalised groups. (Bishop et al., 2003b, p. 8)

Within all three school sites there were other clear messages given about the place of students in the school hierarchy. The designation of “out of bounds” areas, typically areas near the perimeter of the site (easy exit points for students wishing to “escape” classes), the main entrance (usually reserved for staff and visitors to the school), and the school gardens (where they existed), provided obvious messages. The staff room, with quite a different style of seating and furnishing, separate from the more utilitarian student cafeteria or tuck shop, was another obvious contrast. Thus it seems that both the design of school facilities and the customary practices which students and staff engaged in day-to-day supported the notion that “spatial distance affirms social distance” (Bourdieu, 1999c, p. 126). It is also a reminder that schools are “shaped from within” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. xi) more powerfully than from beyond.

As well as these physical similarities, then, there were also social site similarities in these very traditional girls' schools. There were similarities in the schools' mission and purpose statements, which gave guidance to what teachers worked towards on a daily basis. A major difference was in the assumptions which underpinned staff expectations of their students and how these expectations were transmitted as

organisational norms of behaviour, dress, and language (Deal & Peterson, 1999, p. 27). The most influential assumption, evidenced in student #1261's Leaver's Portrait, was that students from high socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to achieve than were other girls. This assumption, transmitted as expectations, tended to become self-fulfilling.

There were similarities but also some key differences between the school sites in this multi-case study. The remainder of this chapter now turns to focus on similarities and differences at student level: between the students who left and those who completed the programme of study which they enrolled for in 2003.

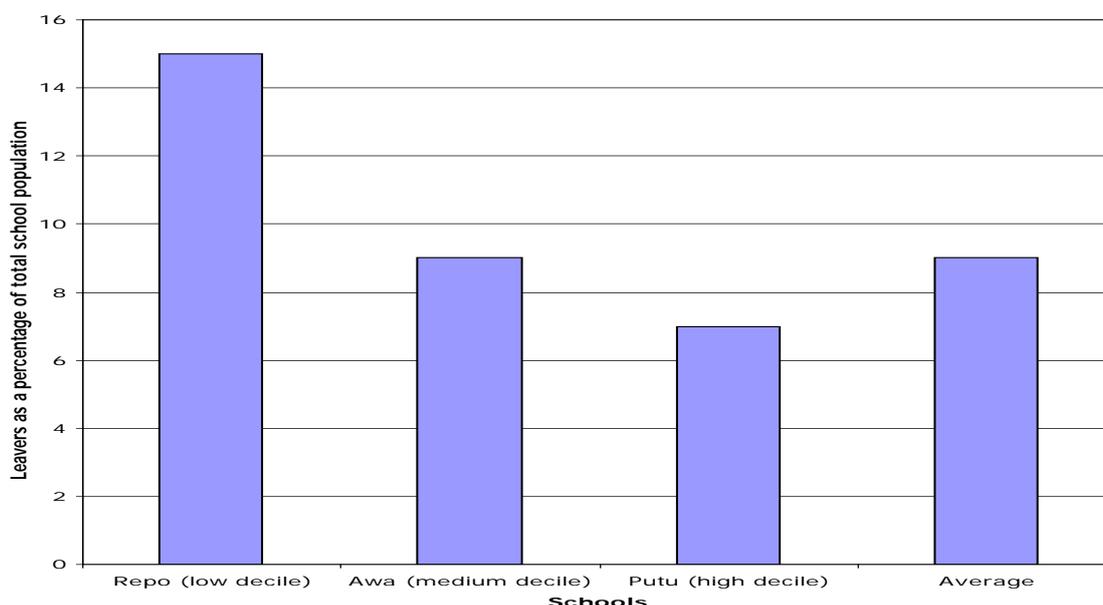
## **Patterns: Who Left, When, Where and Why?**

In Chapter 2, system level influences and specific site effects which might influence early school leaving were identified. A particular point of difference between this research and retrospective dropout studies is that here the aim was to place early leaving behaviour within the context of both place and time. Chronosystem effects are explored first. Then an analysis of findings from the Intentions Survey (supplemented with data from other sources) will establish what differences there were between the persisters and those who left school before the completion of the academic year in 2003.

### ***What is the Extent of the Dropout Problem in These Girls' Schools?***

The three schools enrolled a total population of 1396 senior students in 2003, from which 129 students left before final examinations commenced in November, giving an average drop out rate of 9.24%. The comparison of the three schools (Figure 2) indicated that the highest decile school (Putu) had the lowest drop out rate (6.63% of the senior school population), and the lowest decile rated school, Repo (14.8%), had the highest drop out rate. Awa (decile 4) had a drop out rate of (8.92%). This was an expected finding reflecting, in general, the socioeconomic status (SES) of the families from which the school drew its students. There was no relationship apparent between school size and retention, because the smallest school (Awa) had a drop out rate between the two larger schools.

Figure 2. The relationship between the percentage of senior school leavers and school decile.



The number of seniors who left before November 10, 2003 formed fewer than half of the total number of students who left the school eventually as recorded in the March 1 Ministry of Education Returns, 2004. This is because these data included Year 13 students who had completed their schooling, as well as other seniors who found employment, turned to tertiary training as an alternative to high school study, or who transferred out of the district.

Establishing exactly who had left<sup>125</sup> was one of the greatest frustrations in this case study. Many students return, fleetingly, at the beginning of the year but they do not stay on. Others just fail to return after the summer holidays. Most, however, do not complete official school leaving procedures. My research assistant, now a secondary teacher, explained the reason for this to me. She was talking about a Year 12 student in her class whom she had just found out was leaving:

*I wasn't surprised because she wasn't involved. There is so much they can do, so most of the year there is something. They cannot imagine leaving because they are so into the school. The ones who aren't, they are leaving. They keep it to themselves. The ones who left last year, I didn't know 'til they gave me their*

<sup>125</sup> This problem was exacerbated by the difficulty of establishing participation. The itinerant nature of some high school students was such that the leavers' lists produced by the schools did not match (a discrepancy of 15 students at one school) the rolls provided. Many students had stayed so little time that they had not even been allocated a form teacher by the time they came to leave.

*certificate*<sup>126</sup>. It seemed to me they didn't want counselling, for the teachers to say...They do not want a big deal to be made (pause), to be mocked by their friends. The ones who are sick of school, they want to go but they also know it's an early stage to be going...Sometimes you can tell a student is feeling like leaving. They just have less and less respect for the teachers and their work.

This extract points to two broad student perceptions of, and behaviour at, school: first, the perception of school as central in the lives of those who stay on, with behaviour problems signifying disengagement in potential dropouts; second, avoidance behaviour as a mechanism to deal with peer pressure and teacher expectations about staying on at school.

It was felt that the students who stayed on until the end of the year, sat their examinations but then failed to return in a subsequent year, were of a different category<sup>127</sup> to those students who returned to school as seniors but who left part-way through. Thus, this study reports only on those students who left school prior to November 10, 2003<sup>128</sup>.

### ***When Did They Leave? Time of Leaving and Other Chronosystem Effects***

Some students faded away from school, skipping the odd class initially then having increasing periods of absence until it became obvious to both themselves and the school that they would not be resuming studies.

*Well, I probably really left before September but that was just only letting go because the last term I never showed up anyway. I didn't sign out. I just stopped showing up and had nothing to do with them. I spoke with a couple of teachers. "So what's the point of staying here," the teachers said, so they said to leave. I*

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<sup>126</sup> They had been absent at the end of year graduation ceremony and failed to return the next year, so their awards were given to the form teacher for posting home. This was the first indication given to the form teacher, whose major duties were pastoral care of students, that one of her students was leaving school.

<sup>127</sup> Those who stayed on to complete the final assessments had taken steps to attain one of their goals in returning for another year of schooling, whereas many of the students who left part-way through the year had actually also planned to gain qualifications. There was no way of knowing what had been going on for those students who failed to return to school at the end of the summer holidays, despite their earlier intentions to continue with schooling.

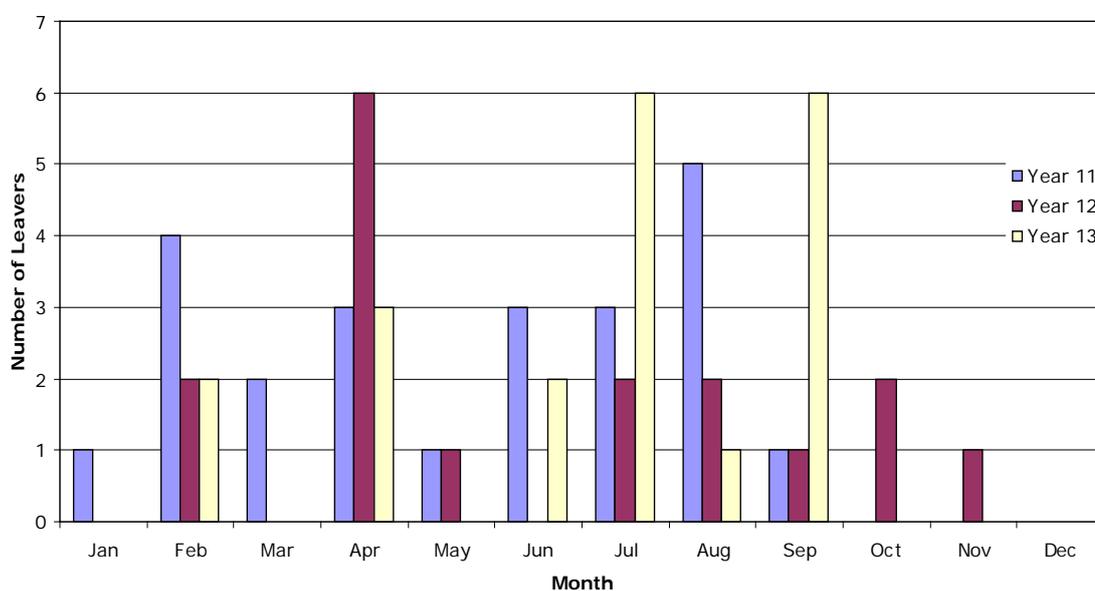
<sup>128</sup> Further, at the time of this study there was no way of either determining exactly what the total number of leavers was for each school, or of appropriately comparing the leavers rates across years, for a number of reasons: First, in 2003 the Ministry changed retention monitoring from a within year to a cohort approach; second, that year one school decided to submit an electronic return which was lost subsequently through a systems collapse and a manual count had to be re-done off school registers to get the data for this study.

*was just wasting time. [School] might have rung Mum up or something but me and Mum don't talk much, so....* (student #1388)

In many cases this did make it difficult to establish when a student had actually left. Based on the leaving dates provided by the school, there were identifiable peaks in the pattern of leaving times within each school, as illustrated by the graph (Figure 3) which shows results from Repo High School.

This school has been selected to illustrate the chronosystem effects because it had the greatest numbers of leavers. Each school had similar patterns, although the placement of the peaks and troughs varied according to local conditions. These patterns were lost when all three schools' data were combined. Leaver variations by level over time were the consequence of individual circumstances (birth date or employment availability, for example) rather than anything associated specifically with wider school chronosystem effects at that level.

Figure 3. Timing of leaving from Repo High over 2003.



At the beginning of the year there was a peak of early leavers who returned to school, perhaps reluctantly.

They left after a few weeks without really getting into the routines of school life: “[this] peak reason is because the dean is trying to sort out those who have been truant for a while” (focus group participant, Awa)<sup>129</sup>.

While really “naughty kids” were dealt with the ones who did not cause bother but who might be skipping a few classes could “hide” in the system until the deans had time to check attendance records, according to Putu focus group participants:

Teacher A: *I went through the ones with a high lack of attendance, “What are you doing here? You’ve just snuck under our radar.” It’s the time and energy to deal with this.*

Teacher B: *The slipping under the radar ones are not naughty in class, they’re late. You’re late 30 times, what are you doing here?*

Teacher C: *We are good at just giving them leaving forms—shape up or ship out.*

Teacher D: *They are not worth chasing round.*

It was thought that over Easter and the first term break (April) students who had not wanted to return to school anyway were perhaps more likely to leave, having had the holidays to reflect on their progress over the first term and subsequently to work on their parents to allow them to leave. This accounted for another peak in April.

By the end of term 2 (June/July) students had had some major assessments and received their first academic report,<sup>130</sup> giving rise to another peak in July/August where those who had not been doing well decided to leave:

*There were heaps, I think they left in August, September, I don’t know, Yeah August, September they all started to falling out of school ’cause there were heaps on the course that I was going to.* (student #2348).

This peak withdrawal activity was thought by staff to be associated with the passing of the school ball season and with the end of the sporting season for most winter codes, such as netball and soccer. Teachers agreed that this was a peak time but felt there were many reasons contributing to this, as this focus group conversation at Awa reflects:

Teacher A: *June peaks<sup>131</sup>, that’s when polytechnics pick up the kids.*

Teacher B: *Winter time is a time of hard decisions, students drop out and people feel*

<sup>129</sup> According to a senior dean at Awa:

*Another reason some [students] return (usually until March 1, encouraged by the school for funding) is that a parent on a benefit can get it for the whole summer holiday period (six to eight weeks) if the kid returns for a few weeks. I have come across that at Year 12/13 especially if the kid is the only one, or the youngest, so the parent becomes ineligible for the benefit when the kid leaves/ is working.*

<sup>130</sup> The timing differed slightly between the schools.

<sup>131</sup> This time corresponded with second semester intakes in the tertiary sector.

*less enthusiastic in terms of that, it's a time of lots of flu, [and problems with] relationships.*

Teacher C: *They leave after the school ball, they hang in after the rowing season, the time of the Maadi cup<sup>132</sup>.*

Teacher D: *After the school ball, Year 12s in particular, it's a huge social event.*

Teacher E: *A lot to leave behind too, it's a big social event.*

Teacher F: *They're finding their funding, they've got money to better fund, to go to poly and a two month course.*

Teacher G: *A few (...) have just life experience, trying to get a job before other school leavers go there.*

NCEA examination entries probably stimulate discussion at home about the cost of sitting and chances for success. As a dean at Awa High explained:

*It's a reality check for Year 12 at that time. They have a year and a half to go, they won't manage it. [It's] a huge step up. They've realised they have to work [at] this.*

Relatively few students left in term three. Those who did had already decided to leave and had been looking at other options, such as employment or tertiary training, for some time previously. Job opportunities depended on a number of factors, for example weather patterns, which determined the availability of seasonal work associated with the rural sector. Exosystem influences, stemming largely from the prevailing economic climate and attendant employment opportunities, can thus be seen to affect students' decisions to leave school. Many potential employees were typically released into the labour market in November, once school examinations were completed and university students became available for work adding to the July/August withdrawal peak:

*If there was a real concrete job in [the] offering, [I] might encourage [her] to leave now, before [the] mass exodus in November and hard to get a job. (focus group Repo)*

Most students from Repo (lower decile school) had already achieved beyond their parents expectations, the deputy principal explained, so parents were open to the idea of their daughter leaving school, whether they had employment or not:

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<sup>132</sup> It was noted that this point about rowing related more to the March peak.

*They would [leave] because that's when the parents left—so it comes back to expectations, or our experiences—because they could at 15 and these girls have to stay until they're 16.*

However, in families which were welfare dependant, a student's attendance at school post-16 became vital because this determined payments.

*I often find that their parents don't come to the fore until they turn 16 because the benefits are cut if the kids aren't at school and at 16, [parents] sort of just say, "Well do be careful dear, because when you're 16 we might decide we don't want you" and suddenly one thinks "She'll have to go to school, I can't [let her leave], my benefit's going to be cut." So suddenly, then the parents, the parents a[re] little bit late to get involved, 'cause they've had three years, well, three and a half coming and going while it suits them. All of a sudden when crunch time comes it's panic. And it amazes me how parents pop up when kids turn 16. (home liaison officer, Repo High)*

The timing of leaving school can be seen to be dependant on a number of factors, many of which are outside the school's control such as changes to welfare regulations and availability of employment opportunities. However, there were factors identified with the timing of leaving which the school *does* have control over, including the scheduling of school events (such as the school ball) and offering of extracurricular activities (such as sports) valued by students.

### ***Who Left? Characteristics of Leavers Compared with the Total Senior School Population***

In Chapter 1 the review of international drop out and retention research revealed a common pattern, with up to 50 per cent of students dropping out before completing four years of high school in OECD<sup>133</sup> countries (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation [CERI], 1995). Student retention and achievement was found to be "highly correlated with ethnicity and socioeconomic status" (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 30). Many New Zealand schools that serve the concentrations of urban poor "face the same problems as inner-city schools elsewhere" (ibid.), so it was of great interest to see whether the three schools participating in this research evidenced similar trends.

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<sup>133</sup> OECD: Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

## **Ethnicity**

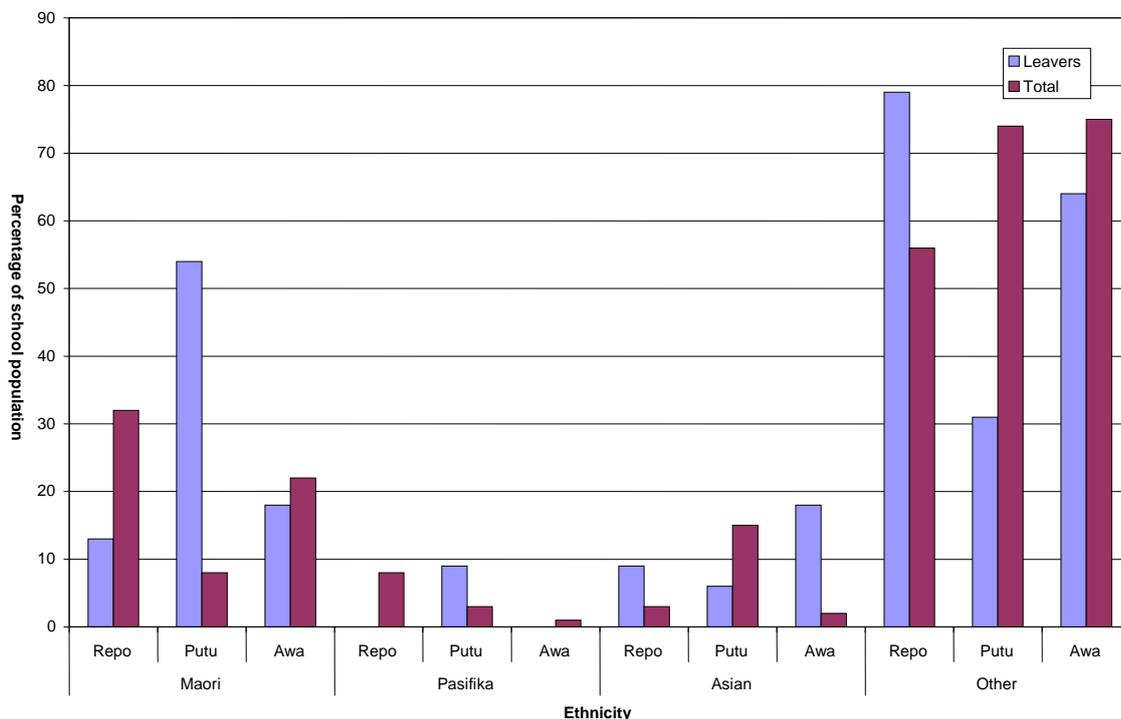
High schools with large proportions of ethnic minorities had particularly poor retention rates, international studies suggested. Data provided in Chapter 2 substantiated Fiske and Ladd's claim that "Maori and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Pacific Island students are more likely than Pakeha to leave school early" (ibid.) and to underachieve in comparison with their peers. In the present study it was found that each school's student population had a different ethnic mix and none of these schools were similar in size, location, or social and physical settings. From the 2004 March 1 MoE return it appeared that 31 per cent of the leavers were Maori but only the lowest decile school had a Maori participation rate of this order, suggesting the need to disaggregate the data by school.

### ***Repo High School ethnicity***

At Repo High the majority of students were of New Zealand European descent, as shown in Figure 4 which compares the ethnicity of leavers against the whole school population for each school site. At Repo the percentage of Maori was gradually rising (from 30 per cent in 2002, to 32 per cent in 2003 and then to 36 percent in 2005). The Pasifika students made up 10 per cent of the school roll in 2005, and other nationalities five per cent, whereas in 2002 these categories combined comprised only five per cent. Thus the Pasifika students were also increasing both in numbers and as a proportion of the school population over the period of the study.

As explained in the introduction to this chapter the education "reforms," which allowed for greater parental choice, contributed to the growth in the proportions of students from ethnic minority backgrounds at Repo High School. The principal suggested that the rise in the proportions of Maori and Pacific Island was due to the "*lower intake and the decision of the two private schools in our area to take an increased intake of day girls*" which it seems were predominately European. Beaven (2002, p. 113) maintained that "regardless of ethnicity, families that are (or aspire to be) better off, make decisions on the perceived socioeconomic status (SES) of students attending the school, choosing to bypass low decile schools that may be closer." The ethnic mix of students becomes for many parents a shorthand for quality, and in this way increases in Maori and Pasifika students can create a white-flight response: "The higher a school's initial proportion of minorities, the less likely it was to attract the sort of students who would raise its decile ranking" (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 199).

Figure 4. Ethnicity of leavers compared to total school populations.



Note. This graph compares the ethnicity of students who left over the 2003 academic year with the total school population ethnic composition from March 1 school return to Ministry of Education.

Looking at the school's leaving data, within the context of Maori representation in the overall school population, initially gave the impression that Maori and Pasifika students were not over-represented amongst the leavers (Figure 4). School staff thought this may be to do with the range of strategies, including leadership and mentoring programmes, they had put in place in an effort to enhance retention and achievement of these minority groups. However, a staff member of this city's alternative schooling centre<sup>134</sup> considered that many Maori and Pasifika students had "faded out" of school before they reached age 16. She suggested that the shortage of seasonal labour in the area was a factor affecting Maori and Pasifika school attendance and, ultimately, retention. This was also the view conveyed by school staff at the focus group.

Teacher A: *It's a horticultural area, some very skilled people who are itinerant but this is their work.*

<sup>134</sup>One of the students on the programme was the sister of a leaver participating in this study: Personal communication, D. Riley, June 14, 2005.

Teacher B: *They think of [work] as six weeks in the pub tavern, it's seasonal, as an immediate thing. Their friends survive on seasonal work, they're used to it.*

Teacher C: *Instant gratification, next week's pay cheque is awesome—they don't think about six weeks time. They don't understand the skill thing and graduation rates. [They'll be] aged 45 and still on \$10 per hour.*

Teacher D: *They don't have a career plan, no ambition, it's a survival plan.*

Congruent with the findings of previous researchers (Finley, 1992; Jones, 1991) there was also evidence of “cooling out” undesirable students, as the story told by this young Maori girl (student #2227) illustrates. She planned to be a chef and “*was interested in food and technology and got straight A's in that.*” She was working part-time as a checkout operator after school in Year 11, and liked to have a smoke in the hour between leaving school and starting work.

*I was suspended twice last year and then the year before that I was suspended about four times for having cigarettes in my bag all the time 'cause they always used to check my bag and I always got snapped. Yeah.*

One of these occasions had been an after-school event.

*I was having a smoke on the way home from school...I still had my skirt on but I had mufti clothes on top of them...walking to the shops for my mum....My mum knew I smoked then, so she didn't really care.*

There were also problems in class to contend with:

*They were always sick of me so, like, made me work twice as hard (laughingly). I was always getting put in the hallway. “Get on with your work.” So I wasn't really in my class, I was nearly always near my classroom, being near the door, or not being there at all.*

She admitted that she had contributed to the problem:

*I had a bad attitude towards teachers. I had bad anger management towards teachers. I used to swear at them if they bugged me...would deal to them, swear at them, tell them to go away. I didn't care as I hated school.*

The deputy principal delivered an ultimatum on finding her with cigarettes in her bag once again:

*“Oh, you're in trouble, you need either, you have to leave, or get expelled.” I said, “Oh, I'll leave” and walked out that same day and never been back since.*

This young Maori girl had just turned 16 when she left school. According to her, lots of her friends had left school at about the same time, and some had been expelled the year previously, suggesting that the contention that many Maori and Pacific Island students leave school prior to reaching the minimum leaving age may have some validity. What was particularly interesting about this student's story was that she had attended a private school prior to enrolling at Repo. She felt that she "*never actually fitted in there,*" and ultimately she and many of the other Maori students had "*left because of racism and stuff over the Maori students.*" These remarks suggest that Maori and Pacific Island students may have a much more complex set of issues to deal with at school than their white, middle class counterparts.

### ***Putu High School ethnicity***

Three quarters of the Putu school population were of New Zealand European or Pakeha decent; almost 10 per cent were New Zealand Maori, slightly over 10 per cent were Asian, and three per cent of students came from all the different Pacific Islands. Putu had high overall retention rates in the senior school but a disproportionate number of the leavers (more than 60 per cent) were Maori and Pacific Island students. Only one Maori student was available to be interviewed (student #1395) and she left to join a polytechnic foundation course, which she thought would give her a better grounding for nursing than another year at school. So, like many other leavers from this school, although she dropped out of school, she did not drop out of the education system.

The number of Asian leavers from Putu, and indeed from all three schools, was very low. This categorisation mixed New Zealand Chinese and full-fee-paying international students, which were quite different groups in their command of English (a factor affecting achievement at school) and in motivation to study. Many international seniors returned home mid-way through the New Zealand academic year, in order to arrive for the start of the university year in their homeland.

### ***Awa High School ethnicity***

The very small numbers of students represented in the Asian data explain the seemingly high proportion of Asian leavers from Awa, the smallest of all the schools. Six senior international students left to return home, accounting for the seemingly high proportion of Asian leavers from this school in Figure 4. At Awa 19 per cent of those who left were Maori, half of whom left from Year 11. This school showed retention

rates that reflected quite closely the proportions of students by ethnicity across the total school.

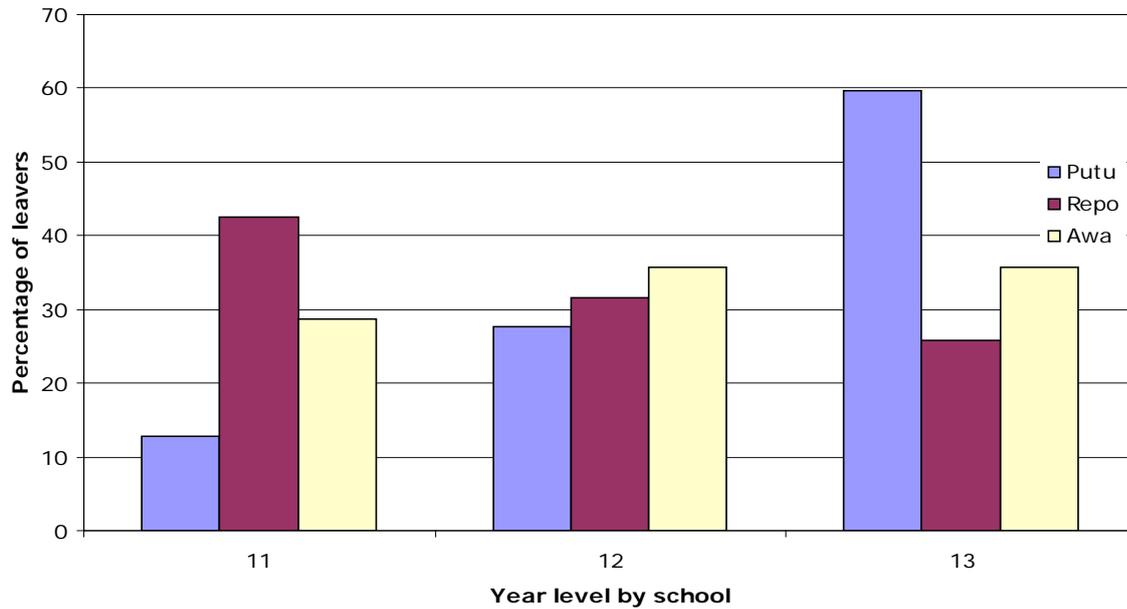
### ***Leavers' ethnicity patterns within and across the schools***

Aggregated data for ethnic leavers reflected national retention trends, with more Maori and Pasifika students leaving school before completing the programme of study for which they were enrolled. However, inter-site variation, the small numbers involved, and the dangers of homogenising such data were highlighted. The achievement of these minority groups is a topic picked up in a subsequent section (qualifications of leavers). There, analysis is based on the whole cohort of leavers from 2003 (not just those leaving before examinations), providing a greater numerical base from which to draw conclusions.

### **How Old Were the Early Leavers, and at What Levels Were They Studying?**

Overseas studies had suggested that students who dropped out from school were more likely than their peers to have been grade retained, and consequently to be older than their classmates. It was difficult to ascertain information about the ages and levels of students in this study because not all respondents completed the data gathering questions on the Intentions Survey (these were last on the form) and school records did not contain complete birth date records. However, judging from the students interviewed it would appear that this was not the case in New Zealand. Without national achievement benchmarks at primary school level students progress with their age groups. This social progression is usually continued at secondary level, with students able to study multi-level courses where applicable.

Figure 5. Leaving students by school and year level.



Of the total number of senior students who left school in or before November in the present study, 37 (6.72%) were in Year 11, a further 40 (8.97%) were in Year 12, and 52 were in Year 13 (13.68%). As shown in Figure 5 there was some inter-site variation, with proportionately more students leaving the lower decile school (Repo) and leaving earlier in their schooling. Leavers from Awa (middle decile school) were almost equally distributed across all year levels, with the lowest drop out rate being in Year 11, then slightly more in Year 12 and the highest proportion leaving from Year 13. In contrast, the highest decile school (Putu) had few students leave and most who did had completed at least Year 11: Few left without some progress towards qualifications as shown in Table 4, and as discussed in the next section.

## Qualifications of Leavers

The year 2002 was the first time NCEA had run across all state secondary schools in Year 11. This point has to be considered when comparing the highest qualifications of all<sup>135</sup> leavers for 2003 (Table 4).

Table 4

### *Leavers 2003: Highest Qualification on Leaving*

<i>School</i>	<i>Highest qualifications by NCEA Level (L) gained by leavers in 2003</i>			
	Little or none*	Yr 11 leavers <sup>1</sup> with L1	Yr 12 leavers <sup>2</sup> with L2	Yr 13 leavers <sup>3</sup> with L3
Putu (decile 10)	0.5	85.8	80.3	1.9
Repo (decile 2)	13.7	46.2	7.3	0.5
Awa (decile 4)	15.0	46.4	46.2	1.2

Note. These data are derived from that provided to the Ministry of Education by schools on March 1 of the year following the 2003 examinations.

\* Percentage of leavers in 2003 with little or no formal attainment.

<sup>1</sup> As a percentage of 2001 Year 9 entrants.

<sup>2</sup> As a percentage of 2000 Year 9 entrants.

<sup>3</sup> As a percentage of 1999 Year 9 entrants. These figures are low because UEBS was still the main qualification offered in 2003.

### ***Putu student achievement***

Achievement data for 2003<sup>136</sup> showed that high percentages of students at Putu in Years 11 and 12 gained Levels 1 and 2 in the National Certificates of Educational Achievement. Overall achievement was “*well above national levels in the senior school*” (ERO report). Only a small percentage of the original Year 13 cohort gained a Level 3 qualification but this was a pattern consistent across all three schools because UEBS was still the main qualification offered at this level in 2003. At Putu High 86 per cent of those students entering the UEBS examination gained an award, with 75 “A”

<sup>135</sup> These national data provide a context for later discussion of the early leavers: These data include students who left within the academic year (the focus of this study) together with those who left before March 1 in a subsequent year.

<sup>136</sup> The data has been altered slightly to protect the identity of participating schools. However the alterations are consistent with the general findings.

bursaries and 45 “B” bursaries awarded. Twenty five students gained scholarship passes.

### ***Repo student achievement***

An article in Repo’s school newspaper reported that the school was “*second in the district*” in terms of students gaining unit standards and achievement standards. This was a source of pride for this low decile school. The school reported an 80 per cent achievement rate at Year 11 in 2003, with half of those entering meeting requirements for the Level 1 National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA). This figure represented students gaining unit standards and/or achievement standards (achieve, merit, or excellence) as a percentage of the entries at that level. At Year 12 the school did not appear to do so well, with only a quarter of students completing requirements for the Level 2 NCEA, although a further 15 per cent completed requirements for Level 1 NCEA, illustrating the increased flexibility for multi-level study which the new system facilitated. It was a time of transition between the old and the new systems, and some repeating students at Year 12 would have had Sixth Form Certificate grades as well. But there were no nationally comparable statistics for that year that includes all these data. The overall pass rate in UEBS was 75 per cent of those who entered, with several subject scholarships and a total of 25 “A” and “B” bursaries awarded. “*Bursary results were also very pleasing when compared to our decile,*” the principal of Repo said.

However, the percentages achieving by year do not take into account retention between levels in the senior school. Just under half of the number of Year 11 students who started Repo High two years prior gained a Level 1 NCEA qualification in 2003 but fewer than one tenth of the Year 12 students who started this school three years earlier gained a Level 2 qualification, as shown in Table 4. These data present a different picture then, from within year results.

### ***Awa student achievement***

In contrast the mid-decile school, Awa, appeared to have higher retention rates into the senior school. Just under half of the number of Year 11 students who started school two years prior gained a Level 1 NCEA qualification and, similarly, just under half of the Year 12 students starting school three years earlier gained a Level 2 qualification. No data were available from the school about those gaining UEBS qualifications. The higher retention resulted in a greater range of alternative senior

programmes, including psychology, media studies, drama, skills for living, tourism, and childcare, implemented as part of a strategy to increase retention through the provision of programmes designed to cater for the greater diversity of “non-academic” seniors. Many of these “local” programmes had their own assessment regimes (for example, ASDAN<sup>137</sup>, commonly called the Youth Award Scheme), only some of which contributed to NCEA, thus affecting the school’s “academic profile” when compared with other schools offering a more traditional range of programmes. The wider implications inherent in the increased flexibility that NCEA allowed will be discussed further in the next section.

### ***Qualifications of leavers by ethnicity***

A breakdown of students’ highest qualifications on leaving (Table 4) showed patterns of achievement consistent with national trends. Maori students consistently lagged behind their European counterparts in the qualifications stakes, as illustrated in Table 5, which is based solely on the Level 2 NCEA results for each school<sup>138</sup>. The low numbers of Pacific Islanders and Asian students at some schools did not enable further conclusions to be drawn. Similarly a national study conducted by Harkness, Murray, Parkin, and Dalgety (2005, p. 22) found difficulties in conducting meaningful analysis—that is disaggregating “Pasifika” data to reveal different patterns<sup>139</sup> of achievement related to the various groups because of the small population sizes.

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<sup>137</sup> ASDAN: Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network. Subsequent to conducting this study, this award has now been accredited onto the New Zealand NQF and higher levels have standard credit equivalents.

<sup>138</sup> Level 1 comparisons by ethnicity were not available for 2003.

<sup>139</sup> Probably one of the more useful suggestions put forward by these researchers was the use of “candidates” to measure achievement more accurately (that is, students who have achieved at least one credit on the NQF) because they found that many schools did not submit results for students who did not achieve any credit. They concluded that Pasifika candidates were less likely than non-Pasifika candidates to gain qualifications at all levels of schooling. This finding is consistent with previous studies. However, they also noted, “the number of candidates within all but one Pasifika ethnic group has increased since 2002. The growth in these groups has been much larger than actual roll growth, indicating increased participation in gaining credits on the NQF” (ibid., p. 5).

Table 5

*Ethnicity of Leavers with NCEA Level 2 in 2003*

School	Percentage of leavers with Level 2 NCEA or higher			
	European	Maori	Pasifika	Asian
Repo	64.7	35	50	100
Awa	59.8	46.7	25	100
Putu	85.5	66.7	100	92.7

Note. These data are derived from that provided to the Ministry of Education by schools on March 1, 2004, the year following the 2003 examinations.

The expected correlation of school decile rating with student achievement was evident, with the higher decile school (Putu) outperforming the two schools with lower decile ratings. However, ethnicity factors and retention rates complicate the picture of student achievement told by these data. It seemed that as senior school retention improved, as at Awa High, the diversity of those entering national qualifications increased. The challenge for schools in increasing senior school retention is to find relevant programmes which engage students in a meaningful way, with some semblance of academic success.

### **Returning to School to Get a Good Education: A Wider Range of Courses**

The introduction of NCEA allowed schools to shape different courses to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse senior population. In this new system, students needed to make course choices in what used to be thought of as core curriculum subjects such as English and mathematics, not just in the option areas. Consistent with the work of Hipkins and Hodgen (2004, p. 146) the intentions survey results showed that there was a wide range of subjects available to students in the senior school (more than 50 across all three schools), ranging from conventional subjects, such as English, mathematics and science, to vocational offerings such as tourism, childcare and office skills. In subjects with large student cohorts a range of “locally-redesigned” ability-targeted courses were found to be offered, such as practical mathematics (what the students termed “*cabbage maths*”) and alternative English programmes such as communications English.

However, because the NCEA structure allowed schools to develop curricula to meet local needs, even subjects with the same name did not necessarily contain the same type, number, or even level, of unit or achievement standards. Thus it was difficult to quantify how many leavers were studying in each of the three main types of programmes identified by Hipkins et al. (2004) and described in Chapter 2.

Although there was greater flexibility with NCEA and senior students had a wide range of subjects to choose from, Hipkins et al. found that “traditional-discipline” courses tended to predominate. Not surprisingly, this study found that leavers, as well as those persisting with studies, had enrolled in such traditional study programmes: Year 11 student #2324 and Year 12 student #2126 were examples of leavers enrolled in six or seven academic subjects, each of which would have contributed credit towards NCEA had they completed the course.

Contrary to the stereotype of dropouts as academic failures, and as losers, some early leavers’ study programmes and academic reports indicated they must have achieved a high level of success in previous years. Indeed one Year 13 leaver, student #1123, had a full academic programme and initially stated her reason for returning to school as “[I] wanted to get bursary.” Another of the leavers, Student, #1395, was one of the few who identified as Maori. She was a Year 12 student who had achieved about 120 credits towards NCEA in Year 11, and was enrolled in six academic subjects that she had chosen to meet the criteria for entry to nursing.

Some students had what Hipkins et al. described as “contextually-focused” programmes. These offered a reduced number of credits for which assessment was predominantly internally assessed. These courses focused typically on skills and practical application, and many offered credits earned from work experience through a state-funded scheme known as “Gateway.” Gateway funding was not available<sup>140</sup> at the higher decile school, which teachers thought was a pity as “*the ones who would benefit cannot do it*”. Other student programmes incorporated STAR courses but generally these were not well integrated into the senior school timetable. Consequently staff expressed concern when students missed time from their scheduled subjects to attend these polytechnic programmes:

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<sup>140</sup> From 2006 Gateway was made available to all state and integrated secondary schools, according to the NZQA principal’s nominee at Awa High School.

*The only problem with STAR is it takes people out of class, so they get left behind, and of course they are then less successful.* (senior dean, Awa)

A number of students who left school had done so after they had a taste of academic success and a different style of teaching on STAR courses.

*Going away to [the] STAR Course for two days made me realise you get treated differently—feel like an adult. I did really well in it. The first test we did, I got nine out of ten. I beat everyone else, even the adult students who were doing it full-time. I suppose it's because I've never been in a restaurant area before. It was something I could do well. Yes. And when I was at school I didn't feel I had any skill, I just about felt useless so I gave up in the end and then I ended up getting "Best Student" at the course and stuff like that. Yeah. I was very happy with it.* (student #1388)

The senior students in the study conducted by Hipkins et al. reported selecting subjects "they expected to enjoy" and ones that they would find "challenging and interesting" (2004, p. 3). This had reverberations in the present study, where many of the students who left school early complained that they were "*just bored at school*" (student #2348).

*[I] found it boring and repetitive and nothing to keep me interested. Not much fun. School, I just hated it. I needed something new and fresh in the curriculum to kind of stimulate me, and I wasn't getting it. I ended up sitting in class so bored, like bored to tears, and I felt I just wasn't gaining anything through it all. I didn't have any problems with the teachers, they're just doing their job and they do a great job but I was just so bored by the end of it.* (student #1123)

Staff also reported that students moaned "*it's so boring*" and that this response was apparently "*fairly typical of students who get to that level.*" This finding was somewhat surprising, given the range of subject choices available in the senior school.

However, the range of subjects advertised as being offered in a school's prospectus was not necessarily available to all students because of timetable clashes. Discussion with Hipkins<sup>141</sup> reinforced my own experience of school timetablers, whom it seemed made assumptions about "academic" subjects and "practical" subjects and

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<sup>141</sup> Comments made at workshop session, *NCEA and challenges for the school curriculum: Recent research findings* at the National Secondary Schools' Qualifications Conference, July 19-20, 2004 at Massey University College of Education.

who should take them. As a result many students did not end up with their ideal programme. In one school Japanese was put on in the same option line as tourism, for example, yet many careers in the tourism and hospitality field might find such a combination of cross disciplinary knowledge useful. In another school physics was offered in the same timetable line as art, so students with aspirations to become architects would not be able to meet the entry criteria for university level studies in this field at that school. Whilst the system had inbuilt potential for flexibility the reality, especially in small schools with low numbers of seniors, was that there was not the degree of choice it might have been assumed was available.

Another limiting factor on student choice was the literacy and numeracy requirement to gain NCEA, so programmes usually included English and mathematics subjects. As one teacher pointed out, students often failed to see the relevance of these subjects to their current lives or future careers:

*There is a lack of relevance, they can't see the greater picture—you never know when you'll use this. [For example] use of maths, it's learning to think. (Repo focus group)*

Parents too thought that school could do more to offer relevant programmes but, unlike their daughters, they did think that English and mathematics were a necessary part of a good education. In one parent's perception, however, numeracy skills were differentiated from pure mathematics—it was the practical application of mathematics to daily living that this parent saw as important.

*They're at school to get an education. Teach them life skills, things like...I don't know but teach them life skills. What [should] they do? So much English. Do anything you want, things like Algebra and all that, what good is that? You need English, maths, at school, whatever the case but sometimes history and all that—what a waste of time. I wish there were classes at school where they're learning how to survive in the real world. Need to do, maybe in the third form, get them thinking about a career then, and working towards it, understand, so that when you're ready to leave school, you're actually prepared to just walk out there.” (mother of student #3167)*

This mother's comments reflect the “simple model of transition-to-labour market” (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. xi) career pathways thinking which has dominated schools' careers service provision in the past. In this traditional view, information and advice enable students to match their strengths and interests with a

particular occupation. Motivation to stay on at school is provided through the stronger links of the subjects studied with a longer term goal in this mother's thinking, although she hints at a wider conceptualisation of careers development, a point explored further later on in this chapter.

A slightly different view was provided by a teacher at the Putu focus group, who felt that making subjects "relevant" was a key aspect of all good teaching: "*It boils down to good teaching.*" However, "*the pace of what we do...*" did not allow time for teachers to assist students in making these connections. The high number of students in some senior classes did not help the situation.

*It's the one teacher to 30 kids in the Year 12 Bio—there isn't enough time to help. They can't understand, they can't see the relevance. You can't give them the help they need, the curriculum is so tight you're limited. Not got the time to stop. It's just so driven. That's one of the reasons.*

As another explained:

*They choose a course they are interested in but [the] requirements are huge—so something they enjoy, it becomes a chore. Art, photography and textiles—it's too much assessment and not enough processing time.*

Teachers at the high decile school (Putu) reported that many students were "*starting to feel angry*" in the senior school as "*the majority of students are going on to tertiary study and so subjects are set up for that. So it's difficult for students who don't feel the same*" (Putu focus group).

Smyth and Hattam's Australian study of 200 young people, school leavers and those seriously contemplating leaving, also found that schooling "endorsed forms of assessment and a credential that was about going to university, and hence not inclusive of their needs" (2004, p. 191). They concluded that the Australian system needed to place less emphasis on curriculum, assessment and credentialing approaches that sort and select, and more emphasis on ones that provide pathways for other educational options for young people" (ibid., p. 194). In theory, the New Zealand system has the potential to do just that. However, the "perception that credits gained from achievement standards have more value than those gained from unit standards" is restricting the potential for curriculum innovation (Hipkins et al., 2004, p. 4).

The capability to provide the types of pathways envisaged by Smyth and Hattam is inherent in the New Zealand system but ensuring that the prerequisites for higher education are met also acts to limit some students' options. Experience indicates that

most deans would counsel students against programmes with specific employment outcomes, advising students instead to keep the option of further study open. The economic situation in today's highly technical and rapidly changing world is so uncertain that programmes which lead to specific employment outcomes may limit flexibility for career advancement or future employability, a senior dean (Awa) explained. The question of offering subjects with relevance to specific employment was a non-issue in cities where there were not good employment prospects anyway:

*There's no motivation you know, like when you're at school you say, if you work hard you get a good job [but] there aren't any jobs, so...(home liaison officer, Repo)*

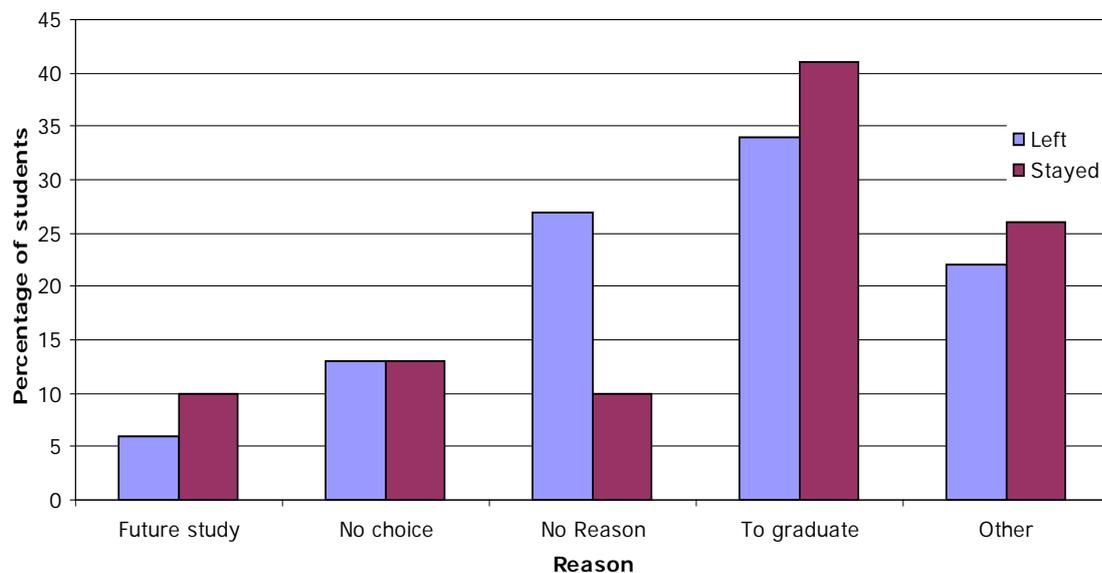
The traditional view of careers necessitated that both student and parent have access to informed advice about subject and assessment choices, and about occupation and training requirements. However, the changing labour market has implications for the nature of advice and skill development which students require in preparation for leaving school. These aspects are revisited later in this chapter.

### ***Motivation to Return for Further Study in the Senior School***

The Intentions Survey asked what had made the student return to school for a further year. Interestingly for the majority it was aspects associated with the value of education (Figure 6). Some examples from students' responses are:

- *“Get a better education”*
- *“To know more than last year”*
- *“It would look good on my record”*
- *“To learn more”*
- *“Gain qualifications”*
- *“Get better grades”*

Figure 6. Reasons given by students for returning to school in 2003



What was particularly interesting was that students citing the value of education as a reason for returning were just as likely to leave school as to stay on and complete the year. Similarly, students who said they had no choice but to return to school (“*Mother/Father/Parents/Grandparents made me*” or “*Because I had to*” or “*no choice*”) on the face of it were undifferentiated in regard to leaver status. However, an analysis by school showed that students in the medium and high decile schools whose caregivers had made them return were almost twice as likely to stay on as to leave. It may be that mother made them return to school but she also made them stay on and finish the year. Caregiver influence did not make much difference in the lower decile school; this is an interesting situation when put together with parents’ views of NCEA which also showed decile differentiation. Parents of students in lower decile schools were shown by Hipkins and Hodgen to be strongly supportive of NCEA but they were “more likely to disagree that the school had kept them well informed about the NCEA” (2004, p. 147). However, the numbers involved here were small, and the study was not repeated over a consecutive year, so this conclusion is tentative. A further opportunity to explore the influence of parents is provided through in-depth analysis of leavers’ stories in Chapter 5.

The students most likely to leave were those who had no motivation to return (i.e., gave no reason for returning, indicated by no response to this part of the survey or by responses such as “*no idea*” or “*undecided*”). Those needing to return to meet the

requirements for further study were more likely to stay on. This was not an unexpected finding, and one congruent with New Zealand research into subject choice. Needing to take a subject for their future plans was important for most of the students surveyed in the Learning Curves project (Hipkins, Vaughan, with Beals, & Ferral, 2005, p. 19). But subject choice was not just about the intrinsic interest of the subject. The influence of the teacher was important, and it was also a big factor mentioned by leavers interviewed in this study. This aspect is explored later in Chapter 5. Academic success is associated with a feeling of belonging and, together with social integration into the wider life of the school, it is an important factor in high school retention. These factors are considered further in the next section.

### **Interests as Indicators of Integration**

Many theories have been developed to account for the tertiary drop out phenomenon which had been widely researched long before drop out became popularly conceived as a “problem” at high school level. Two tertiary drop out theories which helped throw some light on the influence of the school context were the integration theory (Kember, 1989; Tinto, 1975), and investment drop out models (Bean, 1980, 1985; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Schell & Thornton, 1985). Although their origins are different a convergence of ideas from these two theories is apparent, with lack of commitment arising from not being socialised to “fit” in (Bean, 1985) being similar to that arising from a lack of academic or social “integration” in Tinto’s (1975) model.

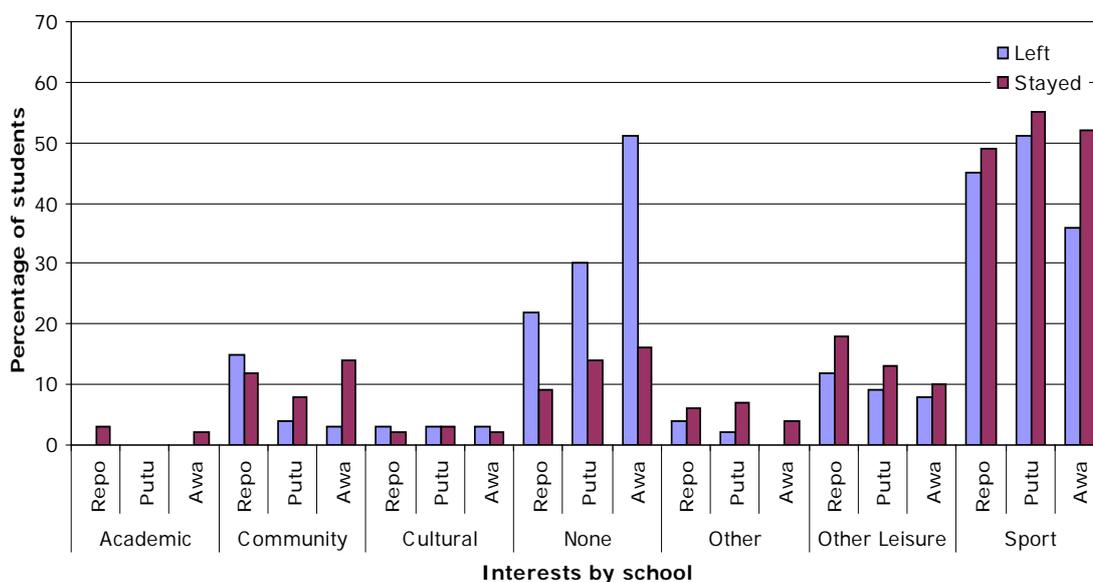
A relationship between the decile rating of schools and the achievement of students was shown by way of highest qualification attained on leaving school in Table 4. Students who left school with low levels of qualifications could be assumed to have been experiencing academic problems. However, some of the students’ stories in this study show that this was not always the case. For example student #1401 left school half way through Year 12 with some credits at Level 3 (at her age she would normally have been studying at Level 2), after successfully gaining “*very pleasing results*” (Teacher’s comment on report) in the year prior–Year 11.

*In terms of her intellectual abilities, she was more than capable of [going on to university] but she kind of moved into it down a pathway that she personally felt comfortable with. She’d grown out of school. She was very intelligent, you know.*  
(deputy principal of Putu)

Student #1123 gained five School Certificate passes and 85 per cent for English in Year 11 but by Year 13 she had “*grown out of it. Felt [I] had learned the same thing for five years—it was the school routine that I started hating. I hung out with older people. I’d matured a lot. It didn’t mean anything to me any more.*” Teachers at the Putu focus group cited other examples: “*She’s just totally outgrown school, Year 13 and very able, a bit of a ratbag. Approved for provisional entry [to degree programme].*” For these very able students, their lack of achievement was an indicator of their lack of engagement with the academic side of school rather than the cause of it.

Engagement with extracurricular activities was another indicator of integration into the wider life of school. An analysis of students’ interests showed that there was a huge range of opportunities for students in every school (almost 90 activities were named), and that many students were involved in more than one activity. Sport was the most popular activity in all three schools, with netball cited the most frequently. For the purposes of establishing a crude indicator of integration it was assumed that participation in any one activity was an indication of some level of integration. Therefore a comparison of “leavers” and “stayers” (students who were retained in school until the end of the academic year) was made on this basis. The results by school are summarised in the Figure 7. The codes (Appendix F) were derived from the student data; they were not predetermined. A greater proportion of leavers than stayers had no stated interests at school. In particular it would seem that students who played sport were less likely to leave than those who had no interests, although this effect was not as noticeable in the high decile school where leavers and stayers seemed more similar in respect of sports participation. It must be noted that the relatively low drop out rate within a year across all schools (129 in total) yielded very small numbers in some categories but this was not a factor in this main finding because approximately half of the total number of leavers gave no interests at school.

Figure 7. Main interests by school and student status.



An interesting observation made by staff was that sports was the only reason for some students staying on at school (*“Sport— this was the only thing that kept them coming along,”* Repo focus group). Once the netball or soccer season finished, then they left, a point made in the analysis of chronosystem effects at the end of this section. Engagement with extra curricular activities appeared to be a powerful influence for retention, particularly for those students in lower decile schools:

*She wagged a whole lot of school. Well, just didn’t come, and her mother had great difficulty persuading her to come and finish. Always came on soccer days. Was the best goal scorer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> XI. When soccer finished, she finished, went away.* (home liaison officer, Repo)

Putu, the higher decile school, was a *“fairly cultured school”* where *“most have involvement,”* and certainly *“sports”* was the reason given by student #1401 for returning to school in Year 12. However, staff at the focus group reported that some parents thought that sports diverted attention from academic work: *“Mum won’t let me do this because my school work comes first.”* In Pacific Island families, it was suggested that *“Mum won’t let me because she doesn’t want to get out of bed early on winter mornings.”* Staff recognised that *“if they are committed to school they’ll be less problems,”* so they were concerned at how to overcome parental opposition. Similarly staff suggested that many girls stayed on until the school ball, which was in August but then left afterwards. This was also mentioned by students.

*And I'd definitely, and yeah, definite I was going away at the end of 5<sup>th</sup> form. But when I started fifth form I changed my mind a bit at the beginning of the year and I was kind of thinking, maybe I should stay so that I can go to the ball and to see if I could, like, start over.* (Student #2286)

It was apparent that the timing of leaving was strongly associated with the cycle of school events, mediated through the level of integration that students experienced within the school setting.

Integration theory suggests that students will not stay on if they are not actively engaged in the life of the school, and would leave early, whereas students leaving for other reasons might stay on until later that year. This notion seemed to be supported by a number of participants<sup>142</sup> in this study who left as soon as they were legally able.

- *“Well my birthday’s on the 30<sup>th</sup>, so I decided I’d leave as soon as I turned 16.”* (student #2286)
- *“It was the day after my sixteenth birthday. (Pause) I wanted to leave ON my sixteenth birthday but the bloody dean wouldn’t let me.”* (student #2324)
- Another student had returned to Year 11 only because she was not at that time 16: *“The law says I had to. Boring. Had other things to do.”* (student #2227)

Some left before the legal leaving age, although they did not formally withdraw, just stopped attending school, as was the case of student #2348 who had been *“wagging too much. Only cared about my boyfriend. I couldn’t get up for school. Yeah, I was getting sick of school. ’Cause I was like, missing out on things in my other world.”* The pull of life beyond school often resulted in truancy and consequently, school discipline actions, as this same student’s story showed: *“...then I caught up into boys at 4th form and that’s when I started slipping away.”* This student had started off being socially integrated into school and had loved her sports.

*I had lots of, like, friends. Awesome to hang out with them. And what else, sports. I love sports. Like everything. Volleyball, softball, touch, rugby, netball. Every sports I love them. (...) happy mostly—everyone at school. I just was enjoying it. Like I just wanted to go everyday.*

Later she had begun to struggle academically, eventually concluding that school was *“a bit too hard.”* She explained: *“I loved the subjects but it was the homework.”* This story supports the notion that both social and academic integration are necessary to

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<sup>142</sup> Twelve of the 29 participants fitted this description, and most were from the two lower decile schools.

ensure persistence but it also illustrates well the complex inter-relationship between this student and her proximal settings. She had strong friendship ties to the school; she got on well with some of the teachers: *“My favourite teacher was Mrs [name] because she knew how to joke. Just entertaining, made me wanna learn ’cause she made it look fun.”* Initially she seemed to have made a good transition into high school, to be well integrated, although she did not find the school work easy. She would get numerous detentions for failing to do homework, and then would not attend school to avoid completing them. In Year 11 outside attractions, *“a boyfriend of several years her senior”* of whom her parents had no knowledge, started to impact further on her attendance. There was no-one able to support her in the family with homework, or adequately supervise her activities: *“I was having too many late nights. I couldn’t get up for school.”* It was then that her academic achievement began to be affected adversely. Consequently her perception of school changed and she became sick of school, which was seen as being increasingly irrelevant to her more adult life: *“I learn stuff at school that I don’t want to learn about.”* She left against the advice of friends who told her *“you’re wasting your time—you’re throwing your life away.”*

This story clearly illustrated some of the limitations of the integration theory and other models of current functioning. Whilst Tinto’s (1975) integration model was useful as a basis for analysing “why individuals function as they do in terms of their current psychological and biological dispositions” (Magnusson, 1995, p. 20), such models are not developmental. They fail to depict the “dynamic developmental relations” between students and their “complex, integrated and changing ecology” (Lerner, 2005, p. xiv). However, this is not to say that the integration model is not without its usefulness in contributing to an understanding of school retention and drop out. Such models of current functioning are complementary to developmental models because the current functioning of individuals is the result of earlier developmental processes and forms the basis for later stages. The ecological framework allows for inclusion of ideas from a range of models, each of which can aid our understanding of components of the very complex drop out landscape.

With this in mind it is useful now to consider, in its wider conceptualisation, the notion of integration and how it may be applied as a “pull factor” by drawing students towards other settings where they feel they fit in more easily and where they experience a sense of belonging greater than they do at school.

In some leavers' stories a feeling of social dislocation was an important aspect of their decision to leave, especially for students coming into a new school environment when they had changed schools at senior level. They sometimes found that it was difficult to make new friends and be accepted into the new school setting.

*"I just found Putu High so incredibly catty. Yes, the girls definitely, and one of teachers as well."* (student #1261)

Problems in becoming socially integrated, in relating to the other girls, were quite common problems for leavers.

- *"I wasn't happy there, at school. I'd been thinking about it. It was an all girls' school – bitchiness, conflict."* (student #1540)
- *"I hated the school, not just because of the teachers, its Putu school, it's the school, it's the people, being in an all girls' school it was bitchy."* (student #1388)

Integration models portray drop out as a product of individual characteristics and family background interacting with the social and academic environment of the educational institution. Varying degrees of integration occur which lead to students evaluating their educational commitment. Friendship, support, and a feeling of belonging become part of the costs and benefits that determine the likelihood of persistence. Roberts, Boyton, Buete, and Dawson (1991) maintained that individuals direct their energies into activities which maximise the ratio of benefits to costs, so students will drop out if they perceive that an alternative, such as employment, will give them greater benefits. Whether dropouts apply such a rational approach to dropping out is something discussed a little later. Paid work was certainly an attractive alternative to school for many leavers in this study.

My experience in marketing to young people in both the secondary and tertiary sectors was that they made decisions about what to do post-school, whether to go into employment or continue with further education, quite early on. This early decision-making may have been stimulated by a greater focus on career education and guidance in the school curriculum and "an increase in career development support" (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. v) following the introduction of the National Administration Guideline covering careers education (NAG 1, iv, in Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 2), changes to the National Qualifications Framework (described in Chapter 2), and the deregulation of the tertiary education system. These "system-wide shifts" (Vaughan, 2004, cited in Vaughan et al., op. cit. p. v) have prompted increased

interest in the *Pathways and Prospects* of young people leaving school (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006). Findings from the Intentions Survey relating to long-term and immediate plans, coupled with data derived from interviews, add to the information provided so far by this project on how young people make career choices.

### **Leavers' Plans**

An important aspect of the survey was to find out what or who influenced students' plans. Teachers (Coutts, 2004b) thought it would be friends. But, as discussed earlier in this chapter (Figure 6), parents seemed still to be very important and respected influences in students' decision-making about their education, careers, and future plans. This was especially so for students in mid and upper decile schools. A number of students who, it was predicted, might leave from their responses to the Intentions Survey (“*my mother MADE ME*” or because “*nothing better to do*”) did in fact stay on at school and complete the year.

What friends were doing did not rank highly as influences on students' decisions to return for another year of schooling, with only three per cent of students mentioning friends at all. This was indeed unexpected because when I was a principal I found that during enrolment interviews with prospective students they frequently cited where their friends were going as a major influence in their selection of school. David, West, and Ribbens also noted that the decisions of friends and placement of siblings were commonly cited in the literature as considerations in decision-making about choice of secondary school (1994, p. 19). Their study confirmed that “children were often hoping to go to the same school as friends” (pp. 135-136).

There is a “dramatic increase in the psychological importance and intimacy of close friends during early adolescence” (Sullivan, 1953, cited in Santrock, 2001, p. 195). Friends, as well as parents, play important roles in adolescents' wellbeing and development. These research findings suggest that the opinions of friends are more important influences for younger than for older adolescents, who have developed greater cognition as they matured. Certainly the few students who cited in their stories the influence of friends amongst the mix of reasons for leaving were younger: “*Stress with mates, getting up early and school work*” were the reasons which student #2227, aged just 16, gave but there were others who had problems with friends, or problems caused by their association with friends.

- *Bitchiness, Bitchiness, conflict. Can't concentrate on lessons. I had a very big fight with one of my best mates and everyone seemed to side with her over me but... Yeah, yeah. It was like between us and how she was treating me and then a whole bunch of other students started to get in and play a part in it and they didn't have anything to do with it. They just cut me down.* (student #1540, left on birthday, aged 16)
- *Catty schoolgirls. Aw. They just gossip about each other and, I don't know, it's hard to explain (pause). Yes, just tart gossip and that starts the ball rolling and gets round the whole school.* (student #2324, left the day after her birthday, aged 16)
- *Oh we all like, just stupid girls' stuff. Say if you don't like someone we'd kind of, like, not pick on her, we'd have fights and stuff. And one of them would go crying to the [name of duty staff], report and stuff and then we'd get into trouble.* (student #2286, left on birthday, aged 16)

Older students were much more capable of dealing with these problems with peers: *"I thought, those girls are hassling me, I'm really just going to ignore it"* (student #220). Sometimes it was the support of friends which kept the girls at school, and indeed this student said *"my friends have always been supportive."* Similarly student #3178 had thought about leaving in Year 10 but had decided to return at that time because of *"family support and motivation, friends and my future."*

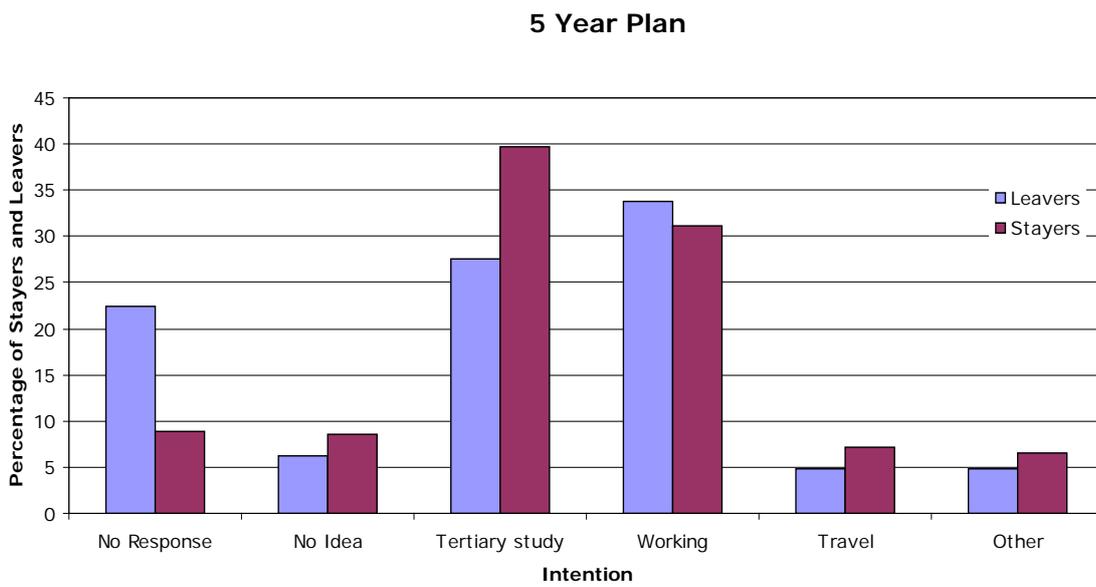
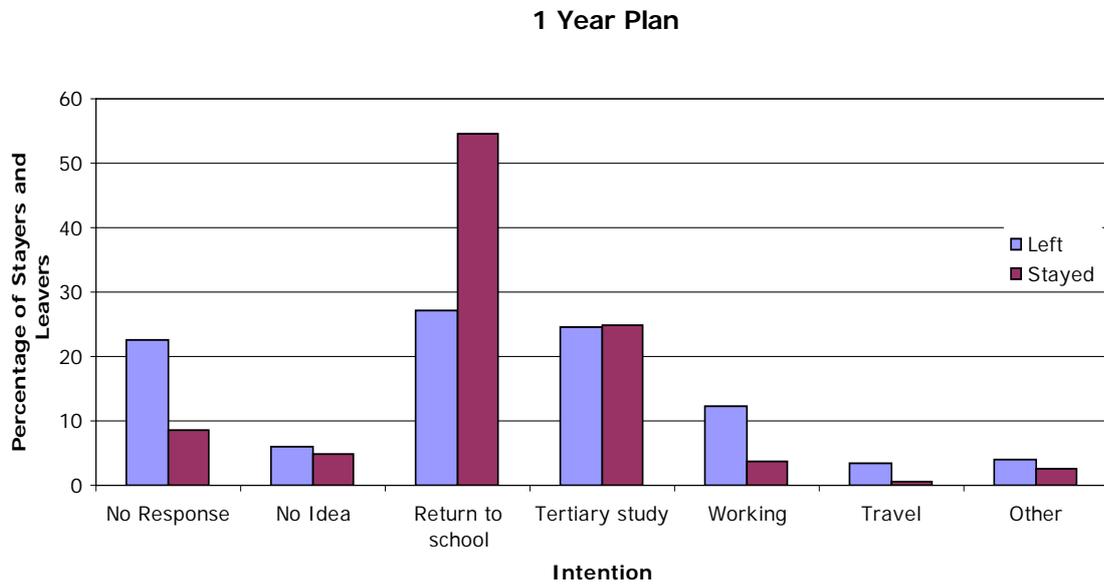
As well as the support of friends and family in keeping her motivated, this student's statement suggests that future career goals were also a factor in continuing with education. Conversely, the absence of plans or goals to orientate their studies was thought to be associated with the likelihood of early leaving. Some evidence of planning was indicated by the reasons students gave for returning to school (Figure 6), as has been shown already. Students' short-term plans (those for the following year) and their longer range plans (what they imagined they would be doing in five years time) are summarised by the two graphs in Figure 8.

The bar graphs show minor differentiation between the short and longer term aspirations of the leaving students. Similar proportions of leavers were not certain about what they might be doing next year and in the future. A significant proportion, about a quarter of those who subsequently left, did not respond to this question. The main difference between leavers' one year and later scenarios was that about a quarter of the students planned to return to school in the short term, whereas in the longer term

planning about the same proportion of leavers then saw themselves as working. The proportions of leavers planning to travel, or to be involved in tertiary study, were not greatly changed over these two scenarios.

The plans for the persisting students varied considerably across the two scenarios but the main difference was a shift from plans to remain at school in the next year to greater proportions envisaging working and engaged in tertiary study in the later (five year) plans. Indeed, the major difference between the leavers and stayers overall, was in the latter's greater commitment to ongoing education, either through returning to school or at tertiary level. Similar proportions of stayers and leavers imagined they would be working in five years time. The five year plans of leavers and stayers looked remarkably similar, the greatest difference being in the much greater proportion of non-respondents in the case of subsequent leavers. Approximately six per cent of leavers and five percent of stayers had no idea what they might be doing next year, and for stayers this increased to almost nine per cent of respondents in later plans. This finding is consistent with that of Boyd, Chalmers, and Kemekawa's (2001) review which found 10 per cent of secondary students had no idea what they wanted to do when they left school.

Figure 8. What leavers imagine they will be doing in the following year and in the future.



Students themselves thought that a lack of a career plan was a factor in dropping out:

*I don't think it's the school, I think it's the students who don't know what they want to do. Like you hear of some students there who know what they want to be and so they stay at school, so they can get their qualifications but I didn't. I didn't see the point in staying there. I didn't know what I was going to do or what I wanted to do so. (student #271)*

What was surprising was the large number of dropouts (almost a third of all early leavers) from amongst those who had been intending to complete a further year of school in the following year. What had happened to make them change their minds? Had they become dissatisfied with what school had to offer? Or were there reasons outside the school's control accounting for this change in plans? It was suggested by staff that the changes in plans were sometimes impulsive responses to events and not necessarily part of a rationally thought out adjustment to changed circumstances.

*Some people were quite regretful and felt they'd burned their bridges. They'd just left and it ruined [their] life. It's a teenage culture. It's everything is instant. Life is so random. Having a bad day? Instant gratification. If it doesn't work, throw it away. (Repo focus group)*

Students' stories supported the notion that most leaving behaviour is impulsive, and not the product of a rational decision-making process as Boudon (1982, cited in Nash, 1997a, p. 151) had suggested:

*Someone told them I had smokes in my bag and took me to the office and I just gave them to them and then [deputy principal] was telling me off. "Oh, you're in trouble, you need either, you have to leave, or get expelled." I said, "Oh, I'll leave." And walked out that same day and never been back since. (student #2227)*

About one quarter of both leavers and stayers planned to go on to tertiary study of some kind in the following year. It was interesting that polytechnic education did not feature highly in the specific responses (approximately six per cent overall but a slightly higher percentage [8.16%] of leavers), even though the students' narratives showed this was a common destination. It seemed that polytechnic education was viewed as both a

staircase and an alternative by staff who recognised that this destination was more likely.

- *[Polytechnic] has a lot of first year courses for free...they promote themselves well and have low entry type courses.*
- *A lot of Year 13 students, I'm very happy to see them go to [polytechnic]. These kids will ultimately come out with something beautiful and they've outgrown school and if they stayed here they would not get it...they aren't going to complete here.*
- *They want to be in mufti, to smoke and be treated like adults.*  
(Repo focus group comments)

The students who had attended polytechnics found success, where they had often failed at school, as the following excerpts show:

- *For some reason I did so bad at school and then I went to polytechnic and I just did so well for myself, and every assignment I got over 90 per cent which made me feel like, you know, really good. (student #1261)*
- *Oh man, I'm doing a retailing course. Oh, it's so cool! Yeah, every day we have different events and stuff. (student #2348)*
- *The way that I was taught was better than at school. I find the work conditions easier, they give home phone numbers and come in at weekends to help if you need it. Workload is really easy—others found it hard. (student #1395)*

The experience of a positive educational experience post-school was not, however, restricted to polytechnics. A course for teen parents was attended by student #3333. She had found school boring, as evidenced by her behaviour in class (Mum said her daughter “*was more the disruptee of the group;*” she was “*pretty naughty at school*”) and the fact that she was skipping school more and more often (“*School just wasn't doing it for me anymore*”). But she was very positive about the course she was subsequently attending: “*It's really good because I can work at my own pace and they don't hassle you about it,*” she said.

Student #3167 who attended a childcare course also run by a private training provider (PTE) espoused similar views. Her five year plan mentioned in the Intentions Survey was to be “*looking after children.*” Since leaving school she was now motivated to study because she was learning something that contributed to her long-term goals.

The style of teaching also made a difference: “*They make learning fun. They treat you like an adult.*” The adult-oriented learning environment of tertiary providers (polytechnics and PTEs) came through very strongly as a major factor in new-found confidence and success as a learner in all these girls’ stories.

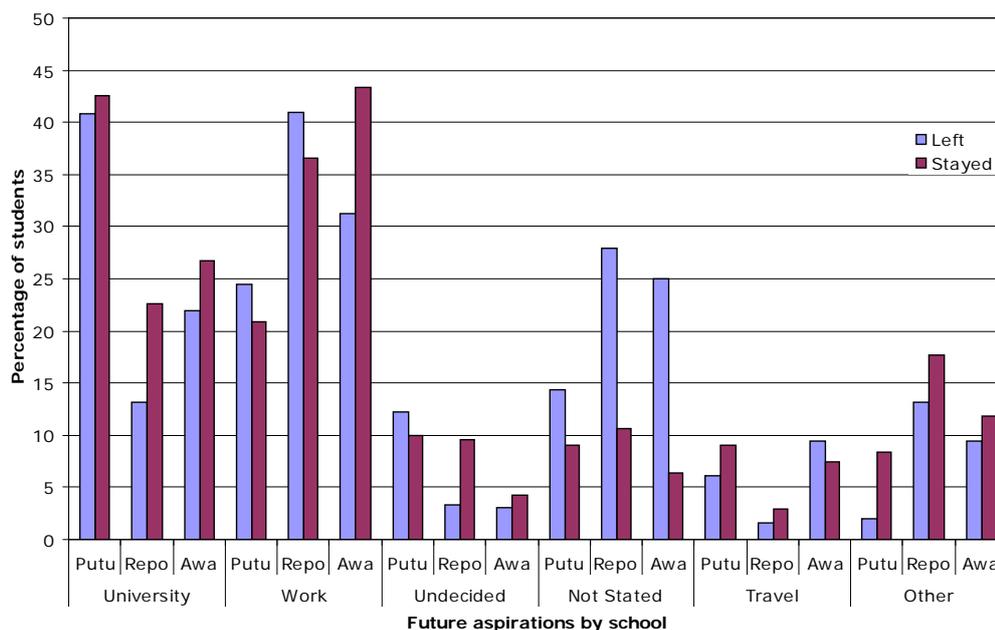
*The course was a better environment to learn in. Tutors treat you like another person, not lower than them. Doing what you want to do. With tutors like that, it makes you want to work harder. I worked so hard at the start, you know having to get all these big assignments and things. I mean it was really hard and when I got all my marks back it made me go harder for the next one and, you know, my first marks were, what 94 per cent or something, and that just made me feel, well, you know, so good, and yeah.* (student #1261)

A greater proportion of students at Putu Girls’ High, than from other schools planned to go to university. This was linked to parental expectations that were reflected in the culture of that school.

*Her parents are a lot stricter and sort of heavy expectations of her going to university and everything. She was, sort of been grown up being told she had to go there and go to university, get a degree, that sort of thing.* (Student #1540, talking about a friend whose parents would not let her drop out from school as she had done.)

Consistent with previous research, this study showed an apparent correlation with the decile rating of the school and students’ aspirations. Not only did a greater proportion of students from Putu High plan to go to university in the next year but also a greater proportion of them were intending still to be at university in five years time. Conversely, a greater proportion of students from Repo High School (lower decile) planned to leave school the following year for employment, and thought that they would be working in five years time. This study found that there was little difference between the aspirations of stayers and leavers. Only in the lowest decile school did having an aspiration to be at university in five years’ time, which was against the norm, seem to have a significant affect on retention in school (Figure 9).

Figure 9. What students imagine they will be doing in five years' time.



What this research suggests is that students' aspirations are correlated broadly with school deciles. This may not seem a surprising finding, in that proportionally fewer students from lower decile schools are known to go directly on to tertiary education in comparison with high decile schools (Minister of Education, 2004, p. 69). Such inequalities in educational opportunity arise from various legal, economic, social and cultural barriers, Dahrendorf suggested (1975, cited in Nash, 2004, p. 363). Access to tertiary education directly from school requires students to meet the entry criteria established for the various award programmes. That there is a relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement at school is acknowledged by the Ministry of Education (Fiske & Ladd, 2000, p. 31). The relationship between school decile and qualifications gained was illustrated in Chapter 2 (Table 2). Resource differences between schools have little effect on educational attainment, Nash maintained (2004, p. 371). He argued that the fundamental causes of differences in educational attainment are "family resources, concrete and symbolic, and the practices they support" which affect the nature of cognitive development (ibid., p. 364). In this argument "educational inequality is, indeed, created 'in the family and the neighbourhood'" (ibid., p. 371), a notion supported by the experience of school staff at Repo, the lowest decile school.

*Yeah, I think if you've got a family with tertiary education that's the expectation, that's just what happens. That's unspoken really. And for these families at this*

*school, so few of them go to university or have been, so the kids don't think they can. One didn't, one didn't dare. None of us has been.* (Repo deputy principal)

It seemed that the teachers at Repo High spent much of their time trying to encourage students to stay on at school. But even able students were scared to take that next step into tertiary, because no one else in the family had ever done that before. As a teacher explained by way of example:

*"I can't go to university, I need to earn money." But the more I talk to her, the more I realise she's scared to go. She'd arranged a floristry apprenticeship—but she got a bursary.*" (Repo focus group)

Nash's view of the fundamental origins of social inequity assists in understanding differences in parents' expectations, which were coloured by parents' own experiences. Even within the high decile school (Putu), the deputy principal explained that some parents *"did want their daughters to be educated but I think there's probably tension there between the position they've attained in their business world and their daughters' education."* The parents of the girls spoken about here (student #1123 and her sister) had no qualms about student #1123 leaving school without completing the qualifications she had enrolled in for that year. Father was a "self-made" man, a restaurateur who attributed his success to hard work, rather than education, and he was confident his daughter could do the same. My *"parents said 'if you want to leave, you must have a plan,'"* student #1123 explained. This student was *"very poised. I mean unlike the others she has no lack of confidence"* and she was *"the sort of girl that 10 years down the track will make her own [way] and get an education"* (deputy principal of Putu High). The student saw she could make her dream of joining the police force a reality by working post-school *"just to kinda get experience and a bit of money behind me."* Her long-term goal was planned out carefully.

*[I'm] joining the Institute of Sport after this—exercise physiology—this year, then pre-policing course and coaching. I will have travelled and hopefully be in the police force. I think I will still be involved with rugby, as I am now. I'll be in a good stage of life with money behind me and well out at [a] job.*

These statements indicate that this student had a highly developed sense not only of her own identity but also of her ability to shape her own world—of self-agency. This leaver's story indicates the interactive influence of the personal characteristics of the student with the family context and the school environment.

One of the push factors for this student was that she *“hated the workload, hated the work and hated the rating system”* (student #1123). Further evidence of similar reciprocal interactions between the individual students and their proximal settings within the microcosm is provided in the stories told by the “wavering persisters.”

### **Wavering Persisters**

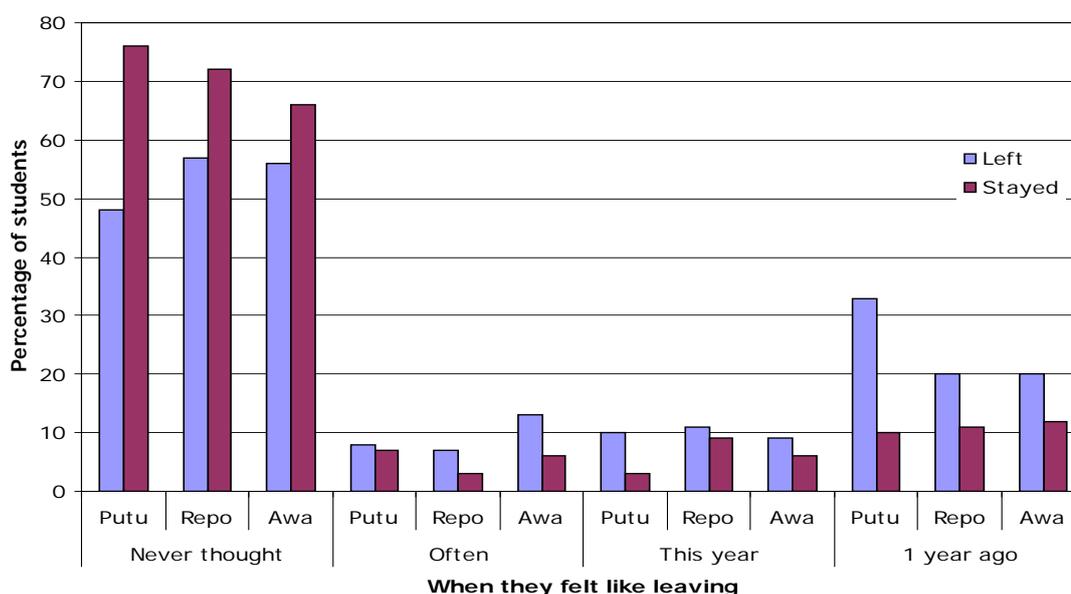
Wavering persisters are those students who have thought about leaving at some stage of their schooling but who choose to continue. In the Intentions Survey students were asked to reflect over their time at school and to identify when, if ever, they had felt like leaving. This generated two different types of responses, with students identifying chronosystemic data (that is, at what time they felt like leaving) as well as a range of reasons they attributed to this feeling. Time factors were expressed as specific dates (*“a year ago”*), frequency (*“every day at this school”* and *“often”*), associated with the timing of events (*“in the holidays”* or *“exam time”*), and with time organisation issues and school workload (*“too busy,” “full on,” “time problems”*).

The main aim of this question was to establish what was going on for the student at the time when she was thinking about leaving. This question engendered responses from both stayers and leavers, whereas most of the other data in this study concerns those who did drop out eventually. The reasons students gave for considering leaving were many and varied. They included teachers, those associated with other students (bullying or problems with other students, having no friends or friends leaving), academic reasons (such as *“lack of interesting subjects,” “boredom,” “don’t like NCEA,” “lack of achievement,” “not doing well,” “failing,” “school work too hard,”* and *“I wasn’t getting anywhere”*), or because of injury or illness or personal issues outside school or within school, which some did not want to elaborate on (*“I don’t want to talk about it”*).

Some reasons given for leaving were more general school issues, expressed as *“hate the school”* and *“school is not good,”* a perceived lack of sporting or cultural options, and poor hostel food and accommodation. One student candidly admitted she *“hated getting out of bed early,”* and another said *“I was being a typical teenager.”* For others, thinking about leaving school was associated with the attraction of having more disposable income: *“[I] wanted [a] job to make money.”* Most of the students participating in the Intentions Survey had not thought about leaving in the past, leading to the conclusion that if a student did think about leaving then she was more likely to do

so than to stay on. About a quarter of those students who stayed on to complete the year, the wavering persisters, reported that they had thought about leaving in the past, although the number who had considered leaving more than two years ago was very small. The range and variety of responses did not lead to any particular conclusions. Indeed, the majority of both students who left and those who stayed gave no reason for why they had considered leaving at that time in the past.

*Figure 10.* Wavering persisters: When students felt like leaving.

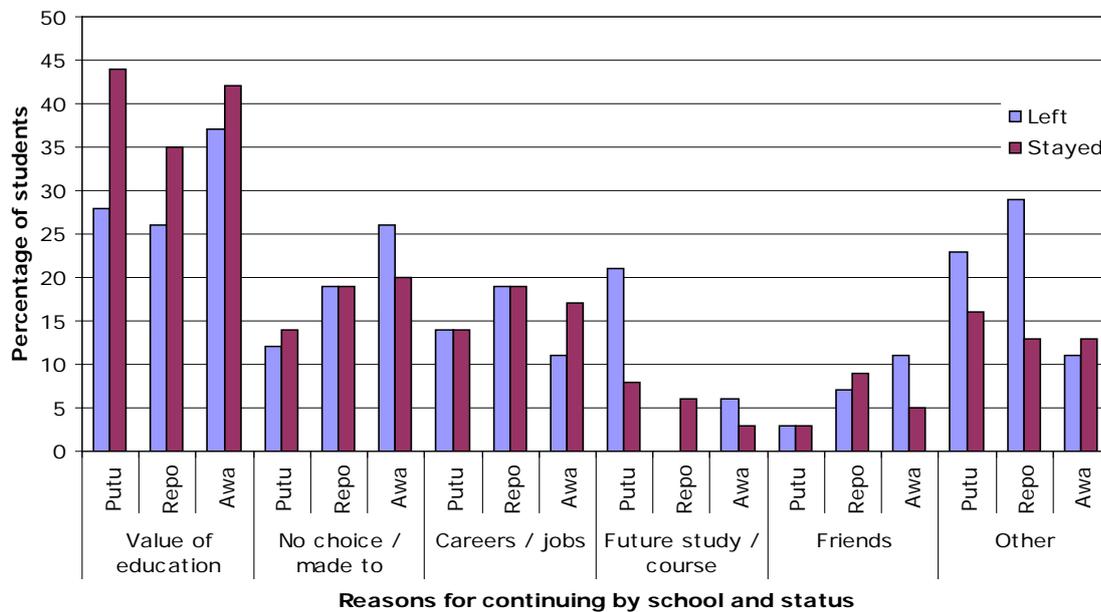


But what was it that had made these students decide to continue with their schooling? The majority of leavers had considered the value of continued education in making the decision to continue, as Figure 11 shows. This was consistent with investment theorization. Investment models were developed originally to account for drop out from the tertiary sector. They had their foundation in studies of employee turnover, with factors affecting employee retention in industry, such as commitment, satisfaction and reward, applied to student persistence in education. Schell and Thornton's investment model (1985) asserted that student satisfaction is greatest when the programme they are studying offers high rewards and low costs. Examples of rewards are enjoyment from hard work and a sense of achievement. Costs might be loss of earnings, reduced leisure time, or lack of teacher feedback. According to this theory declining educational rewards and the availability of an attractive alternative, such as

employment or tertiary training, may lead to reduced commitment to school and early leaving.

A comparison of this chart (Figure 11) with Figure 6 shows that the reasons which students gave for continuing their studies were very similar indeed to the reasons they gave for returning into the senior school in 2003. The value of education was the highest ranked reason by far, for either returning to school or deciding to continue with schooling after some event made them reconsider their commitment. There were other similarities too, between the responses of wavering persisters and those who ultimately left, as discussed in the next section.

Figure 11. What made the wavering persisters decide to continue?



### Reasons for Leaving?

It was interesting to compare the reasons that the wavering persisters gave for considering leaving with the reasons that emerged from the stories told by girls who did leave eventually. Both groups identified a range of reasons, with no apparent common theme apart from the complexity of their situations. Social events, accidents, illness, economic change and biological events are reasons often reported in dropout literature, suggesting that many students leave because of the influence of chance events. Similarly, in this study, many students who left had indicated previously that they had career plans that necessitated further study at school and yet they still ended up leaving. In follow-up Face-to-face and Telephone Interviews it seemed that many students did

not really seem sure why they had left: They just seemed to have outgrown what school had to offer. The expectations of school and family are powerful influences, and the rejection of these may simply represent a stand for greater independence rather than a well thought out career plan.

*I don't know if it was the project or my attitude that really, like, I didn't want to do anything, you know. I didn't want help from anyone. I just wanted to go my own way. So...(student #271)*

Changing pathways may thus be associated with a growing development and awareness of their own identity as they matured as young women and a rejection of the identities available to them in the school environment.

*You weren't allowed to be yourself. I want to be, like, myself, not look like everyone else. I've always been different from everyone. Which I like. (student #2286)*

The pressure to conform at school was so intense that this student believed she was being victimised by teachers: “*And the hair, and getting donged about the hair every day.*”

Some teachers maintained that the publication of league tables comparing results of achievements in the secondary sector has led some schools to actively discourage certain students from attending. Chilling out undesirables, or discouraging these students from entering examinations, would improve overall results and show up well in the newspapers. The above may possibly have been such a situation, as could be the following, outlined by student #2126.

Researcher: *When did things start to change? When did you think about leaving?*

Student: *At the beginning of the year like, the teachers were paying more attention to what I was doing wrong, than what I was doing right. You know, there were other people who were doing worse things than me. And I just got so sick of it and ugh...*

The constant run-in with school authorities often took its toll, manifesting in stress and physical symptoms.

- *The days that I did go were really bad. I went for a few weeks, couldn't take it, started crying and I guess mum just sort of realised and she said to me “You just can't keep going there unhappy.” (student #1540)*
- *The day that I got home, from school I cried from then, and in the morning I cried again because I didn't want to go to school. It was just stressful and I just*

*wouldn't...I kept getting headaches, migraines and stuff and feeling sick and stuff and feeling stressed.* (student #2286).

As in this case, where the mother intimated to the school that ill health was the reason for her daughter leaving school early, the reasons which students give the school for leaving are often superficial and not the real reasons which are more complex and perhaps too personal to disclose.

Previous research suggested also that lack of success at school was a major factor in dropping out. In the present study it was seen that some of the students did have ability but lacked the confidence or family support to persevere with schooling: “Some parents want her to go on but they don’t know how to help them” (Repo focus group). However, for others there were problems coping academically which were major stressors. Many students would just “give up” when the work got too difficult:

- *“There was a lot of times I just gave up and literally put all my book work away.* (student #2286)
- *Yes, I just gave up, I’d had enough.* (student #2126)

Home problems were sometimes of such a magnitude that they affected the motivation and commitment to school of other students, such as student #271: “My parents were actually going through a separation and that really did bring me down flop.” Another (student #2324) said her stepfather had “told mum that either I had to move out, or he would leave her.” In several other situations the school staff were not aware of the death of friends or of family bereavements which were impacting on the students’ motivation to continue with schooling.

*My very good friend passed away. She was in a car accident and it took a lot, like, it was a big shock, because you know I was with her in class everyday, and all of a sudden, she wasn’t there any more. And it was another thing, maturing thing in my life. When you’re 16 you think you are invincible and then something like that happens. And yeah. It took a long time for me to get over and it was difficult at school without her there, so for a while. We took our time out to sort of, you know, grieve and get over it. And school was just a sort of non-factor. I don’t think I even ended up going for a while. I didn’t do any work for a complete year. My schoolwork just went completely flat, a huge landslide.* (student #1123)

What is interesting in this narrative is the insight into how this incident had affected her own development, which this student shows:

*I mean you can't really blame things and that but it was a factor in my credits. Once I got into it, not doing any work, it kind of snowballed a bit. I just couldn't be bothered any more and argh, all of a sudden a whole lot of other things seemed more important than school. Its one of those unforeseeable things that you can't do anything about and some people, I wouldn't say strive but they learn a lot and they gain a lot from something like that happening. (student #1123)*

Statements such as this indicate that drop out is both a product and producer of development. Human development is said to occur when a “person acquires a more extended differentiated, and valid conception of the ecological environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27). Events, which have become *markers* in the students’ retelling of their stories, are probably those identified in previous dropout research as the causes of dropping out. It seems that these markers are but signposts along the torturous route many students have taken as they make the transition between school and what society perceives as a more adult life post-school. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) explained that “an ecological transition occurs whenever a person’s position in the ecological environment is altered as a result of a change in role, setting, or both.”

Most students had not planned to leave school early, as evidenced by responses to the intentions survey conducted at the beginning of the year. The literature review indicated that poor academic achievement was a major factor for many of the students who dropped out. Many did have academic problems but these were not always the main reason, and never the only reason. For other students, many of whom did have considerable ability, social events, illness, problems at school or home were reasons cited for the decision to drop out of school.

Yet as a principal of a school with a hostel, which affords the opportunity of getting to know the students really well, I can vouch for the fact that many other teenagers experience the same problems. This naturally raised the question of what it is that is different about those who stay. Resilience theories (Clarke & Clarke, 2003) suggest three likely differences between the leavers and the stayers: their personal characteristics, their relationships with parents, and the level of support outside the immediate family—perhaps from teachers or mates at school. Chapter 5 explores in more detail the reciprocal interaction that occurs within the proximal settings of family and school through in-depth focus on two Leavers’ Portraits.

## Discussion

What is unique about the approach used in this dropout study is that it aimed to study student drop out at the very point of leaving. It sought to get a real feel for the school contexts through having visited the sites but also through the views of the key informants. In this chapter we saw that the school environment was composed of both physical and social elements.

There were many similarities between these single-sex state secondary schools, which had mission statements and charter goals affirming their aims for girls to develop their potential in a range of leadership, academic, sporting and cultural areas. Physically the sites were well established but the older, and somewhat tired, facilities in each case boasted of the successes of past students through the memorabilia on display and the rituals of assemblies, ceremonial events reinforcing respect for authority and school pride. There was something very special about the single-sex learning environment which Lashlie also noticed when she went, as part of the *Good Man* project, to an all boys' school for the first time.

At one school I was urged by an obviously proud teacher to visit the library and I wondered at his enthusiastic insistence that I do so. It was in fact a museum containing mementos from the lives of many of the school's old boys. On one wall hung photos of those who had become judges or taken other high-profile positions in the community; on another were sporting trophies obtained in world cup events, including the replica of a gold medal won at the Olympic Games by an old boy. It was as I stood in this room and took in the sense of tradition surrounding me that I began to understand more about the essence of maleness. It's about connection, about linkages to the past that show the pathways to the future and it's about excellence, striving to be successful in order to honour those who have gone before. It's about loyalty and hard work and belonging. (2005, p. 37)

Whilst Lashlie attributed the values symbolised by these mementos as the "essence of maleness" in fact I am certain, had she visited any of the sites in this case study, she would have come away with a very similar impression. The atmosphere within these traditional girls' schools affirms the place of women in society. It is girl friendly. The message is about woman power.

However, students experienced the school environment differently, accounting in part for why it was that some students left whilst others stayed when faced with similar problems within the same school. An example of this was the way in which some students found the single-sex learning environment safe, comfortable and stimulating, whilst others reported on the “*cattyness*” of the all-girls school environment. These schools promoted themselves on the adage “*Girls’ schools, best for girls,*” but this was not always how the students experienced it.

The notion of *experience* is a major premise underpinning Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective on human development, as he explained:

The scientifically relevant features of any environment for human development include not only its objective properties but also the way in which these properties are subjectively experienced by the persons living in that environment. (2005a, p. 5)

The environment included both physical and social aspects. This section identified subtle differences in the nature and frequency of the reciprocal interactions between students and their teachers, about which more will be said in the next chapter (Chapter 5).

Whilst there were many similarities between the three school sites there was also significant inter-site variation. Few students from the highest decile school left with no credits towards qualifications, and there were differences in the ethnicity of leavers which did not emerge clearly until analysis was done within the context of the wider school community. The detailed analysis of who left, from where and when, supported recommendations from previous overseas studies (Fry, 2003; Jasinski, 2000; Valenzuela, 2005; Velez, 1989), and New Zealand researchers, (Harkness, Murray, Parkin, & Dalgety, 2005, p. 22) not to “homogenise” dropout data as this practice typically hides underachievement within particular groups.

There has been recent debate in New Zealand education circles about the relationship between drop out and class/ethnicity and educational achievement (Harker, 2006; Rata, 2004). The effects of poverty on educational outcomes in general is undisputed in international research: Schargel (2004b, p. 34) suggested that students from low-income families are three times more likely to drop out of school than those from more affluent homes. However, Harker points out that the relationship between SES and school attainment has been established from studies based on developed nations with populations largely of European origins. In New Zealand the educational

achievement of Maori and Pasifika lags behind that of their European and Asian peers but to what extent this can be “accounted for by the fact that most of these children live in low SES families with associated issues of family stress, health problems and lack of resources” requires further research (Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003, cited in Harker, 2006, p. 1). After reanalysis of previous New Zealand studies (the “Smithfield” and Progress at school” data sets), Harker concludes that:

Any explanation of the differences between ethnic groups that would place the “blame” on schools, is obliged to show that there remains a significant direct effect of ethnicity after all relevant other contextual variables have been taken into consideration. (2006, p. 27)

The increased range of programme offerings and the step-wise accumulation of credits facilitated by the introduction of NCEA were thought by teachers in Hipkins et al.’s study to increase motivation to learn, to increase student confidence, and to lead to “some students returning to school to try again” (2004, p. 3). Indeed Harkness et al. suggested that, whilst at all levels of schooling Pasifika candidates were less likely than non-Pasifika candidates to gain a qualification (2005, p. 7), there is “increased participation in gaining credits on the NQF” (op. cit., p. 5) for these ethnic groups. There has been a trend over the last two decades for all secondary students to stay at school longer, as illustrated in Chapter 2 but there is still a gap between students of different ethnicities.

That secondary school students are staying at school longer cannot be attributed to changes in the national qualifications system. As outlined previously, these changes were a response to the perception that the former examination structure was no longer meeting the needs of the increasingly diverse range of students staying on at school. The retention rates in New Zealand secondary schools (Table 1) are increasing, in contrast to the more variable retention recorded in Australian schools over the last decade that showed decreasing retention rates in recent times<sup>143</sup>. The latter led to questions about the dropout problem at a government and policy level in that country (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 21). Similarly, the international literature (Chapter 1) also revealed concerns about increasing drop out rates. From this, it could be concluded that the increased retention in New Zealand secondary schools is the consequence of some localised

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<sup>143</sup> However, it is suggested that this is a factor of the increasing number of part-time students enrolling in Australian high schools (ibid.).

exosystem effects. However, there is no room for complacency because, within a generally high average senior school retention rate, there are ethnic variations which give concern and there are also gender related concerns<sup>144</sup> outside the scope of the present study. Longer term, it will be of interest to see whether the changes in the curriculum brought about by the introduction of NCEA do make a difference for retention of these groups, as greater confidence in learning and an increased motivation to learn have been reported, with some students returning to school to try again (Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, & Ferral, 2004, p. xviii).

In their telling of their experience of dropping out of school, the leavers in this study revealed the complexity of what was going on for them at that point in time. The “main reason” given for leaving was not the only reason, and sometimes it seems, was not even the most significant influence. During the telling, many students appeared to be processing the events that led to the act of leaving school early. This study also captured evidence of developmental change occurring, through comparison of what the students said in their Intentions Survey at the beginning of the year with feedback from the Telephone and the Face-to-face Interviews. In this way evidence has been provided to support the contention that drop out is both a product and producer of developmental change.

A feeling of belonging, of being comfortable within the school environment, was important in student retention. However, the school environment was more than the physical space. Problems that students experienced in brokering satisfactory relationships with teachers and other students came through very strongly in this chapter as an area that warrants further attention. It became obvious that family support, when their daughter experiences problems, is also an important ingredient in a students’ decision to leave school or stay on to complete the year. In the next section (Chapter 5), stories which focus on relationships at school and on the influence of the family allow for further exploration of the notion of dropping out as an ecological transition.

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<sup>144</sup> The "misconceptions, moral panics and populist discourses" associated with boys' under-achievement are outlined by O'Neill (2005, pp. 93-97).

## CHAPTER 5: STUDENTS' STORIES

Located within the broader environmental context of the exosystem, described in Chapter 2, family and school relationships are key mesosystem influences on student retention and drop out from high school. However, there is debate in the literature about the relative influence of each of these microsystems. In this present chapter the students' stories give an insight into the interconnectedness of these two proximal settings and the ecological framework facilitates consideration of how, and to what degree, they affect students' early leaving behaviour.

A multitude of themes emerged from analysis of the data from the various sources. Because these themes are so inter-related, it was found that adequate coverage could be given to most of the key issues affecting drop out and retention through a focus on the influence of the two major institutions in which students spend most of their time: the immediate settings of the *school* and the *family*. In Chapter 4 the nature and extent of the effects of the school site were considered. Although there was some degree of similarity in both the physical and social spaces in these traditional girls' schools, because of their differing school communities, there were also striking differences. There was a culture of high expectations in the high decile school and the acceptance of lower levels of achievement and aspirations which belied students' promise in the low decile school.

Using a mixture of selected Leaver's Portraits (condensed versions of the interview data) and intertextual narratives (discourse segments from many key informants), this chapter looks more closely at the dynamic developmental relations between students and the people in their proximal settings. Problems experienced by students in their relationships at home (**Mum and me**) and in the classroom (**The snow job**) and how these problems influenced the decision to leave before completion of the programme of study for which they were enrolled in 2003 are discussed. This chapter concludes with an exploration of the role which careers advice, both informal and formal, plays in career development and the ecological transition involved in leaving school early.

## Mum and Me

In the literature review the influence of the family was recognised widely as a most important contributor to success at school, with family background explaining much of the variation in educational outcomes, including school achievement and dropout behaviour. Previous research commonly focused on the characteristics of families, such as socioeconomic status and educational background, and on family structure. Recent studies (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger et al., 1990, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 140) showed that students who had strong relationships with their parents were more likely to stay on at school.

Wide experience in relating to and interviewing parents confirms that secondary education is acknowledged by nearly every parent as a very important period of his or her children's schooling. Parents see high school as the time when their children will gain the qualifications necessary to make a successful transition to well-paid employment and where the preparation for a career occurs. Many parents hope that their children will have better lifestyle opportunities than they have had, and see education as giving the opportunity for achieving upward mobility in society. Selecting a "good" secondary school is of vital interest to parents. Of "paramount importance for middle class parents [is] getting their child into the 'right' sort of secondary school, typically one which produces good examination results" (Reay, 2005, p. 33). In choosing a secondary school for their children to attend David (2005) found that mothers had a significant influence in the family decision but that middle class fathers with children in private schools were also very involved in the choice process. It was "evident that families do not take these issues lightly but invest considerable amounts of time and energy into thinking about education and particular schools" (David, West, & Ribbens, 1994, p. 145). It could be assumed that the decision to leave school would also be regarded as a very important decision, one which would not be taken lightly. Was this the case? And what role did family members typically play?

To explore these questions about the role and influence of the family on student retention and drop out, this section aims to bring together the students' perspectives with those of some parents and school staff, in a "complex and multi-layered representation capable of articulating the same realities but in terms that are different and, sometimes, irreconcilable" (Bourdieu, 1999d, p. 3).

### **Leavers' Portrait # 2324**

In the Leaver's Portrait singled out to illustrate the influence of family this student seems, on the face of it, to be doing well at school but ends up leaving because she cannot deal with the family situation. She sees gaining economic independence as the only way of getting out of what has become an intolerable home condition.

**Leavers' Portrait # 2324**  
**Living in a war zone:**  
**“He told Mum that either I had to move out, or he would leave her”**

The Face-to-face Interview was held at about 9.30 at night after this young woman came home from a long walk. She said she used to go for long walks to get away from her mother's partner. The Leavers' Portrait presented here is a condensation of this interview, amalgamated with data from the Intentions Survey and Telephone Survey.

*[I left school on] July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2003. It was the day after my sixteenth birthday (pause). I wanted to leave ON my sixteenth birthday but bloody dean wouldn't let me. She made me take the (sigh) Leaving Form home for mum to sign. Yeah. I decided, in April. I decided I would leave school when I turned 16 and go flatting and live with a flat mate and things and [boyfriend]. Only the dean didn't want me to leave. She just said that I should reconsider it and things like that. It was my decision in the end and they had to accept that. She was nice to me. My science and biology teacher, yeah, I [talked to her], she just said that she'd be sad to see me go. She wished me luck and hoped that I did well and things like that. I was just kind of there one day and gone the next because I didn't really want them telling most of the school my business.*

*I was living with mum but mum had a partner and, her partner decided that he didn't like me anymore. So he told mum that either I had to move out, or he would leave her and so, mum just wanted us to live, like we were, with the same war zone basically, and I made the decision. I said to her “I can't handle anything like this so I'm going to get out.” So, I went and boarded with a friend of mine for a while and her parents but that didn't work out, and I went and moved in with my boy friend's sister, and I lived with her, and I was living with*

*her when I left school and then I moved in with my boy friend and now I'm here and I'm not with him anymore. Yes. Eleven years, on and off. I never really liked it the whole entire time. I couldn't really tell mum that because I was too young, four or five, when they first met. And [when] I was old enough to say something and I just did. (little laugh) Yeah.*

*Mum's boy friend wasn't impressed [that I had a boyfriend]. Mum was in Australia when I told him about it, which was probably a bad idea, yeah. I didn't think that he would go as nutty as he did. He just didn't like it. Don't know why he didn't like it. I reckon he thought I was too young. I didn't have a chance to explain myself, or anything. He just went off and involved the police and everything. Yeah. All the while I was home, like, with him, by myself. He (pause) told me that if I sent [boyfriend] any messages, if I saw him, if I spoke to him on the phone, he'd be arrested for rape. That's what he told me, and I was too scared to do anything. And he reckoned that the police rang [boyfriend]. He did tell me that somebody rang him but if police issue like a warning, whatever, they don't do it over the phone. Especially at somebody's work place. So I think that was just a whole lot of crap just to scare me, and mum thinks it was too. 'Cause mum was really on my side at the end of it. Yep, it was about April time.*

*I went to see the counsellor a few times. Used to talk to her about what I could do about mum and [stepfather] and about things, them trying to stop me seeing [boyfriend] and things like that but I knew how it was at home, and I knew what the reaction was gonna be and things, so it helped in a way but not really at the same time. I knew what kind of person I was having to go home and deal with. Like [stepfather], who has absolutely no patience or anything. He will not listen to anybody but himself. He's right and, that's it. No discussion. Yeah. I got sick of trying to reason with him. Got really, really sick of HIM. Yeah. Just sit and watch TV or drink and watch TV. Or go out into the shed and read his paper and drink and that's it. That's all he used to do. It never like, stopped him from working or anything like that but, it was too often really. [The counsellor] said that to have [independent means support], like you do have [to get] consent kind of thing, like, that I had been kicked out of home and had to leave and mum wouldn't have done that because she just wanted everything to stay as it was and for us just to resolve the problem. I knew that she wouldn't, so I didn't bother but she wasn't really talking to me at that stage anyway. No, not really,*

*not for a while I didn't talk to her, because of what she'd done. Because she picked him over me. He gave her the ultimatum, I heard him give her an ultimatum. Yeah, because otherwise, me and her would be living by ourselves without him. I'd still be living at home with my mum. Yeah. 'Cause, she always sides with him and she always did. I suppose she was so scared that he'd leave her.*

*That problem's pretty much resolved. My boy friend's not in the picture anymore. I'm working but I'm supporting myself. I paid my board and whatever else I need. Yeah, [mum's] helping. They're helping me, sometimes. She helped me move into here. Sometimes she'll buy me the odd thing when she's in a shop, she'll just see it and she'll think of me, and so she'll buy it. [Stepfather] doesn't like that. I did borrow some money off of mum and she did buy me a brand new bed but I paid her back at \$25 a week. Yeah, it wasn't a gift, it was a loan (laughingly). I hope to be working at [same firm] for a while. Hopefully I'll get an NZQA qualification for retail. Yep, and if I end up getting that, well, I'll just see where I can go from there. What else, I don't know. Maybe married I'm not too sure. But I do want to own a house and still have a good job. Sometimes I regret leaving school. I think I should've still been there. But, when I think about the whole, picture, I think working is better.*

In February this student had returned to study because of “my parents,” planning to go into an “office course at [polytechnic]” the following year. It was the altercation with her stepfather over the boyfriend which brought a longstanding home situation to a head. Before that time, this student said she had never felt like leaving school before.

Although the problems with her stepfather appeared to be the main reason this student gave for leaving, the situation was much more complex. The first point of interest was why she chose to mention the fact that she'd got a boyfriend to her stepfather, whilst her mother was away. She realises herself that this was not a good idea, explaining that she did not expect such a strong reaction but were there other reasons for this apparent over-reaction? In the Telephone Interview mention was made that her stepfather's half brother had committed suicide two months prior. The timing of this event in relation to the incident over the boyfriend is not clear. However, the student acknowledged that stepfather had “suffered a bit since that tragedy but he's funny, happy one minute and grumpy next. He drinks far too much.” Because he was

dealing with his own emotional issues at the time that the boyfriend was raised it is possible that he did not have the emotional resources to cope with it other than in the way he did, which was to use scare tactics to try to end the relationship. Student #2324's perception that stepfather "*doesn't like me,*" was coloured by her own disappointment "*I never had a dad in [stepfather] or a biological father.*" Whether this student's assumption that her stepfather dislikes her is true, is a point for conjecture. The student's reference to the "*war zone*" at home signals that her own feelings are more than dislike: She sees stepfather as "the enemy."

Enemies "engage in hostile acts or pose a significant danger or threat to well-being, aims, and goals, while endorsing different beliefs and values (Holt, 1989; Middents, 1994; Shallit, 1988). An enemy's gain is perceived to be our loss (Shallit, 1989; Beck, 1999)" (Abecassis, 2003, p. 8). Everything the stepfather does is perceived to be "malicious" and "unfriendly." "Enemy development" is more common among children of middle school age and adolescents than younger children, because it requires more advanced cognitive development. It is associated with the development of self-concept, and "may develop when some aspect of a person's social image or status is challenged (Beck, 1999, cited in Abecassis, 2003, p. 13). But how does such a relationship form? Abecassis explained that enemy formation typically commences when a chance remark or event touches on an area of uncertainty or vulnerability, in this case related possibly to difficulties in coming to terms with the realisation that her biological father had abandoned her at birth. If it is personalised and taken as an intentional slight, from this an assumption can be derived that the other person holds a negative view:

The offended person adopts a cognitive set in which the offender's motives are recast as malicious, dangerous, evil, or threatening and she may search memory for past evidence of real or imagined violations. What starts out initially as distress or hurt feelings is transformed into a sense of having been wronged, which leads to feelings of anger and strong dislike or hatred, as well as a desire to attack in response and to preserve a sense of self.

In the absence of an interest or willingness to be introspective...and consider whether an action was personally directed...or to communicate with the "offender" to express the hurt, the risk of developing an enemy relationship is increased. (Abecassis, 2003, p. 13)

Typically enemies are dealt with by avoidance or by retaliation through return negative comments. In this student's story we see evidence of both these forms of behaviour. The student appears to be punishing her mother, not talking to her, "*because of what she'd done. Because she picked him over me.*" However, there was no file evidence of ongoing problems at home. Neither the deputy principal nor the home liaison officer could recall any school-related issues, apart from the fact that the student was now no longer living at home but with the boyfriend. It seemed that neither the dean nor the mother wished her to leave school, and hence the insistence by the dean (which obviously made the student very angry) that the leaver's form be signed off by mum before she would action the leaving process.

*[The dean] was my teacher in Form 3 and she wasn't impressed and she made...because she knows my mother didn't want me to leave school. Mum wanted me to be happy in a flat and she warned she wouldn't be talking to me.*

So it seems that mother had also tried scare tactics in an attempt to deter the student from leaving school early. Mother seemed to be of the opinion that the issues could be worked through: "*she thought it would be better if I carried on.*"

Initially this student had wanted to try to stay on at school, and she attempted to avoid the conflict at home by going to stay elsewhere. The school had arranged for support:

*The teachers have obviously phoned to mum, and mum has said that she's—she's referred to the guidance counsellor and what, what happened there, we'll never know.*" (home liaison officer)

But there seemed to be problems with transport and the availability of part-time work, and as a result this former student ended up moving several times before coming to the realisation that she could not afford a flat unless she was working full-time. It is at this point that she decides, reluctantly, to leave school. She ends up flatting with her boyfriend. It was the boyfriend issue that triggered the argument with her stepfather, and this seemed to have become the "marker event" in the decision to leave home first and, later on, school.

But as well as problems at home there were also issues at school, which may have acted as "push factors" in coming to this decision. For example, although she says that her results "*were alright*" in one section of the Face-to-face Interview in another section the student identifies that she has been having trouble with mathematics.

*We had like 41 kids in a class and only one teacher, and he was trying to teach us all this advanced algebra. Half of us would stay out because we didn't understand it but he never had time to go over it.*

Her attendance records for the previous year at 366 half days out of a possible 384 would be considered exemplary, and thus her comment about staying out was certainly at odds both with the records and with her own comments about peers wagging classes:

*Sometimes they did, to go to the park and have a cigarette or things like that.*

*Yeah. I was always too scared to do that though. Too scared to wag any class.*

So it can only be assumed that “staying out” was a subject-specific situation, unnoticed or not acted upon by the mathematics teacher. Poor attendance is not the cause but rather a symptom of students at risk of dropping out, according to Greene (1966, p. 27). It is commonly associated with academic problems but, from the home liaison officer's assessment and school records, it would seem that student #2324 was doing well. In the student's assessment:

*I just needed to revise more. Pay more attention in class I suppose, and do homework. I had quite a few other things on my mind really, to be able to do things like that. I was quite a good student. I just tried as hard as I could. That's the kind of student I was.*

Many of her circle of friends left mid-year but she was the first one:

*I think I started the ball rolling. I left, then another girl left and then another and another one. Quite a few left after me and I don't have contact with any of them anymore. I think quite a few of them did leave. They just weren't interested in school. Full stop. They were naughty at school and things like that. But I left because I didn't really have a choice. Probably [I'd have] stayed at school until the end of the sixth form, or fifth form at least, and, figured out where I was at, at the end of the year, what was going on, whether I was doing well at school or not, where I could leave and get a job, or carry on and go through to the sixth form. And the seventh. I just wanted to be able to stay a bit longer. Probably March, April when I knew that the home [situation] wasn't going to get better and I had to do something that would make me happy. And that was leaving home, including leaving school.*

As was shown in Chapter 4, mid-year was a common time for students to leave because this is the time when they receive their first academic report and also when NCEA examination entries are due. That this might have had an influence can be inferred only

from her slight anxieties about mathematics, and from her reported lack of attention in class because of home problems. As we saw in the last chapter, a student's lack of clarity about future directions and lack of integration into the school may be factors in dropping out and so it was too, for student #2324. She had no involvement with any sporting or cultural activities and there were also problems, it seems, associated with her relationships with other students, whom she describes as "*catty schoolgirls.*"

*They were more interested in like, the weekend and boyfriends and things like that. They just gossip about each other, just tart gossip and that starts the ball rolling and gets round the whole school.*

Since she left school she had made some new friends. "*My friends didn't say much [when I left] and I don't see them now,*" she said.

*I am surrounded by new friends at work, up on their level now, not talking about stuff girls talk about, not just whose going out with whom, and crap like that. I was never into that.*

So it sounded as though this student did not have close friends at school. She had different values from the other students, as shown by her dislike of sharing information about her own relationships and her different interests both in and out of school: "*I'm a home bird. I like to do things at home.*"

She had an abhorrence of smoking and drinking and was not part of the party scene:

*I mean, after the weekend, some of them have to have the week off to recover from the weekend (little laugh). I mean, I'm not one who goes out and does things like that. I used to watch TV or walk all the time.*

She also admitted to "narking" on the students who went to the park to smoke.

*It used to annoy me that they used to cut classes to go to the park to have a cigarette and I wanted them to get into trouble because they were doing it.*

Although she is adamant the girls did not know who had disclosed their whereabouts, one can assume her peers would have had their suspicions. This behaviour would not have enamoured her to other students. As a result she may have experienced feelings of alienation. Unlike some of the other girls in the study, once she had left school student #2324 made no effort to stay in touch with the students with whom she went to school, suggesting that relationships at school were not close.

Similarly at home, there are relationship problems. Her conflicting feelings about her natural father are projected onto her stepfather, whom she comes to see more as the enemy than a family member. The psychoanalytical perspective suggested that

the quality of parent-child relationships is linked to peer relations and susceptibility to enmity (Abecassis, 2003, p. 14), which may provide the basis for understanding this student's behaviour.

So, with this bigger picture view of what was going down at school, and possible connections with the behaviour towards peers and the stepfather, it is interesting to revisit the home situation. Although the student claims that "*Mum lives her life through rose coloured glasses*" and had not made the right choice in selecting stepfather over her daughter, there was plenty of evidence that mother was being supportive of her daughter even in the face of opposition from her partner. With hindsight there are different ways of reading her stepfather's insistence that she be in the lounge rather than reading in her room: "*I'd go to bed at 5pm so I didn't get yelled at.*" It may have been, realising that there were tensions between them, that he was attempting to create the opportunity for family discussion. However, she is adamant that she doesn't want to be there because "*he's a dominating alcohol freak.*" But what is the extent of his problem? How much is he really drinking, anyway? The student does acknowledge "*it never like, stopped him working, or anything like that but, it was too often really.*"

It seems that there is no middle ground as far as the student is concerned. She wants mum all to herself:

*Mum is lonelier with him than without him as all [us] kids would visit then. I won't live at home again unless it's just mum because I can't handle it, especially after living in a flat and doing what I want to do [like] reading a book in bed. He thought I should be in the lounge.*

Within this family the stepfather and daughter are each attempting to process the situation but the "emotional work" (Sharma & Black, 2001, cited in Crozier, 2005, p. 55) exerted in trying to deal with their own feelings seems to be overwhelming them to the extent that it is impacting on other areas of their lives.

This student's story illustrates a complex situation. She is trying to deal with the stress over mathematics difficulties and fear of failure in Year 11 and her lack of fit with peers at school. The anxieties she feels at school are carried over into her relationships at home where she is trying to deal with feelings of injustice. She thinks it is unfair that she is considered too young go out with her boyfriend<sup>145</sup>, and that mother is against her

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<sup>145</sup> Interestingly she makes little of the fact that he is no longer on the scene. Sometimes what is not said is just as significant as what is talked about.

going flatting with him. She is experiencing difficulties in coming to terms with the fact her biological father gave her up at birth and her mother's perceived displacement of affection from her to stepfather. Her anger about these issues appears to be projected onto her stepfather, whom she deals with largely by avoidance, although she also reports arguing with him, describing the home environment as a "war zone." The stepfather has emotional issues of his own to work through, related to a recent bereavement, as well as those associated with relationships at home. He also seems to be resorting to avoidance, which he does by taking refuge in the shed, television and alcohol. These, and the ultimatum (me or her), are mechanisms to avoid the daily stress of the relationship with his stepdaughter. Mother too, stuck in the middle between two people she loves, must also be finding the situation hard work.

Mother is doing the emotional work involved in trying to keep the family together, to keep the peace between the warring factions. She is also involved in emotional work to keep her daughter at school, just as being at school involves emotional work for her daughter. It was mother who monitored her daughter's academic progress at school and provided ongoing support. She was the first point of contact for the school, if staff had concerns. Was it because this was a blended family, and mother was identified as the primary caregiver? It seems not because other research has also identified the gendered nature of roles and responsibilities for children's education within the family, even when the two biological parents are living in the same household. This aspect was of great personal interest, as my introduction explained, for my own mother had been a significant force in facilitating wider educational career opportunities for me. In particular, how parents' own life experiences affect the aspirations they have for their own children and their beliefs about parenting will be explored further in the next section.

### ***What Other Students Said: How Did the Family Influence Dropping Out?***

Many of the problems which the young woman in this Leaver's Portrait experienced appeared to be linked to unresolved issues associated with father-absence. The literature suggested that we can learn a great deal about the influence of families by deduction, from studies where parents have been absent. Students from father-absent homes were found to be more likely to experience difficulties at school (Conger & Peterson, 1984, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 94) and were more likely to exhibit deviant

behaviours, either withdrawing from male company or becoming preoccupied with the opposite sex, in an effort to cope with their anxiety and lack of skills in relating to males. Many students who became leavers appeared to be part of the “rock’n’roll” culture of “drugs, alcohol, boyfriend which for some kids...” (focus group Putu) appeared to be their downfall. Their ability to deal with the issues associated with these typically teenage preoccupations rests, according to resilience theorists (Clarke & Clarke, 2003), on the availability of at least one caring family member to support them. The effectiveness of parental support was a product of their availability (how much time the parent had to invest in assisting the daughter to process these issues); their parenting skills (which relate to the parent’s own background education and life experiences) and, also, to what else was going on within the microsystem of the family at that time. All of these factors contribute to what Bronfenbrenner termed “*life course options*” (emphasis in original, 2005b, p. 101). Whilst the potential options for individual development are “defined and delimited by the possibilities available in a given culture at a given point in its history” (Vygotsky, 1978; Vygotsky & Luria, 1956, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005b, p. 100), variation between individuals can be attributed to microcosm effects such as those revealed within the family contexts of leaving students.

### **Sex, Drugs, and Rock ’n Roll**

The Leaver’s Portrait above and the following excerpts from other girls’ stories illustrate well how a preoccupation with boys affected students’ ability to stay focused at school and to attend regularly. Both of these are major factors contributing to dropping out.

*She started to play up a little bit [in Year 10]. I don’t blame friends but the people she started to play round with and that, they didn’t help but smoking, and doing things like that. She sort of got that idea, and boys. She met him in September of [Year 11] in the park one lunch time at school. Well, because of him living on the street, you know, I really was quite scared that he might take her like. She’d never had a serious boyfriend before him and when she met him she just like, stuck to him like a heavy, stuck to your shoes like. They were 24/7 together sort of thing like. (mother of student #3333 Awa High)*

In this case the girl is leaving school because she is pregnant. Her story had a certain resonance with the views of Hetherington (1972, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 94), who suggested that girls who suffer paternal absence because their mothers are

divorced are likely to exhibit deviant behaviours, such as spending large proportions of time seeking out male company and engaging in sex-related behaviour, in an effort to cope with their anxiety and lack of skills in relating to males. Some of the other students also fitted Hetherington's description very closely, as another mother's story shows.

*[She], I think, is easily lead astray in a way. She's got rather an attractive face and loves boys. Loves, loves the boys. As I say, she was climbing out windows. She has always been a wild one. I think [she] has got a very strong libido. I think it's very strong, more than I think that of her friends I mean, and they always joke about it, you know. Here's [daughter]! She pulls a man every week, all the time. She still does. I think it's her nature. I think she's gonna be blessed or cursed for that whatever you want to call it, for the rest of her life. Ooh, she's my best mate. We are, you know, we are very, very, very close. Very similar people you see. Yeah. I've had three marriages and lots of, you know, things so, yeah. [Daughter's] a chip off the old block.* (mother of student #220, Repo High)

Three leavers' stories involved pregnancy, although only in one case was this the reason given for leaving school at that time. Two of the students' mothers were available for follow-up interviews and both disclosed how they too had also followed the same pattern, being teenage parents. Despite the educational aspirations they had for their children, these mothers may have influenced their daughters' life choices through the sharing of their own previous experiences. Through telling her own story in the way that she does, with a certain pride in the similarity of their experiences, the mother of student #220 is giving tacit approval for her daughter's behaviour. Because this mother holds down full-time employment, as well as carrying out the duties of care associated with being a mother and partner, she models how the problems associated with teenage pregnancy and the motherhood role can be dealt with in the longer term context of career development over the life course.

However, these mothers expressed feelings of great disappointment that their daughters had not gone on to complete their education. They knew how hard it was going to be, bringing up a baby on their own.

*I was shattered. I was like, I wasn't happy about it at all, her being pregnant. I was, sort of really depressed at the time, like, she'd not like, ruined her life but ruined (pause) she was going to be old before her time. Like there's my sisters and I all got pregnant like. Dad first sees like, because my eldest sister's about*

*17 and Dad said “No, they couldn’t be married” and my younger sister was 15 and she didn’t adopt it out ’cause my parents had broken up and she went to my mum but my elder sister had to adopt out. [Dad] sort of felt that was much too young for a baby. He never told me any choices, he just made the decision for me. (mother of student #3333, Awa High)*

Because of her own experience, this mother wanted her daughter to make her own decision about whether to keep the baby or terminate the pregnancy.

*I didn’t feel it was my choice. I was bought up, like, we didn’t go in for abortions when (pause). I didn’t tell the rest. I just said you can’t do it for me. Whatever you do, you’ve got to do it for yourself. A decision you live with forever.*

But there are implications for the whole family in daughter’s decision to keep the baby.

*Oh, I look at her and think, oh, the thought of you, as a mistake you know, ruining everyone’s life. I’m unmarried and I haven’t got the patience to look after a baby. I was quite worried about it. Her and I argued at the start of the pregnancy but that was even worse, a bit like I was reaching through time but she wouldn’t do anything. She was just sitting at home sleeping or eating, or she wouldn’t even clean our bath. I’ve told her I’m putting them [unemployed father of the child also staying there] out if she won’t do any work. She’ll do it but only if she’s asked. (mother of student #3333, Awa High)*

Mother has two other children at home and has been working to supplement the benefit she is on because she is a lone parent. As part of her analysis of how she is going to cope, she also decides that her daughter is not returning to school.

*Her behaviour at school, like it was, and she hated state schools up until that point. She even asked to be allowed to stay at school, once she got pregnant but I knew that her mouth was just going to get her, like, go too much overboard. So I told her and she had to leave. I stopped school straight away [for her] as soon as she came home, like on a Monday because it was a positive pregnancy test when she was there. (mother of student #3333, Awa High)*

This decision is also based on mother’s suspicion that her daughter wants to return to school for all the wrong reasons.

*I don’t know if she was wanting to skite to people or whatever but she suddenly decided that she wanted to go to school.*

The physical changes which accompany puberty change the identity of girls and alter their behaviour. Being sexually active gives many young people a sense of being adult that they do not get at home or school, and as a result many experience raised self-esteem. Similarly having a baby establishes a new identity, that of mother and possibly also wife/partner, within the family and the wider community. “Older women—the group of sisters and cousins to which they are already attached—will now accept them with the definitive qualifications of an adult woman” Nash (2002c, p. 155). Becoming pregnant may have had such an effect for student #3333 because, up until that time, her mother acknowledges that she had “*really encouraged her to be immature.*”

Despite the fact that teenage pregnancy is a problem that this parent has first-hand experience of, she displayed a certain naivety in her dealings with her daughter’s first boyfriend.

*They met in the park one lunch time at school. I didn’t know about him for probably three or four months and she just one night asked me did I want to meet him. She brought him around and for the first couple of weeks he was to leave and then she told me where he lived and he was sleeping in the park. He just slowly and slowly moved into her bedroom. She lost complete interest in school.*

Nash suggested that many parents are unaware that their children are sexually active or, “if they suspect, they often, as their children report, ‘prefer not to know’” (2002c, p. 154). This story raised issues about the availability of contraceptive advice. I wondered whether mother had had any discussions with her daughter about contraception but did not like to ask for fear of sounding judgmental. Awa High had a health centre on the school site, and contraceptive advice would have been available through this service, as well as sex education being covered as part of that school’s Health Curriculum in the junior school. Commenting on the reports of earlier sexual activity amongst New Zealand teenagers and the very high teenage pregnancy rate<sup>146</sup> Nash concluded it is unlikely that these trends are “the result solely of a parallel rise in misinformation and ignorance” (2001b, p. 209).

The idea that these pregnancies occur because the young people lack knowledge in this area of their lives...is not always, and perhaps not even most often, an

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<sup>146</sup> New Zealand has one of the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the OECD countries, according to Dickson, Sporle, Rimene, and Paul (2000, cited in Nash, 2001b, p. 200), with the age-specific pregnancy rate for women 15-19 years of age being 33/1,000 for non-Maori and much higher at 94/1,000 for Maori.

appropriate explanation. It may be a still greater error to see their pregnancies as a *lifestyle choice* but somewhere between these positions one might find the real states of mind in which girls become pregnant and accept motherhood. (emphasis in original, Nash, 2002c, p. 157)

Because of her own lack of formal education, the mother of student #3333 was keen that her children took advantage of the educational opportunities available.

*[She] didn't want to go [to school] at all and through my education where I really didn't want to too and I kind of felt I could re-educate myself and the children or something. Even if she did nothing with it, I wanted her to stay on and be educated.*

Mother hopes that, through becoming better educated, her daughter would have a different life story and better life chances than she had experienced: “*I said to [daughter], when you were born, I decided your life was going to be heaps better than mine.*” Mother gave her family the message about the importance of education in brokering a better future and she took extreme measures to try to keep her daughter at school: “*She was attending but not very often so I was bribing her and paying her and things like that.*”

Nash pointed out correctly that the process of decision-making about whether the pregnancy should proceed is not restricted to one point in time. At the point of engagement in unprotected sex, within 48 hours of the event<sup>147</sup> and in the first 28 weeks of pregnancy are critical junctures for different types of termination and thus critical decision-making periods. This understanding is pertinent to student #3333's story because this young woman could arguably be seen to have given up on school and be impatient to leave (ibid.). The daughter finds a way out of what must have become, for her, an intolerable school situation by becoming pregnant.

*She was pregnant. Pretty naughty at school, I made her stay. Probably why she got pregnant (laughs). She'd still be at school if she wasn't pregnant.* (mother of student #3333)

Nash explained that many girls but especially those from working class families who are failing at school, engage in sexual activity in an “ambivalent state of mind” (2002c, p. 155). He suggested that “if the decision is not made rationally, it is often *allowed to happen*” (emphasis in original, ibid.).

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<sup>147</sup> With the advent of the “morning-after” pill; induced abortion carries little risk during the early part of pregnancy, although complications become more likely after the twelfth week.

They take blatant risks at least in part because becoming pregnant will solve certain problems for them. It will take them out of school, give them a new identity within their family and the wider community as a young mother...and entitle them to an income. (Nash, 2002c, p. 155)

Previous studies (Nash & Major, 1995; 1996, cited in Nash, 2002c, p. 150) had found that pregnancy was the main reason for girls dropping out from school, although this was not so in this case study. However, there was evidence of early sexual activity, which Nash claimed teachers have learned to recognise as one of several factors identifying girls at-risk of dropping out.

Teachers have learned to associate early sexual activity, especially by girls, with a cluster of “transition” behaviours, including truancy, drinking, smoking, and cannabis use, all of which can be taken as indications of a rejection of school and a desire to leave (Schamess, 1993). (Nash, 2002c, p. 161)

A study of Hawke’s Bay Year 10 students (Fenwicke & Purdie, 2000, cited in Nash, 2002c, p. 149) found that nearly 40 per cent had experienced sexual intercourse by the time they reached that level. Thus it was not surprising to find that this topic formed a large part of girls’ conversations at all the schools. However, it was surprising to some of the students themselves. Student #1261 had moved from a coeducational school to a single-sex high decile school (Putu), and was somewhat shocked at what she heard.

*I’d never been in that kind of environment in my life, and I thought “OK, what’s going on here” you know you’re only 15, 16. What’re you doing, you know. Quite a few of the girls were a bit promiscuous, yeah. Not very good. I don’t like that sort of thing. And it’s like my second day at school and they brought up all the stuff about having sex and things and [I] was thinking whoa! (laugh, laugh) you know, what’re you doing, sort of thing, you’re young. I mean [at my other school] people did go off and have sex and all but it wasn’t to that extent. (student #1261)*

This student’s experience supports the contention that middle class girls of high esteem and with the potential and support to succeed in school are now also commonly engaging in sexual activity at a young age (Nash, 2002c). In the past it was girls from working class backgrounds who were more likely to engage in teenage sexual activity, although these girls are still more likely to get pregnant than their middle class sisters. Nash therefore warned that schools must recognise that it may no longer be appropriate to assume “sexual activity, even under-age and promiscuous sexual activity, [is] a

taken-for-granted signifier of resistance to education” (2002c, p. 164). Certainly many parents have now begun to accept their daughters’ engagement in sexual activities whilst still at high school, whereas even when I was at university the concept of mixed flatting was considered outrageous to my parents, probably because they worried it might lead to increased opportunities for sexual liaison.

In working class families Nash maintained that sexual activity is “only lightly monitored, and in many families actually taken for granted. Parents often attempt only to ensure that their daughters are not faced with an unwanted pregnancy” (ibid., p. 153). Similarly, many middle class families now also accept the reality of their daughter’s sexual activities because “a pregnancy that results in childbirth will almost certainly bring to an end the anticipated educational and occupational trajectory for which they have planned and worked for so many years (ibid., p. 152). Nash explained that “in response to a reality they are powerless to change, the common strategy has been transformed from routines of surveillance designed to inhibit sexual activity to practices of monitoring intended to prevent its unwanted consequences” (ibid.) through “an intensification of the personal relationship between mother and daughter” (ibid., p. 210).

Through a close and trusting relationship with their mother it is thought that middle class girls, in particular, share their relationship experiences and seek advice. As discussed in Chapter 4, in middle and higher decile schools the powerful influence of the caregiver, usually mother, in making students return to school, and then to stay on to complete, supports this notion. However, students’ stories showed that some mothers found coming to terms with the sometimes conflicting roles of friend, confidant and parent stressful. Student #220’s mother, for example, considered she was good “*mates*” with her daughter. Difficulties were experienced when mother finally came to the realisation that things were getting out of control, and she needed to rein in her daughter.

*I’d brought [daughter] up basically on my own and we were not like mother and daughter. We were like best friends. Flat mates! But I paid all the bills and went to work, you know. So we had a huge bond, we really did, that I thought was unbreakable, I thought she had respect for me to tell her what to do, and for her to understand it was not that I wanted to be bossy, it was that it was in her best interest. That all flew out the window. (mother of student #220)*

The emotional processing done in coming to terms with this is hard work.

*That's what the counsellor suggested, I apply tough love. It was tough alright, and I had to sit there and watch her flying on one wing, you know, and she crashed into things and got into all sorts of trouble.* (mother of student #220)

Hochschild used the term “emotional labour” to describe the effort involved in situations like this, where mother is suppressing “[her] feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (1983, cited in Sharma & Black, 2001, p. 925). The notion of emotional labour, as it applies to students, is a construct rarely referred to in the dropout literature. However, the Australian research of Smyth and Hattam (2004, p. 87) identified that many students and their parents are already emotionally vulnerable due to circumstances external to the school environment: “Having to deal with strong emotional reactions to what’s going on at school...only exacerbates such emotional vulnerability.” This provides another clue as to why it is that some students drop out, whereas others stay on, when faced with seemingly similar situations at school.

Not all students experienced deep trusting and sharing relationships with their mothers, as became apparent from the stories which the home liaison officer (HLO) at the lower decile (Repo) school told about what she described as the sex, drugs and rock and roll culture and lack of adequate parental supervision.

*I think the social life has got a lot to do with [dropping out] and boredom. You see, so many now come to high school—they've already been drunk, they've already been having sex. They've done it all. By the time they get to the fifth form, you know, life's pretty boring. Nearly all the parents want what's best for their kids, just some of them (pause). Some of them just lack parenting. But they all care.* (HLO Repo)

She worried about the girls’ lack of parental supervision and what they got up to out of school but her ability to influence their behaviour was limited. Like the promiscuous 14 year old Nash described as “on a trajectory that would lead inevitably to her early withdrawal from school” (2002c, p. 159), the home liaison officer was clearly concerned that student #2348 would become pregnant and drop out from school.

*[Student #2348] smoked a lot of dope, her sister gave it to her on a daily basis. And when she was at school, she was never any trouble—ever. And she was such a lost waif and stray but there was nothing we could do about it. She knew that her weekend behaviour wasn't safe. You know, I used to try, you know, to say to her, “look, don't sleep with all of them, don't (little laugh), don't get that drunk.*

*Don't share your toothbrush, don't share other men's dirty cocksies," I told her quite bluntly. But I really liked her, I really liked her. (HLO Repo)*

The sex education and contraceptive advice that the home liaison officer gives her girls exemplifies the trend noted in Chapter 2 for schools to compensate for lack of parental availability.

### **Parenting Skills as a Factor in Dropping Out**

A small minority of caregivers appear to lack parenting skills, and show a distinct lack of sense of responsibility to the families under their care. This is a very judgmental statement, but one formed over years of experience. It is a conclusion supported by the leavers' stories, and by the admission of some of the mothers, who were often acutely aware of their deficiencies as parents when confronted with the complex problems associated with their daughters' leaving school and transitioning into adulthood. One mother expressed the wish that training be made available for people about to become parents. She was reflecting on the difficulties she had experienced and also on the difficulties she knew her daughter would soon face as a teenage parent.

*And I do think, like, parents should have training. You have to have a licence to drive a car but you can bring a child up, yeah. I think it's really weird. I don't know how you would change it. I think you should have to do some courses and then have a child. You can't make somebody love somebody. I just about went up the wall. It's like a kid is more important than cleaning. (mother of student #3333)*

Many of the issues which lead ultimately to the student dropping out of school have their roots in poor parenting skills as far as the teachers were concerned. That these problems were not restricted to lower decile schools is evident from comments made by school staff at Putu High. The principal acknowledged that some of her students also experience home problems but the way she discussed these appears to indicate that they did not surface commonly as school-related concerns.

*I would imagine that for some kids, there's a lot going on at home that also makes them feel that they want to be more independent. I guess it's, I mean we deal with that quite a lot too, in trying to keep kids in school and they may end up on independent [youth] benefit or [may] have not quite the wherewithal to move beyond school. They have to stay on to get there. (principal of Putu)*

Student #1388 was a specific case of an early leaver from this school whose story supported the contention that permissive parenting styles and lack of parenting skills were a major factor in early student leaving.

*The relationship with the mother, and that deteriorated, probably, when [daughter] tried to push the boundaries and I think mum was quite inexperienced and not very comfortable in her, I mean not sure, in her mothering role and boundaries and things too. Some mothers seem to, kind of, be really clear and set about boundaries for their daughters and what's acceptable and what's not. I think [student's] mother kind of, it's ok and then suddenly panicked. But it wasn't ok and [then she had to] try and pull her [in] and [daughter] couldn't understand. (deputy principal of Putu)*

Parents lack confidence in their ability to parent. In the case of those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, their lack of education is what led some parents to be controlling and over restrictive. One mother realised retrospectively that she had been what Reay, David, and Ball described as “unnecessarily overprotective,” a common characteristic of working class mothers in dealing with transition issues (2005, p. 75).

*Yeah, I encouraged her to be immature. I always thought they would grow up eventually sort of and now I think that when I sort of, like at 18 she was kind of slack, you know turned into an 18 year old, you know, after I'd been treating her like a 14 year old (little laugh) forever. I've really encouraged her to be immature. That might be why she had a mouth on her like she has now, when I come to think about it (pause). I didn't encourage her to act like a young adult. I was like her as a young teenager. Going to have a good time and not want to shift out of home. I always put restrictions like. I didn't want her to grow up. (mother of student #3333)*

Being a parent was not an easy role as one mother, whose daughter's disappearance had been reported to the police, observed:

*She'd changed and wasn't the girl I knew. Hormones? She doesn't like being told straight up. She's my one and only but I will not drop my standards. We are two different types of people. All the teachers had been very helpful and done their best but at the end of the day the child has choice and if she doesn't want to learn, what can we as parents do. I'm mum (Pause). I can only pray and hope.*

*The gift of forgiveness and love is always there. [I'm] too young to be a grandmother but I understand. (mother of student #2247)*

When parents were having difficulties with their daughters at home they often turned to schools to assist them, as in this story. However, some parents found the schools less than supportive of the standards of behaviour that they wished to uphold.

*I had a bad experience with [the dean]. I was in there like you know, like, whatever trouble [daughter] had got herself into and [dean] asked her like why didn't she like [other student] and her answer to it was that they were "sacky arse" and I was like, look sacky arse isn't even a word and I thought if I'm going to sit here and listen to things like that I may as well leave, take you home and smack you soundly. (laughingly) [Dean] she just like, is she sacky arse? It made me angry. I thought, whoa, I just found an excuse to give her a... yeah, it did upset me a bit. I tend to go backwards once I get a bit of upset too and I don't know. I'm getting better as I get older but well. (mother of student #3333)*

And students had different reactions to school staff extending their duty of care role into their private lives. Student #3333 talked extensively about the range of teacher-student relationships she had experienced at her mid-decile school, and in particular one less than positive experience where a teacher told her that she had seen her in the weekend with boys and told her that she should not be concerned with that sort of thing—that school was more important.

*Yeah, I knew my family cared that I wasn't at school but my teachers, they take home their pay packet on Friday night. There's some teachers that overly care. It was a good thing that she cared so much but then, on the same level it was a bad thing like, teachers aren't supposed to worry about what you do on the weekend, as long as you're at school and you pass all your assignments. (student #3333)*

Despite this teacher's interest being no doubt the result of genuine caring, this student felt that the teacher had overstepped the boundaries of the role. In the Progress at School project, it was also found that students felt "subjected to an intrusive surveillance and an annoying form of pressure" from teachers (Nash & Major, 1995; 1996a; 1996b, cited by Nash, 2002c, p. 163).

What [students] find more difficult to tolerate is the interest teachers sometimes take in their relationships and their willingness to make known their opinion on the appropriateness or otherwise of their choice of friends....For many students,

the institutionalised absence of a realistic and mature acceptance of their sexuality is another indication of the fundamental unreality of school. (Nash, 2002c, p. 163)

In contrast the student from the lowest decile school spoke relatively positively about the support and advice she had received, although it was still not influential enough to keep her at school in the end. Her parents had accepted already that she was on the “slippery slope” and that practical steps to avoid unwanted pregnancy needed to be taken with some urgency.

*Assistant principal, she always tried to help me stay and she used to tell me what I'd get out of it to stay, or what am I going to get out of it if I keep on going and drinking and doing other stuff. Yeah, it got to my brain and stuff. I was thinking “No, that's it, I'm going to keep on coming to school.” And then it was just the time when I come home everyone comes around “Well, what are you up to? Come and get on the pill.” Sick. (student #2348)*

This student gave up trying at this stage, and seemed resigned to the fate her family obviously saw for her. She came from a home where both dad and mum were present. Her mother was from the Pacific Islands and did not appear to speak good English:

*Hardly ever found anybody at home. Her mother was an Island woman and mum, well, I seldom managed to get hold of her but when I occasionally did, she would pretend not to speak English and she really couldn't be bothered. (HLO Repo High)*

The liaison officer's comments highlight some of the difficulties which parents, whose first language is other than English, experience in developing effective relationships with the school.

## **Background Effects**

Parents' relationships with school have been acknowledged as an important factor in students' achievement and retention but this example illustrates that where children's class or cultural backgrounds are different from those of school staff, parents have difficulties in negotiating effective relationships (Reay, 2005, p. 26).

Poverty was identified in other studies as inhibiting the capacity of families to achieve informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1999, p. 133). How structural disadvantage, such as poverty, influenced parenting behaviour and other aspects of family life is frequently overlooked in sociological research, according to Sampson and

Laub (ibid.). Similarly, they claimed that developmental models in psychology have tended to emphasise family processes and early antisocial processes to the neglect of structural context. In seeking to address the question of why only some adolescent boys reared in poor neighbourhoods became delinquents, these authors found it necessary to bring together aspects from both structure and process theories to provide an adequate explanation. This has possible applications for the present study which considers, amongst other aspects, the similar question of why only some students from apparently similar backgrounds drop out from school. Sampson and Laub suggested that the high levels of financial stress experienced by many lower class parents result in psychological distress, which in turn affects child management practices. In times of economic difficulty aversive interactions between parents and children increase and the capacity for supportive, consistent and involved parenting is diminished. Thus, it is through parenting behaviours that economic hardship is thought to affect adolescent development.

This idea was substantiated by a re-analysis of the Glueck's (1950) study on juvenile delinquency, leading Sampson and Laub to conclude that family processes, such as supervision, attachment and discipline, "mediated approximately two-thirds of the effect of poverty and other structural background factors on delinquency" (ibid., p. 133). They theorised that poverty inhibits the capacity of families to achieve informal social control, which in turn increases the likelihood of adolescent delinquency. It seems that strong and consistent family values and associated practices of control serve as important buffers against structural disadvantage in the larger community.

The story of student #2348 served to illustrate the application of this theory. The family lived in state housing flats, and both parents were registered as unemployed.

*In the middle of this awful, awful, God awful state housing area to see this tall, and well presented man—socks, sandals, some heavy book, and listening to the National station. It wasn't what I expected. And I couldn't believe it, and I thought, "He must be step-dad." But [student] tells me, he definitely was her dad and mother was an Island woman. (HLO Repo)*

Student #2348's parents did not know that she had been skipping classes or about her weekend activities. The fact that her parents were rarely home enabled this student to intercept school mail to ensure her parents did not find out what she had been up to.

*I am grateful for the moment, just when I saw her recently and she's not pregnant. So I thought, well, hopefully she makes it. I mean, I never had a*

*conversation with the parents. I would say, you know, "I've come to see about [daughter] not being at school." "Oh, she'll be there tomorrow" and that was it and you could say you didn't have any insight into what was going on and why she wasn't there. (HLO Repo)*

The student's actions and her parent's dismissive response to the visits of the home liaison officer effectively defeated the schools' attempts to engage the parents in redressing the concerns teachers had about this student's absences ("*she just didn't come. And she'd disappear for days at a time*"), infringements of school rules ("*she had alcohol at school*"), and lack of academic progress. The student's own view of the situation is equally of interest. It gives a better picture of what was going on at home and why leaving school became inevitable.

*I just was enjoying [school] but then I caught up with the boys at fourth form. And that's when I started slipping away. I think because I was having too many late nights, I couldn't get up for school. Oh my father was shocked, and (more laughter) telling me "what are you leaving school for?" "bip, bip, bip" "I dunno" (laughingly) 'cause I didn't want to tell him that I was drinking and my mum, she just said, okay, whatever you want to do, you do it, its up to you. It's your future and that. Thanks mum. (giggles) but because she never used to go to school. She always had to look after her sisters. Oh, she was number eight. (student #2348)*

Student #2348 was on the verge of being suspended, "*'cause I'd had my three chances,*" at age 15 years and eight months but never actually went back to school to face the consequences of her behaviour because "*none of them knew where to find me.*" Mother rarely attended school herself as a youngster so she was not terribly worried about her daughter following a similar pattern. However, father clearly had a stronger educational background than his partner, and from his daughter's description he is clearly very disappointed that his daughter is leaving school early. There is a difference in the value of education evident in the views of the parents here.

In cases like this one where parents lacked consistency in their values and approach and were not able to provide adequate parental supervision, they found it difficult to retrieve the situation when confronted with the reality of their daughter dropping out of school. That the educational background and personal experiences of parents were very important in determining the educational outcomes of their children, including length of stay at school, was alluded to in Chapter 2 and supported by this

girl's story. The strong relationship between parents' own educational experiences and drop out was further confirmed by the schools, particularly by the experiences of staff at the lower decile high school, as indicated from discussion with the deputy principal (DP) of Repo High.

Researcher: *Well, when I spoke to [the principal] about it last time, she made a comment about (reading from notes) "even though students were doing really well, they still left." That's why she was interested in this research.*

DP: *And I think her theory would be "They would because that's when the parents left." So it comes back to the expectations, or our experiences.*

The question of "family inheritance," of the tension between the aspirations of parents for their children and the current social situation of the family which can give rise to other, sometimes conflicting, expectations in the case of working class fathers, is explained succinctly by Bourdieu: "At one and the same time he says: be like me, act like me but be different, go away....succeed, change, and move into the middle class" (1999b, p. 510). This "contradictory injunction" causes the son to feel "guilty of betrayal if he succeeds, he is guilty of disappointing if he fails" (ibid.). Bourdieu focused only on the relationship between son and father in his dissertation on family inheritance. Nash pointed out that "strategies of reproduction in middle-class families have traditionally depended on educating sons for economic independence and daughters for marriage within their class of origin" (2002c, p. 151). However, he claimed that "daughters are now educated both for a level of economic security of their own and for their future as married women" (ibid.). This dual role expectation for girls would seem to pose additional challenges to amicable relationships within the family setting, particularly where mother and father have different backgrounds and conflicting expectations for their daughter.

However, not all females appeared to be subjected to such family tensions, especially where they had older siblings and mum and dad were experienced parents. In this study it was found that some experienced parents from professional backgrounds had daughters capable of going on to university who, against both school and parental expectations, dropped out of school before completing Year 13.

*Dad's a scientist and mum's a teacher, and [daughter]'s kind of a rebel. [She] was also the baby, so mum and dad perhaps had had some experience before and I guess mum and dad perhaps had a bit more confidence as parents so, while they didn't*

*always approve of [daughter] and her antics, they'd had kids before and they weren't quite so precious about you know, that sense of failure or whatever. And they would say they would've loved to see her stay on at school, and gone on to university and certainly, in terms of her intellectual abilities, she was more than capable of that but she kind of moved it down that pathway that she personally felt comfortable with, and she'd grown out of school.* (Discussion about student #1401 with Putu deputy principal)

Whilst this student's parents were not happy about her decision they were accepting of it.

*She was very intelligent, you know. She was quite independent, had strong opinions. For her, leaving in the middle of sixth form, you know, she had outgrown school and I think I could see that if she stayed at school she would end up [getting] herself with so much trouble, we'd end up having to ask her to leave anyway. They went off to the IT course at [polytechnic] and mum came in with [daughter] and really sweat-hard<sup>148</sup> to leave but they really had to do the hard thinking I guess. And she did think it through I think. She'll be a success whatever she does, because she's got the people skills and she's intelligent.* (deputy principal, with reference to student #1401)

Once again we see it is mother, on behalf of the family, who has the interface with the school. Personal experiences indicate it is mothers who did the emotional work of seeking to ameliorate the tensions within the family caused by these sometimes contradictory expectations. It seemed that many of the girls in these early leaving stories had similar experiences.

### **Making Time for Daughter**

Being a parent is usually hard work. Although it is commonly referred to as a "labour of love," finding the time and energy for children when both parents are working can be difficult. Supporting children's education necessitates particular types of work which Crozier and Reay defined as emotional labour (a concept discussed previously), domestic labour, and professional labour (2005, p. xii). Professional labour involves supporting homework, and providing educational experiences, such as cultural experiences or extra tuition, out of the home. Domestic labour typically concerns the provision of meals, organising uniform and equipment for school, and making sure

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<sup>148</sup> That is, they sweated hard over the decision.

daughter attends regularly and gets to school on time. The greatest share of this work falls to mothers as part of the wider responsibilities they undertake generally in the care and education of children within a family setting.

*And then, of course we put the pressure on the mums. Most of the mums at this time of the year are in the pack houses or starting to be in the pack houses and are doing long hours—hard work. And trying to run a house. There's lots of kids. It's quicker for mum to cook the meal herself than to try to teach the kids. And the kid hasn't been at school all day, maybe. And I leave a note, letting her know. Late in the day it's the last thing she wants when the washing's on the line, laundry is overflowing, tea needs to be cooked, younger one's suddenly sick and mum's trying to think "Can I get into work, kids to school tomorrow and go to work?" I mean it's grim for a lot of them. So mum might say—you know, you'd better stay home tomorrow and it's sad. That's mum's job. (HLO Repo High)*

Transporting children to school is another major responsibility undertaken frequently by mother, plus the attendant stresses of getting teenagers out of bed in time and ensuring they eat breakfast before they go to school. These are not the easiest of tasks, as any parent can attest.

*We took lunch, yeah. But we'd normally (laughingly) eat that. But when we first [started school] I was always like quite late to school. I used to get a ride with my mother in the morning and so I'd always eaten lunch in my first class, or probably in the second one, or I was hungry really which, otherwise I'd pass out 'cause I didn't have time for breakfast in the morning. (Little laugh) I've never been a morning person since I was little. (student #2324)*

Not only did mothers try to ensure their daughters got to school on time but they also saw to it that they attended regularly. This was sometimes a very difficult challenge. In one case the mother bribed her daughter to attend school by paying her 20 dollars each week. Needless to say this was not an effective strategy. The girl took the money and went off to school but once there she would skip classes.

*Oh for about, say the whole year, I'd been going just on and off, like a couple of days a week [and] I wasn't putting my best in and I didn't turn up for classes." (student #3333)*

So there were huge demands on mothers' time. This was particularly so for mothers who held down employment outside the home. For solo mothers time was even more at

a premium. Even if parents had the skills to assist with homework it would have been difficult to make the time to do so. The strains of juggling so many competing demands must surely have reduced their capacity to listen attentively to their daughter's concerns. Indeed many students seemed afraid of sharing their problems and chose instead various strategies to deceive their mothers into thinking that they were still attending school, as this excerpt from student #1388 shows:

*My mum didn't even know until I'd left. I just said that I had exams but I didn't. I had exams for about three months. Yeah. Well, you know, she [twigged] in the end. It was a bit late by then. (student #1388)*

This fear may be associated with the knowledge that not attending school would disappoint or maybe anger her mother. Fear of violence in the home was very real for students at the lower decile school as the deputy principal remarked: "*Teachers know that at home they're going to be yelled at and beaten*" (Repo deputy principal).

Balancing the time for domestic responsibilities, whilst demands to fulfil the professional requirements of the senior secondary school increased, was stressful for the parent undertaking these often conflicting duties. Professional responsibilities, such as assisting with homework, monitoring academic progress and meeting with the school about their daughter's performance, were carried out by working mothers within tight time constraints not experienced to the same degree by other parents. There were also financial concerns for women of lower socioeconomic groups, especially solo mothers who carried out all the duties without the support of a partner.

*You know, people like me. I mean, I'm a single mother, I've always basically done everything I can to get what they want, but my wages will only go so far. After you spent lots and lots of money on a uniform for her and then, you know, it was either too long, or too short, or she didn't have the correct socks on or the correct shoes. Well, if I can't afford to buy her shoes, well, you know. It makes it very, very hard. And there's only so much and we've still got to live. And we've still got to have food, and everything else that goes with it. (mother of student #3167)*

On top of this were employer requirements where one or both parents were in paid labour. In this mother's view, the tension between school requirements and home and work responsibilities was irresolvable. It influenced her to decide that her daughter should leave school.

*I used to have to go to [the deputy principal's] office. I got tired of listening to it all. She was wagging school and getting herself into trouble and I was always down there, and I haven't got time to go down to school every five minutes. So I said she may as well leave.* (mother of student #3167)

There were other instances where it seemed that it was the mothers who had made the decision about their daughters' continuation: Student #3183 had returned to Year 12 "to get an education and mum said I have to"; student #3333 left school before the end of the academic year, despite the fact that she wanted to continue: "Once she got pregnant I told her and she had to leave," her mother said.

Such findings support overseas studies which showed that within the family there is typically a clear division of labour in which schooling and associated educational problems are seen as the mother's responsibility primarily (Reay, 2005, p. 27). Mothers were "pre-eminently responsible for their children's upbringing and education" in London studies conducted by David, West, and Ribbens, 1994 (cited in David, 2005, pp. 15-16). As the following excerpt illustrates, it is mothers who typically engage with the school in the "support, defence and protection of their children in the face of a system that is failing to meet their children's needs" (Crozier & Reay, 2005, p. xii).

*I think it was the occasional hair style, or the colour of my hair. I dyed it blond and it went really yellow. I got into trouble for that. I just about got kicked out of school for that. Said I had to dye it a darker colour and do something about me, my schooling I suppose. Kick me out of school 'til it's done. I'd have to stay home until I'd done something about it. Mum was very annoyed. She went in, she took me in, she was....A big meeting with [the deputy principal] about it. And I got put on report, which is still not a good thing to do.* (student #2286)

It was still the mothers who took the main day-to-day responsibility for educational matters in two parent families. This same student's story also shows that fathers of middle class children were involved but that the roles of the parents differed.

*I found the work real hard but me and mum and dad never really thought to come and ask for [help]. (Pause) We just kind of breezed through the year and tried and like my dad would sit down and help me with things and stuff because he's just worked on the orchard, like all hours but he didn't have time so, we had to get me some other help.* (student #2286)

How the different roles were divided up seemed to be related not just to gender but also to the educational background and previous school experiences of parents.

*And the thing with my parents, all I have to do is try my hardest, and they're happy with that. They don't care if I fail, they don't. They feel very proud of me if I, like, pass something but they're not expecting me to reach the top and be [the] number one student because mum went through the same thing at school. She knew exactly what was happening. So of course, she'd get upset as well, go in there and talk to the teachers and say you're not taking much, you know, notice of my daughter. She was good and then, dad would take me from there, and stuff and that was good. Yeah. He's brainy. He's the brain and me and my mother are the learners. Yeah, mum and dad went to school. Mum most of the time. (student #2286)*

This story supported David's contention that "mothers are far more routinely and regularly involved than fathers" (2005, p. 16) but it also suggests that parents' personal histories influence not only the level of involvement in their children's schooling but also their effectiveness in dealing with teachers (Reay, 2005, p. 26). Mother had chosen the secondary school for her daughter. Student #2286 had wanted to go to a coeducational school, one which offered dance as an option in the curriculum.

*It was just closer than going to [the coeducational school]. I wanted to go there but mum wanted me to go to [Repo], so I ended up going there which mum has said to me that she regrets sending me there. (Student #2286)*

Mother is adamant that her daughter is not going to experience the same things which happened to her at school so, with her husband's support, she goes into school to sort out the issues concerning her about her daughter's schooling. The school's focus appeared to be concerned more about this student's non-compliance with the uniform code, with the colour of her hair and with her irregular attendance but the mother is concerned about her daughter's academic progress, which she sees as related to her daughter's ill health and reluctance to go to school.

*Her mother was supportive, very supportive. Over the hair issues—the school was entirely wrong, and, we just had to back off. So we compromised, so when the attendance issue came up her mother was supportive of her again but also supportive of the school report when she saw the value of [daughter] being here daily. She just wasn't getting out of bed. "I'm not going to go." Yes, so that was good. (deputy principal of Repo)*

Although there was some element of debate, the review of international research indicated that students from single-parent families and step families were more likely to drop out of school (Pong & Ju, 2000, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 138). Many of the families in this study were headed by the mother. This exploration of the extent of mothers' roles and responsibilities gives a good indication of why this correlation might exist. Whilst even in two-parent homes mothers generally took responsibility for day-to-day matters associated with schooling, they did so usually in an environment where support from the other parent was available.

### **Parents' Effectiveness at Dealing with School Problems**

That different types of family relationships were established with the school according to parents' social strata was also noted by Lareau (1989, p. 123): "interconnectedness" in upper-middle class families and "separation" in working class families. As was seen in the case of student #2286, middle class parents see their role as a compensatory one because of a "combination of relative affluence, educational expertise and 'self-certainty' that gave them options" (Reay, 2005, p. 30) to modify school provision and redress any perceived gaps. In this case student #2286 is provided with extra tuition by her father initially but when it is clear that a higher level of academic support is required, it is brought to the attention of the school, and as a result a teacher's aid is organised to assist the daughter in certain classes. In addition, because dance is not offered as a subject at this school parents arrange for their daughter to attend private lessons after school.

*I think I had dance on the night anyway. I do modern, cat and athletics. I've been doing that for six years and before that I did gymnastics, before I got bored. So I've always had some kind of outside interest. (student #2286)*

The organisation of culturally enhancing activities, such as music and dancing lessons, and the provision of additional tuition when students are experiencing difficulty may be impossible for working class mothers because of lack of time, money and/or expertise.

Working class mothers shouldered most of the burden of involvement in their children's education alone (Reay, 2005, p. 17), and tended to see their relationship with the school as complementary and supportive of the teachers. The fact that it is mother who is primarily responsible for the care and education of children is not merely to do with society's view that women are better at it. For many women there is no choice. Of the 28 students interviewed nine were from families where it was clearly established

that their mothers were on their own, without a partner. Others had blended family situations, two students were living independently, and for some girls their family arrangements were very unclear. Many seemed to move between members of the family with a surprising frequency. In families where there was no father figure within the nuclear family, other members of the family (often maternal grandmothers or sisters) commonly provided support to the solo mother<sup>149</sup>. This reinforces the perception that childcare and children's education are matters for women to deal with.

So in middle class families it seems more likely that both mother and father may be involved in their daughters' education but even so, they take on different roles. Previous studies had shown that fathers' involvement was greater where they had more experience of education and when they came from middle class backgrounds (David, 2005, p. 17). This was the case for student #2286, where her father has had a higher level of education than her mother: "*Mum left, I think, at the end of the fifth form, yeah, and I think dad went the whole way, yeah.*"

Thus it can be seen that mothers typically did the day-to-day organisation of the home, including monitoring school requirements and fulfilling the requirements of school procedures. Generally it was the mothers who would ring in about their daughters' absence from school, write letters explaining lateness, absence or uniform problems, and they were usually the ones who would come in to see the principal about difficulties which they thought might impact on their daughters' education. In this study it was common for mothers to sign off permission to leave school on the school's Leaving Form, even where the student had said that both her parents were supportive of her leaving school.

Mothers were the ones found to be "linking and co-ordinating children's and other family members' needs with services' and agencies' provisions and requirements" (David, Davies, Edwards, Reay, & Standing, 1997, p. 3). For example, student #3144, a young Maori girl who was, teachers said, "*a hard working but quiet student,*" described how "*Mum went in and friends got my Leaver's Form signed.*" So the mother had taken the steps to withdraw her daughter from school. Why had the mother done this? There had obviously been a lot of sorting out going on at home before this event. The dean said "*there were family issues but you couldn't get her to talk about them. She just drifted away from school, just stopped attending.*" In a letter from mother explaining

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<sup>149</sup> In my experience as principal there were few situations where father was in sole care of the family, and there were no such instances in this study.

her daughter's absences it mentions that "*suicide shattered our family*" and that family were "*all working through the trauma.*" The student had not availed herself of the counselling services made available through the school (an issue for many Maori, which is touched on elsewhere in this chapter) but when I spoke to this student after leaving school it was clear that the family had its own ways of dealing with their issues and concerns. She explained that she had gone to stay with family in Australia because she had "*had a hard year personally, so went to clear [my] head.*" She had a positive experience of school: "*I enjoyed school. In talking to friends [I] came to the conclusion [Awa] was one of the best.*" However, she decided not to go into Year 13 "*when I found I could do the course with the qualifications I had.*"

### **Other Family Issues Affecting Drop Out and Retention**

So far in the discussion about the influence of the family on drop out there has been a strong focus on the relationship with parents. However, as in the story above, other family members and other family problems were seen to be factors leading to students dropping out of school. The following example similarly shows how other family problems can affect a student's decision to leave.

student #3183 had returned to Year 12 "*to get an education and [because] Mum said I have to.*" When she decided to leave she said that her mother was disappointed, as was her father. In this case the student said she wanted to leave for employment, to earn more money "*because I wanted more stuff,*" a decision she said later she regretted. The reasons this student gave for leaving differed from those that the school and hostel staff felt were really important factors in this girl's decision to go. Teachers felt that a big factor in student #3183 leaving was the behaviour of her younger sister. "*The fact that her sister was always in trouble was a problem—it was quite embarrassing for her. And then there was the problem of hostel fees.*" Financial problems at home possibly accounted for this teenager's focus on financial independence at the time of leaving. In a previous year this student had been stood down from school for three days because she had hit another student. It transpires that her sister had been given alcohol by this other student and student #3138, as "big sister" was angry with her for leading her sister astray. With father losing his job: "*father didn't have a job and I think the father had also been in prison for drugs,*" the hostel manager concluded "*they'd been through quite a rough time.*" So the actions of other members of the family and changes

affecting home circumstances, such as financial problems, can also be seen to be part of the very complex mix of factors influencing students' decisions to leave school.

### ***Summary***

Whilst the focus of this section has been on ascertaining the influence of the family, particularly the role which parents played in the decision to drop out of school or to stay on, it is clear from the stories shared thus far that dropping out is typically the culmination of a multitude of other issues and events. These lead finally to a change in the student's attitude to school and the decision not to attend. A strong relationship with at least one parent did not necessarily protect the student from dropping out but it did provide students with the support they needed to survive the experience and make effective transitions into work or further study.

Parents were found to influence dropping out in a number of ways, from providing advice and guidance through to acting as a role model for sex and work roles. Conflicting messages, through a mismatch between what parents said were their dreams and aspirations for their children's futures and the realities of their lived experiences, added to students' difficulties in relating to parents during the teenage years.

Within the family there seemed to be a clear division of labour in which children's schooling was seen as the mother's responsibility primarily, a finding that is congruent with Reay's conclusions (2005). However, there were differences between mothers in different family circumstances and class locations (after the findings of David, West, & Ribbens, cited in David, 2005, pp. 15-16, and Lareau, 1989, p. 123). In the three cases where students agreed that their parents could be interviewed in depth it transpired that father was no longer living at home, although in one instance mother had recently entered a new relationship and so there was a father-figure in that situation. In these cases, and in other cases where feedback had been given by telephone, it was evident that the decision to leave had come after much interaction between the mothers and the school. Most of the stories showed that when families were experiencing difficulties they often turned to schools to assist them. However, where there was a lack of congruence between the background of the mothers and that of school staff some level of dissatisfaction in the outcomes was evidenced.

Mothers in different family circumstances and class locations were seen to have different relationships with the school determined by their own previous experiences and educational backgrounds. Where students' class and cultural backgrounds were very different from those of the (generally white middle class) teachers, parents had difficulties in negotiating effective relationships with school and addressing issues of concern regarding their children's progress.

But what was actually going on at school for these students, the ones who left before completing the academic year they had enrolled for in 2003? In what ways does the school contribute to the generation of inequality/difference in retention rates? Chapter 4 looked at the influence of both the physical and social environment on student retention and drop out. In the next section the relationships which students had with teachers and schoolmates is the particular facet to be explored. How the school has influenced this is seen through students' stories and the perspectives of other key informants.

## **The Snow Job: School Effects in Dropping Out**

In the Leavers' Portrait (student #2286) which has been selected to focus this discussion on school effects both parents took a keen and active interest in their daughter's educational affairs, as indicated in the last section. This student's story illustrates the struggles students experience in establishing a sense of individual identity within the school setting and how teachers shape students' expectations and aspirations through their daily practices.

### ***Leaver's Portrait #2286***

**The snow job:  
"Getting donged about the hair every day"**

Although the parents were well-off people running a rural business, the student attended a low decile school (Repo) because of its proximity and convenience for transport. This school was not the daughter's first choice and she had been unhappy at

the school since Year 9. She left as soon as she was able to legally, with few qualifications and no idea what she was going to do in the immediate future. In the telephone interview soon after, she said she was leaving because she was not enjoying school. She was not coping with the work and she did not see herself having a future there.

In the Face-to-face Interview this student elaborated on the themes identified originally. At the conclusion of the interview the researcher summarised how the school had influenced this student to drop out but at this stage an entirely new line of reasoning was introduced.

Researcher: *So, basically, in terms of a summary of how you came to leave school, it was, as it were, having a special time in terms of having to cope with specific subjects and [not getting the] sort of help [needed] and getting picked on?*

Student: *Yeah.*

Researcher: *Someone being disruptive in the classroom wasn't there?*

Student: *Yes.*

Researcher: *Are they the main things?*

Student: *Yeah, pretty much. And the hair, and getting donged about the hair every day.*

From her appearance this young woman was a very creative person, and she liked to express this aspect of herself by her way of dressing and how she wore her hair.

*I started off dressing, like I've always dressed nicely, for school. It's always been ironed and cleaned. When I was about 12 my hair— it started going like, a dark brown and I've always wanted to stay my blond. It's not natural colours they said. And I'd get in trouble and told to dye my ringlets. And I was, like, spending thirty bucks a month to re-do my ringlets. And so mum just got fed up with it as well. Dyed my whole hair to blond, and, it stayed like that for a while, then they complained about that. Yeah. At that stage I was doing [work] experience at a hairdresser's salon. And I talked to the ladies about it. The teacher wanted me to dye it. My hair could've gone green or purple because I had taken the colour out, it would've cost a fortune to get my hair stripped. It would've just gone, yuk. And I would've had to dye my hair black pretty well which is.... And then I would've got kicked out of school. Oh, that was, just, that was, very stressful. Yes, that's, mostly I think [why I was crying] that day. That*

*was the day the teacher talked to me and said “if you don’t do something about your hair” so.*

*So really, at Repo Girls’ High you weren’t allowed to be yourself. I want to be, like, myself, not look like everyone else. I’ve always been different from everyone. Which I like. You couldn’t act or be myself at school. And I couldn’t dress the way I wanted to, and if you had mufti days, you weren’t allowed to wear too way out stuff either. Yeah—really hard. No, they don’t mind so much on mufti days but they’re more worried about your work, come mufti days, which is surprising. And when you get back into your uniform, they are more worried about how your uniform is looking. If you have one button missing you get a growling. If you’re wearing a little bit of nail polish, or something like that, you get a growling. You have to go to the office and take it off. The office which is in front of the principal, which means that you get in trouble, you go to the office and they ask “What have you done? Why are you in the office?” “Shouldn’t you be in class?” And stuff like that. But, no, that was probably the main thing was they wanted me to act like someone I wasn’t, at school. ’Cause I had, like, different ideas about [things], like people would answer questions different to me and I was...I’d write down my ideas and stuff in the art and stuff, and good, because you could draw. Like you’d get something to draw, that you could draw in your way, how you want to which showed that this is your picture. Which is good because I could be myself in the art class, be more relaxed and sit outside and talk and do my work at the same time. I got 12 credits which is the most I got in a [subject]. Yeah. This was most of my points because over the whole year I got 32 credits altogether with 12 credits from art which was most of that. Yeah. When I am interested and can be myself [I can do well].*

*I liked, art. I liked the teacher for art. She was, like, gave me chances, like, second chances if you did something wrong. So my art was probably my enjoyment of the day, yeah. So if I didn’t have art, it wouldn’t be a good day (pause) for me. And I liked my correspondence [schoolwork]. Yes. I was getting, like 90% and I never got that much percentage. I passed every booklet. I felt really good about that because maths is my weakest point, posting numbers or anything, even remembering numbers sometimes. And, yes, [it was] the teachers that made it enjoyable, ’cause the whole class is talking, and I’m*

*talking, I wouldn't get, like, just me, in trouble. They just went tickey-thing, the teachers.*

*I struggled with most of my subjects but, science, I still struggled a lot with science, because we had quite a big class there. Yeah, which was the fourth form, yeah, I kind of struggled a bit. But the teacher, on occasion he could come and help which was good 'cause that was just before tests and things but, yeah. Did very good. Yeah. There was a whole lot of lunch times I went in, and he gave me, and, there was another girl in my class that was not that bright either, a sheet on, what we could revise. Which was very helpful and we did quite well in the test—and we passed. That was good. If that had happened all through school, I'd probably still be there now. My science teacher, he was really good. I got quite good marks in science that year, which was fourth form, one of my favourite classes, even though science is boring anyway. Having it was just good because I was getting good grades.*

*I got put off doing textiles because of the teacher. All my friends sat on tables, like we had tables for sewing. And it's like the good girls' table, they were the only ones that could talk and not get into trouble. And then, back here, you'd have like the ones that could talk but would get into trouble and the one's that just [did] not care and not listen to the teacher and then you've got us, who were just all round naughty and we did everything wrong. [Teacher], she'd, just stand there, and she'd be like, well, "you're doing that wrong, and that's wrong, and you're talking. You shouldn't be talking" and I wouldn't be talking, it'd be the people around us. And, I got put through so much hell in that class that that put me off that [subject] (big sigh). Just like, in [mathematics] I used to sit with one of my good friends and we'd like... She's quite a talker, and so we'd just start the odd conversation but I'd get told off in class and I hadn't been talking. Getting blamed for the whole class talking and stuff. And I got stuck at the front of a maths class for very much half a year. It was just, I can't remember what I did though. It was a really silly reason. It was just (exasperated sigh). I was really not feeling very well but I can't remember why. I think it was because she didn't think I was concentrating, or something. But, yeah. It varies, that I was concentrating, because I didn't understand the work, 'cause they go writing on the board and the next thing you know, it's wiped off. And I mean I need a lot [of help]. She teaches one thing and then another and I*

*need to spend like, that one thing, that whole class time on, like the whole hour and not move on. It's so quick, 'cause it's just very confusing. Yeah.*

*Don't like doing homework. So like, [dad and I], we'd sit down and do it. It kind of goes in one ear and out the other. And then the next day we'd have to go over it and do some different ones. And it would just (exasperated sigh) confuse me totally. Yeah. Every day from there. Like, because you had maths, like, twice on Monday when I was in fourth form. And, we'd go in, to the class, first time. Do the work, and then if we didn't finish it we'd go and do it once more and then I'd come back and I would go....I wouldn't know what I was doing. Yeah. A new language. Yes (with a sigh).*

*[I'd been thinking about leaving] all along really. There was third form and then there was fourth form, and I'd decided not to. Definitely. And, yeah, definitely I was going away at the end of fifth form. But when I started fifth form I changed my mind a bit at the beginning of the year and I was kind of thinking, maybe I should stay so that I can go to the Ball and to see if I could, like, start over. But then, as it came to the middle of the fifth form, the whole hair thing came, and I was getting into more trouble and, it was just getting more and more annoying and so, I decided when it came to the beginning of October, that I was leaving, the day after my birthday.*

For this student the problems with achieving at school and the feeling that teachers were picking on her went right back through her previous schooling, with the result that she was determined to leave early right from the start of high school.

*It was about one [teacher] at primary school, and intermediate, and there was about four at [Repo] High School. [In primary school] it was just that the teacher had real high, standards. She wanted everyone to be at the top. But, of course, I was one of the ones that wasn't and I got picked on. It was the same as one of my other friends that lives just down the road. She used to get picked on if she wasn't very well, either and she has an eye problem. Yeah. We'd get our tests, we'd all do them, and then we'd have to go up one at a time to see the teacher. You know, like, we'd be standing in a line and everyone would be like. "Oh what did you get, what'd you get" and stuff like that. And you'd go, get them marked. We'd come back and [boy student] would be like "Oh, I got 90" and that (laughingly) and I got, two percent and stuff. Yeah, and it was the same through high school.*

The public humiliations lead to a loss of self-esteem and confidence in this student's own capacity to learn and progress. From the perception that teachers were picking on her a kind of victim mentality developed, which became a self-fulfilling prophecy in many classes. The deputy principal's perception, that there were long-standing academic problems which manifested in particular patterns of behaviour, was congruent with the student's story: *"So like all things, those patterns are set well before they come to us."*

### **Relationships with Teachers: The Snow Job**

This Leaver's Portrait illustrates how important the relationships with teachers were in determining whether she did well in a subject. Interest in the subject certainly helped, as in drama but it was not the only factor and the teacher was again mentioned in dispatches.

*Because the drama teacher's very funny. He is my social studies teacher and he is very cool. So,[you] pay more attention to these tutors (laughingly). Yeah. So, that's it. Yeah.*

As with the experience with fourth form science, doing well did not seem to be related necessarily to enjoyment of the subject, which was *"boring,"* but to teachers being helpful, and fair: *"If that had happened all through school, I'd probably still be there now."* There did not seem to be any particular common denominator amongst those teachers she identified as the "best" in assisting her to learn. She got on well with most: *"I got along [with] form<sup>150</sup> teachers and stuff. I had, yeah, different form teachers every year,"* although her own summary of the situation was that when she was interested and teachers allowed her to express her self-identity, she could do well academically.

Because of her interest in clothes, textiles was a subject which might have had intrinsic interest. Certainly it would have allowed for expression of her artistic bent. However, here again, it was the relationship with the teacher which was the critical dimension in her lack of enjoyment and poor achievement in this subject.

Relationship problems seemed to have been experienced with her teacher in mathematics too, where she felt that she was being blamed for the whole class talking. The teacher thought that she didn't understand the work because she wasn't concentrating, whereas the student had a different perspective on the problem: *"It's so quick, 'cause it's just very confusing,"* suggesting that it was the style and pace of

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<sup>150</sup> In this school form teachers played a strong pastoral care and mentoring role. They look after attendance monitoring and act as the first point of contact for parents about school matters.

delivery which resulted in her lack of focus. The student's description of the in-class learning experiences in mathematics suggested that the teacher, like many traditionalists, saw her function was to “‘cover’ the set curriculum, to achieve sufficient ‘control’ to make pupils do this, and to ensure that pupils achieve a sufficient level of ‘mastery’ of the set curriculum as revealed by evaluation” (Young, 1991, cited by Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, & Tiakiwai, 2003b, p. 8). Many teachers adopting this didactic teaching style (referred to commonly as “chalk and talk”) tend to teach to the middle ability level of the group, frustrating both brighter and less able students in the process. Student #2286 was put on correspondence where she finally got to experience a sense of achievement in mathematics, because she was working on a programme which was at the right level and she could work at her own pace.

However, the student seemed to think that the teacher had some other agenda in making this shift from classroom to correspondence lessons:

*The maths teacher, the one that sat me up in front of the class. I reckon she just wanted to get rid of me (laughingly).*

This conclusion came from being separated from the support of friends and placed under the watchful eye of the teacher at the front of the room, being sent out of the room on occasions to work alone<sup>151</sup>—“*You’d just have to tough it out on your own, which was quite hard*”—and finally being removed from the mathematics class permanently, when she was put on Correspondence School work. This student's feelings that these actions were part of a deliberate strategy to “*get rid*” of her may not have been solely the result of some kind of paranoia. A member of the guidance team at another school (Putu) said at the focus group: “*We did a snow job on them—they need to go,*” when colleagues were discussing a student who had recently left that school. Jones' New Zealand study of Pacific Island students experiences (1991, pp. 171, 178-179) also talked of teacher practices which effectively “cooled out” students from school.

From the perspective of student #2286, less than positive relationships with teachers were a major factor in leaving early. Her story illustrates how a feeling of alienation developed when both other students and teachers were perceived to be giving her a hard time.

Student: *Some of the girls at Repo High were horrible but I was never really bullied. You’d walk past them and they’d make a snaky comment.*

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<sup>151</sup> This was part of a school-wide withdrawal room procedure. This student had also been sent out of other classes, such as textiles, to the withdrawal room.

Researcher: *Was it a factor in leaving?*

Student: *No but I didn't like that school, the teachers. One was mean to me, concentrating on me so much. I didn't deserve to get trashed like that.*

Some of the issues related to the school environment, as the Leaver's Portrait of student #1261 also illustrated so well in Chapter 4. The social dimension of the school environment is shaped to a large extent by the way schools are run, by the way teachers relate to the students who now saw themselves as young women, as the following excerpt illustrates.

*I didn't like it. It's just school! Oh, I don't know, just the bits you know, the...I think the teachers are really rude. I was just sick of it. They (sigh) I don't know. They're like. I just don't know how they. I want to see like but [teacher's] rude, you know, like 15, 16 year olds, you know, they're becoming independent, they wanna do something. They don't want to be treated like a little kid, they want to, you know, we all smoke, we all drink, you know. It's because we want to be older than we actually are, and when they're treating us like we're 10, and talking to us like we're 10. They're not going to teach or talk to us and we're going to rebel against them and we're gonna, you know, not turn up and that sort of thing and I think that's what happened to all of us. (student #1388, Putu)*

Whilst some overseas studies concluded that “school personnel rarely, if ever, encouraged them to stay; all too often they facilitated the students’ departure” (Altenbaugh, Engel, & Martin, 1995, p. 172), others recorded the reverse: instances where the student’s high school experience was “totally transformed by a vital relationship with a special adult” (Lightfoot, 1983, p. 355). Clearly such “magical matches” (ibid.) were less than commonplace in schools, if the literature is anything to judge by but there was plenty of evidence even amongst the leavers’ stories in this study to suggest that a strong positive relationship with a teacher was a significant positive factor in weighing up whether to leave school or stay on. This is an aspect which clearly warrants further consideration as a factor influencing high school retention.

### **Identity Seeking: Desperately Seeking Susan**

The characteristics of students whose educational trajectories were marked by relative decline were able to be identified in the New Zealand *Progress at School*

project (Harker & Nash, 1995, cited in Nash, 1997b, p. 32): Those with low aspirations, ill-disposed towards school and tired of trying were more likely to decline in relation to their earlier level of achievement. Student #2286 exhibited these characteristics. The last section showed she had poor relationships with quite a few of her teachers. Although she found school difficult she was not without ability: “[*She*] wasn’t the brightest cookie in the jar, at all but she had unit standards, there were things she could achieve,” the deputy principal said. The main problem was that she had given up trying: “*I think she had outgrown the effort. I think she copped out, for lack of a better word.*” The student herself acknowledged that she had given up trying at school, as we saw in Chapter 4: “*I just literally put all my books away and just refused. I did that on a lot of occasions.*”

Nash maintained that “the belief that they can succeed at school, not necessarily reach the highest levels of attainment, but obtain the qualifications they want, contributes greatly to students’ progress” (1997b, p. 156). Congruent with the findings of his previous research into educational achievement, it seems that one of the biggest barriers to this student’s academic progress, and consequently a factor in her leaving school early, was her poor academic self-concept: She lacked “the perception that the effort of studying is likely to be rewarded” (ibid.).

*She lost confidence in what she’s doing, I think. She’d got to the point where she could see no future. She felt as if she wasn’t achieving. Therefore being here was a waste of time.* (deputy principal of, Repo)

Her lack of confidence in her ability appears to have been reinforced by peer association, having “*always hung out with people who were a lot more brainier than me,*” and reinforced within the family, where she and her mother were seen as the “*learners*” whereas dad was the “*brainy*” one.

A helpful insight into the confusing range of terms in the literature about “self” and “identity” was provided by Coleman and Hendry (1990, p. 46), who concluded that the term identity had “essentially the same meaning as self-concept” and thus these terms have been used interchangeably in this discussion. Recognising the lack of agreement across different traditions, a pragmatic approach taken here is the one recommended by Benwell and Stokoe: This is to consider the term identity in its broadest sense, “in terms of *who people are to each other*, and how different kinds of identities are produced in spoken interaction and written texts” (2006, p. 7, italics in original). Through evidence provided by conversations with the student herself, and

with other key informants, it emerged that the poor academic self-concept this young woman held was part of a wider and more complex concept of identity.

During adolescence the sense of self becomes “more complex and sophisticated” (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 45), not only because intellectual growth during this period makes this possible but also because physical development results in changes to body-image. The biological development of adolescence results in physical changes which alter body-image and consequently require re-adjustment of self-image (the individual’s evaluation of the self). This student is slim and not very tall. She would be considered ideal in size and stature as a dancer. Dancers are generally small and show the requirements of a particular social context, with the result that the pressure to remain of low body weight leads frequently to a higher incidence of eating problems amongst dancers, as evidenced in this student’s story.

*Oh, I had a bad eating problem last year. Yeah, I think that was caused by stress. Yes. It was like, pains in my stomach because I wasn’t eating as much and I think I was stressing and, had a bit of an eating disorder. I could only eat half a cheeseburger and I’d be full. I’d like, feel sick. So, yeah. Like, eating disorder, not eating.*

Whilst these physical manifestations of stress cannot be attributed solely to stress over body image, biological maturation may certainly have contributed to the overall situation. Adolescents mature at very different rates so even at senior level some girls may still look as they did in childhood—small with no breast development (late maturers)—while others may have the appearance of a fully developed woman in her twenties. Whilst for boys early maturation<sup>152</sup> is seen to carry social advantages, for early maturing girls the situation is more complex as results of longitudinal studies showed. Early maturers are less popular with their peers, and more likely to show signs of inner turbulence than those who mature later (Jones & Mussen, 1958; Peskin, 1973, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 22). Early maturation has also been reported to lead to enhanced self-confidence and social prestige, although apparently social class was a

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<sup>152</sup>Late maturing males have been found to be less relaxed, less popular, more dependant, and less attractive to both adults and peers (Jones & Bayley, 1950; Mussen & Jones, 1957; Clausen, 1975; cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 22). The attainment of a body shape that matches the sociocultural ideal leads to extreme behaviours related to exercise and eating which are of increasing concern for professionals working with adolescents (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2004, p. 1). “ For boys, the ideal is a muscular body with a large chest and shoulders and a slim waist. For girls...a slim overall body is seen as being central to popularity with both same-sex and opposite-sex peers” (ibid.).

factor in the seemingly contradictory research findings, with middle class maturers being at a greater advantage than their working class peers (Clausen, 1975, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 22). As a late maturer, and a dancer, this student could possibly have been receiving contradictory messages about her status from her dancing teacher and her peer group, adding to the stresses she was experiencing at school.

Student #2286 had many problems associated with her body image. Whilst she felt she was subjected to unfair attention on account of her classroom behaviour, the most galling aspect of her feelings about being picked on related to her appearance, particularly about the way she wore her hair and uniform. In this Leaver's Portrait the school's challenge to comply with school regulations in these matters escalated to such a level that eventually she dropped out of school, citing the fact that she was "*donged about the hair every day*" as one of the underlying reasons. The confrontations over appearance can be read in two different ways: On the one hand, the flagrant and continuous disregard for school rules was likely to be interpreted by school authorities as a form of resistance to the school rules and all that the school stood for. On the other hand, the student's strong desire to be different from other students, to be seen and acknowledged as an individual—"I want to be, like, myself, not look like everyone else"—was probably more deep seated than conforming to the uniform regulations. It was about being herself, about being able to express her new-found sense of identity as a creative person: "*I've always been different from everyone. Which I like.*" She showed her individuality with hair colour and design: "*One day, I had that bit going over there and I had two pony tails and another two at the back.*" Even on mufti days she had come to realise that her concept of appropriate dress was too extreme to be accepted by the school: "*If you had mufti-days, you weren't allowed to wear too way out stuff either.*" That she took the issue of uniform conformity to heart was possibly because this was the outward expression of her inner identity. "Dress mediates how we see ourselves and how others see us," according to Martin in the Foreword to *Dressed to Impress* (Keenan, 2001, p. xv). He explained that there is cultural significance in what we wear and that "if we want to pass muster we had better make the right choice" (ibid.). This insight may provide the clue to understanding why uniform and hair became such major issues. The message given to this student through the stance adopted by teachers was that "*you couldn't act or be myself at school.*" In this way the process of young people's identity formation can be seen as occurring "within and against the context of schooling" (Anderson & Herr, 1994, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 68).

The altercation with the school was about more than just appearances; it was about this student asserting herself as an individual with her own ideas: “*I had like, different ideas.*” She liked subjects such as art and drama where she was allowed to be creative, to be herself and do different work which was accepted. These were subjects where the teachers allowed her to feel more relaxed as a person, and thus she was more comfortable in taking risks and exposing her individuality. Her inability to express her identity, by way of either her dress and hair, or her ideas, was a source of frustration and anger. The lack of acknowledgment of her emerging sense of identity, the school’s inability to let her be herself, became such a major issue that it was cited ultimately as a major reason for dropping out before the end of the year. Leaving school is the ultimate act of defiance of school authority.

During the year her anger and resistance was expressed in other forms. McRobbie stressed the importance of appearance as a form of resistance: By “wearing make-up, jewellery, altering the school uniform, young women use overtly sexual modes of expression which demonstrate quite clearly that they are overstepping the boundaries of girlhood (as demanded by the school) into womanhood” (1978, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 166). Their own culture becomes an agent of social control, “for by resisting they reaffirm and reinforce patriarchal power relations” (ibid.). According to this view, young women “are both saved by and locked within the culture of femininity” (McRobbie, 1978, quoted in Coleman & Hendry, ibid.).

Young women’s resistances to the school take on a specifically female form, which challenges “the school definition of a ‘nice’ girl which is seen to emphasise neatness, passivity, hard work, politeness, which will result in a ‘good’, ‘suitable’, job” (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 166). “Silence and the ‘sullen stare’ in classroom encounters” are strategies young women use to negotiate their existence in school, according to Griffin (1981, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 166). In this student’s story resistance to the school was not restricted to passive forms. A range of strategies aimed to undermine the effectiveness of school authority were described, including refusal to do the required work, direct confrontation with teachers, and failure to attend classes.

*There were three mornings I think, one morning when I wagged—’cause I hated school so much—this was in the fourth form. It was a half day, had to go for the morning and I just decided to tell mum that we didn’t have to go anymore. Which I got caught out. My maths teacher, the one that, like made me sit at the*

*front, of course, no, I wasn't there, not at the front, rung home and I was in bed sound asleep. I had a real upsetting morning.*

She felt picked on by teachers but her anger resulted in actions, such as door slamming, and teacher baiting, which provoked situations she then found difficult to handle.

*Yeah, it would get worse. So all they could do was issue you bad reports. That was only because I was upset and taking revenge on the teachers.*

Her friends were supportive of her, and if they thought the teachers were being unfair they had their own ways of dealing with this, including direct confrontation. In these circumstances the student felt she had enough support to continue the challenge:

*All the people I was sitting with would actually stand up for me and say to the teacher "Stop picking on her." Yeah I even like, I stood up, I stood up many times and said and she said to me, "Go sit over there" and I'd go "I'm not going over there Miss because I haven't done anything wrong" and actually, in that class, I got sent out about five times in that class, in one term for doing nothing. They'd go "She wasn't talking then." And she'd be like "Over there." "I'm not going over there." I'd just refuse. So she just [kept] nagging at me to move and I wouldn't. So that just ruined the class. Everyone in the class or on my table would be like, they'd refuse to work if she sent me from there. Because it's not fair. Or they'd talk louder and annoy the teacher just 'cause she'd picked on me. They would do that for any one of our friends if like, one of them got into trouble with [a teacher]. [They'd] be noisy and stuff, say, "See you, Miss, you're mean to [student], being unfair and stuff." She kind of needed to hear that though, because she was, and they'd have noticed that because when we'd go out of class we'd be walking on ice like. I had to be the last one out of class because I'd been naughty and I'd just walk out and slam the door and then just talk about it. And then, she packs away all her stuff and it will be like, huhu well, thanks pal, and go on.*

In this story the teacher engaged in a power struggle with the students. The reprimand situation with one student escalated into a whole group confrontation. In the end it is clear to the students they have won: *"That was the end of the year and she could've picked me up and abused me but she wouldn't do because she's a snob."*

The confrontations evoked with school authorities (which generally arose out of problems with the work or a desire to be different) were difficult to deal with: *"I'd been crying, like, all night, all the day because that was the day the teacher talked to me and*

said ‘If you don’t do something about your hair,’” to the extent that the student became sick: “it was just so stressful and I kept getting headaches, migraines and stuff and feeling sick and stuff and feeling stressed.” Her sickness was part of a strategy, developed with mum, to avoid confronting the consequences of her non-conforming behaviours at school: “Mum said if it got too stressful, to say that I’m feeling sick and come home.” She also developed an eating disorder as a consequence of these school-related, and possibly other, stressors. Anorexic eating disorders are associated with overprotective and controlling parenting practices. The daughter tries to meet the high expectations of her parents and the school but “inside she is angry at not being recognised as an individual in her own right” (Berk, 2001, p. 360). Instead of rebelling openly, the anorexic is indirectly telling her parents and those in authority over her: “I am a separate person from you, and I can do what I want with my own body!” (ibid.). Whether this explanation accurately reflects the home situation for student #2286 is unclear but it certainly provides a plausible explanation for her continuing clash with school authorities.

Although she was near to being suspended from school she had a good relationship with both her parents, and was mindful that they would not approve if she went too far: “I didn’t want to get kicked out—it wouldn’t’ve gone down too well. My parents would....” This realisation served to moderate her behaviour. The deputy principal remarked that the student’s mother was very supportive of her daughter, although she had trouble getting her to go to school: “She just wasn’t getting out of bed. ‘I’m not going to go.’ Just did not want to go to school” As a result her attendance had suffered and the school was concerned because they knew that students’ “achievement is reflected in their lack of attendance.” However, whether poor attendance is the cause of poor achievement, or a consequence, is a moot point, as Greene explained:

Young people who enjoy school are not very likely to be absent unless it is absolutely necessary. Even when they are ill, these students want to go to school. On the other hand, the potential dropout will find all sorts of excuses for not attending school. Even the most minor ailment will be magnified out of proportion if it will keep the student out of school. (1966, p. 27)

Mother agreed to her daughter going onto a daily<sup>153</sup> reporting system because “she saw the value of [her] being here daily.” However, in the end the parents gave in to their

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<sup>153</sup> This involved a period-by-period check by the class teacher and parental sign off, as a way of monitoring attendance and behaviour closely.

daughter's wishes to leave school. The deputy principal seemed to think this was largely because mother suspected that her daughter was sick, although other teachers felt parental expectations were a major factor.

This student had been much happier since leaving school: "*But now I'm out. Mum says I am like a changed person, and I'm a lot happier.*" Crossley (2003, cited in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 139) pointed out that "when people talk or write about their experiences of chronic or serious illness, they often characterise themselves as becoming a 'totally different person.'" In this case the change may be attributable both to the dropping of the "sick role" (a façade she had adopted as a strategy to avoid school problems?) and to the personal development which typically accompanies leaving school, an event taken as a signal of emerging adulthood. That this student is now ready to take on some of the responsibilities of adulthood is shown by her taking steps to gain employment, whereas when she first left school she made no effort to: "*I really just had a holiday time off.*" She left school with no immediate plans for either work or further training, despite her leaving form indicating that these were her likely destinations.

However, she did have longer term aspirations of making a career as a dancer or dance teacher. How realistic were these ideas? She was a keen dancer—"I do modern, cat and athletics. It's quite fun"—and had been learning for about seven years.

*My dance teacher's going over to Britain so, when she gets back, she's bringing back this course—a choreography course and so she'll like, let me teach, like my class dances and stuff. So that would be really perfect. And then, hopefully when I'm 18, I'm going to try my hardest to get into a dance school from Wellington or wherever there is a good one. Yes. Definitely. I love teaching people dance and watching them dancing. I love dancing myself, so, why not, it's a good [career]. It's good. I was watching a movie the other day and they had, like, choreographers that were doing all the people stuff. They were choreographing another girl. And there was an alley somewhere and that was their big studio and it looked really cool so, I thought. Yeah. Maybe one day I might even be doing that.*

The fact that achieving her aspirations did not depend on school credentials but on those gained through association with another qualifications provider, was probably a major factor in her lack of commitment to school work. As Nash explained "if students believe...that they have learned enough for their purposes...then they cannot be expected to find further time at school of much value" (1997b, p. 163).

One of the central themes of adolescent development is the attainment of independence, leaving school, getting a job, leaving home, and finding a partner. For most young people in Western societies this is a gradual process which occurs over a long period of time, and not necessarily in that order or with those particular steps. As these different roles are taken on they affect how others see us; they affect how we view ourselves, our sense of self and our identity.

Whilst some identity work is done in the context of the school and family, vocational identity work is done largely in the workplace setting or, as with this student, in the community. This student had already had some work experience arranged by the school at a local hairdresser. She had also been employed at a local food chain, providing entertainment for children's parties.

*I've always done [dance] ever since I was little. Talent quests at school and in [food chain venue] and stuff. Yes, I'm known around town [as] the, kind of, the different one.*

She had also created opportunities to use her talents for pecuniary benefit within the school community.

*Lunchtime, coming out with [friends]. My mate had a guitar and we like, made up a few, like, playing these songs and we used to go round singing to a whole lot of groups for money and (laughingly) stuff and we used to buy school lunches (still laughing). That was quite fun. I enjoyed that. And we had a little band for a while and we used to practice in the music room.*

This lunch-time activity was frowned upon by school authorities. The school's curriculum offerings did not offer dance either, contributing to the sense of constraint she felt in her ability to express her developing sense of identity as a creative person. It added to the complexity of factors influencing the decision to leave school.

*I think that [Repo] should think about getting what [other school's] got. Like a kind of a dance subject because I know a lot of girls at that school that enjoy dancing. I do dance for a lot of girls from Repo High School and if they had that, they'd probably want to stay longer than seventh form to do [dance], well actually to get drama all year through. You can do it, like every year you can do it. That's cool. It'd [be] fun.*

Because the passage from school to employment cannot be assured, "work no longer constitutes the major source of identity" according to Vaughan (2003, p. 6) who

claimed that music, fashion and leisure are more central to how people think of themselves today. That student #2286's self-image was influenced heavily by cultural objects such as music, dance, fashion, television, movies magazines, advertising, and art can be assumed because of her preoccupation with her hair, the trendy gear she wore, and from her desire to be different. The vocational identity to which she aspired as a choreographer was inspired by a film she had watched.

The growing impact of media culture on identity formation in contemporary societies is a trend remarked on by Giroux who recognised, almost with surprise, that "my identity has been largely fashioned outside of school...which always seemed to be about somebody else's dreams" (1994, quoted in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, pp. 74-75). Media culture is part of a "technological and aesthetic 'sensorium' (Aronowitz, 1992) in which individual and collective identities are defined, created, displaced and denied," according to Smyth, Shacklock, and Hattam (1999, quoted in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 75). In Australian studies of early leavers, Smyth and Hattam found "interaction with media culture led these young people to reconsider the efficacy of sustaining an academic identity that was seen to undermine or suppress their personal identity" (2004, p. 76). As with student #2286, for some students in that study it was a significant factor in the conditions that led them to leave school early. The wearing of uniform is frequently a contested issue in schools because it is the chief way school authorities use to regulate identity: "The rules around school uniform were seen to be about conformity—a conformity that many were not prepared to endure because their appearance was so central to the performance of their identity" (*ibid.*). One staff member in the present study argued that "you outgrow [the] uniform [but] it's not a reason to leave school" (focus group, Putu High). This remark seemed to suggest that school retention indicates not academic ability but the ability of students to adjust their behaviour to meet the requirements of the school, to "act within a narrowly defined and institutionalised view of what it meant to be a 'good' student" (*op. cit.*, p. 132). Those middle class students whose family values and practices correspond most nearly to those of the school are thus more likely to stay on to complete their senior education. Simply put, "people do what they have been brought up to do" (Nash, 1997a, p. 32).

Vocational identity work is influenced heavily by parental role-modelling and family and school expectations. Students today, as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001, 2005), are subjected to increasing media influence through exposure to computers, television, mobile phones and iPods, which provide a range of alternative futures. "They

are creating a pastiche, often without much adult assistance: a view of themselves, their relationship to others and the world in general, and a view of a possible future” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 133). As I discuss further in the next section, schools can assist students in their “struggle over identity” (ibid.) by exposing them to other choices and by facilitating open communication about the underpinning issues associated with identity formation. These issues are often reflected in conflict at school, especially when they are not confronted.

In summary this Leaver’s Portrait illustrated that the development of body-image, a changing academic self-concept and progress towards vocational identity formation were part of a broader development associated with an emerging sense of identity. The Leaver’s Portrait’s was not a “synchronic snapshot” of a stable, consistent and “immutable self” (Antaki et al., 1996, cited in Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 37) but, rather, a chart of development over that part of her life at the time of the study.

One of the very interesting aspects about this leaver’s story was how a vocational identity came to be developed. The student appeared to have spoken to her parents and her dance teacher about her ideas but she did not seem to have spoken to anyone at school despite having been thinking about leaving school for a long time. This could have been because dance was not offered at the high school she attended, so there was no knowledgeable subject specialist on the staff. This student, like many of the other leavers who feature in this study, had not availed herself of the services of the careers advisors which every school employed. Why was this? Because there appeared to be a link with aspirations for further education and retention, the topic of careers advice is an important one which will be explored further using the stories of other students.

### ***What Other Students Said: Careers Development and Careers Advice in Ecological Transitions***

“Attainment of an identity in the career realm has long been recognised as one of the most challenging and overt aspects of the identity formation process for adolescents,” according to McIntyre (1998, p. 84). High school is a time when important career-related decisions are made: whether to stay on at school beyond the compulsory age of attendance, whether to leave school into employment, after achieving qualification milestones, or whether to continue education beyond Year 13. The Intentions Survey results (Chapter 4) showed that most senior students had started

to think about these decisions and had made plans for the future, yet many still ended up leaving school without the qualifications necessary to realise their career goals.

The students' stories indicated that career development was rarely a purely logical process. Sometimes it appeared to be the result of an impulsive reaction to chance events, such as a fall-out with friends, an altercation with a teacher, an accident, illness or an economic change, such as a father losing his job. Others just drifted out of school, becoming increasingly disenchanted with what was on offer there and skipping odd classes at first, then on an increasingly regular basis, until leaving school seemed inevitable. By capturing students' reflections on the experiences which led them to leave school evidence was provided to support the assertion that dropout behaviour is an ecological transition, both a "product and a producer of developmental change." The work of resilience researchers Clarke and Clarke (2003) suggested that the presence of at least one caring adult, perhaps a parent or a teacher, can assist teenagers grapple with the many problems which beset most young people during adolescence. It can smooth the path as they make the transition from child through to adult.

*The developmental potential of a setting...is enhanced if the person's initial transition into that setting is not made alone, that is, if he enters the new setting in the company of one or more persons with whom he has participated in prior settings. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 211)*

That dropouts experienced problems common to all teenagers is a conclusion reached from this study but it may be that those who left school early had more than their fair share of such problems. Post drop out a number of students also experienced significant trauma through society's stereotyping of dropping out, as the following excerpt illustrates:

*I did not get the jobs that I wanted. I got sick and tired of working at supermarkets and fast food restaurants and then being called a "loser" by people. And people can be nasty. My friends have always been supportive, just people's general reaction. A young person working full-time in a fast food restaurant, people come in and look at you like, "What are you doing here?" Oh, yeah. I had a couple of people saying that to me. "Why aren't you at school?" I wasn't going to tell them, why I left. I just quietly ignored them. Yeah. I was very proud of myself, and I wanted my mum to be proud of me. I mean, my mum was always proud of me whatever decisions I made. 'Cuz, I don't*

*know, that's just the way she is. But she thought it was really stupid that I left school. I didn't see it as being particularly stupid at the time but, as time got on, I thought, I'm not going to get anywhere unless I settle down. I went back to school last year. And that was very embarrassing but I swallowed my pride and I did it and got laughed at. Oh, "Why are you back at school? Couldn't you do it the first time" because I was 20 years old and all the other girls were 17, in the 7th Form, turning 18. I got a lot of hassles but I just [carried on]. [Teacher] cornered me in the hallway and said, "Would you leave school for the right job?" and I said, "I came back to get an office job, to get my foot in the door, to be able to offer a prospective employer my qualifications" She said, "Well, there's an office juniors job at a very successful company and if you could get that, would you leave?" And I said "Yes. Yes. I didn't want any old job, I wanted something that involves using my brains." (student #220)*

As we saw earlier in this chapter, this student had left school as a pregnant seventeen year old but she had returned to school because she had not been able to get a job of the calibre she wanted. The experience of “*crappy jobs*” had caused her to seriously reconsider her future, and it had brought about a complete change in attitude in regard to her schooling. As a result of processing her experiences then, student #220 exhibits changes in her attitude towards school and towards her parents which signify post drop out development. She had both the support of her friends and her mother during this difficult transition, enabling her to return to school and achieve her goal. She had the respect of teachers for having the courage to return and further her education. The relationships with staff kept her motivated to continue, despite the other students in Year 13 giving her a hard time about returning. The job she finally took offered a “*career path in administration.*” Her mother acknowledged that her daughter had matured, saying: “*She's moved on so much. We are very, very proud of her.*”

Most parents were supportive of their daughters but being supportive meant that they wanted to ensure that their daughters were happy. Having supportive parents did not necessarily mean encouragement for students to stay on at school.

*My mum knows that I've got a mind of my own and she said that I should try and finish schooling, like, finish the end of 7th Form but she said she'll still support me if I decided not to stay at school. And my dad he's (sigh) a bad influence, whatever but I didn't really, you know, I'm not happy with him at times but yeah, they're both very supportive. (student #271)*

Although many parents said they were supportive of their children gaining a good education what this meant was relative to their own experiences. It transpired that many of the leavers had already exceeded parental expectations by staying at school longer than their parents did because of changes to the age of compulsory attendance.

*My mum, she just said okay, whatever you want to do, you do it, it's up to you it's your future and that, thanks mum (giggles) but because she never used to go to school. She always had to look after her sisters. (student #2348)*

This excerpt serves to illustrate the point that the advice which parents gave their children was rooted in their own experience. In lower decile schools the lack of role models from within the family was considered often to be a barrier to continuing on at school and into tertiary education, as one staff member explained:

*I don't think she really knew how to leave home. They don't go out of the area. They've never gone away and stayed at motels, or had other members of the family go to university and pave the way. They just don't know how to....(home liaison officer, Repo)*

In the higher decile school some of the early leavers were from families where the fathers had become successful without a high level of formal education. These wealthy businessmen role-modelled an alternative career route to that advocated by the school. Teachers were disappointed when they felt that parents were not encouraging their daughters to stay on at school to achieve to their academic potential, because they realised the powerful influence which parents brought to bear on the direction of students' career development.

Parents were very influential sources of information about careers but there was evidence that some, at least, were aware of their own limitations in this area. They looked to schools both to provide an education which would prepare their daughters for their future destinations and they expected teachers to guide and support the career development of their daughters. What this meant differed between the schools, though. The higher decile school had "*high parents' expectations, valuing education,*" and parents expected the school to be preparing their daughters for university. This was taken on board by the staff, as the focus group with members of the guidance team illustrated: "*I assume the students will be going on. I keep this expectation.*" Going to work straight from school was an exception, and as a result it was reported that "*eighty per cent go on to tertiary.*" This expectation of tertiary study destinations for the girls at this school was thought to arise because the parents at this school were from amongst

*“the highest educated population in New Zealand.”* Even the *“Year 11 leaver thinks that they will go to university—other pathways in mind—sometimes it works, sometimes it’s dreaming.”* Parental attitudes were typified by one teacher’s report of a conversation she had had with a girl about participating in sports: *“Mum won’t let me do this because my school work comes first.”* The teachers were convinced that high expectations were a factor which supported the career plan concept and that *“if people signal leaving, as deans we’d say, do you have a plan?”* Parents too were only happy to let their daughters leave school if they had a plan.

- *“Parents wary at first but understand now. They said I had to find something before leaving.”* (student #1261)
- *“My parents were supportive. Mum wanted me to go to school and if I wanted to leave, I had to study.”* (student #1395)
- *“My parents said ‘If you want to leave, you must have a plan.’”* (student #1123)

Even where there had obviously been problems at home, when it came to a situation where a student’s education was being put at-risk then these had to be overcome. Student #1388’s story illustrates the value which parents at this school generally placed on education. At home this student felt *“totally un-noticed. Siblings with father. Mother has a new boyfriend. [She] seems tearful and shaky. Is close to her grandfather who talked her into coming back to school”* (Pupil file note). Despite these problems, with the assistance of other adults (teachers and grandfather) this student managed to pull together a plan which assisted her in moving forward:

*Yeah, it was part of the plan. I got kicked out [of home] last year and I rang up mum to say I was going to leave school and that’s when she took me back home and said you’re going to stay at school, you know: “I don’t want you to leave.” So she took me back and yes, that was all cool and then she said “[you can stay here until] the end of the year, in January.” That was always the plan, not until I’d finished school. I was doing a STAR course for school. The reason I never [dropped] out of school, because if they found out, they’d make me pay for the course. Well, I probably really left before September but that was only just letting go because last term I never showed up. They [school] might have rung mum up or something but me and mum don’t talk much. My mum didn’t even know until I’d left. I just said that I had exams*

*but I didn't. Like she goes "So long as you finish the course."* (student #1388)

There were some unique aspects in the students' stories from this school which differentiated them generally from those told by leavers from the lower decile schools. First, where both biological parents were on the scene (more common in higher decile schools) there was greater talk of father involvement, although mother's influence still came out as stronger. Mother was usually the one confided in about problems first, and she was the one who invariably fronted-up to school. But at Putu, unlike the other schools in this study, *"more often than not, we'll get both of the parents."* Second, although education was valued, families which had achieved their status in society through the application of natural business acumen and hard work appeared less concerned about their daughters leaving school early. Fathers in particular had often done the same thing: *"They knew the value of education but they weren't educated themselves"* (deputy principal of Putu). These self-made businessmen's own experiences showed that it was possible to follow alternative career development routes and still achieve "success".

*Yeah. My father is pretty easy going and knew I never liked school. They knew what was going on at school and they thought the best situation for it was to leave. I wasn't happy at all. My dad had a look round for me 'cause he owns the buildings of a few of the cafes. He is in property development. And he just went in and asked if I was able to do some work for her. I then did the Food and Beverages course for sixth months. My mum sort of had a look round for me and I sort of realised I needed a qualification 'cause I didn't have anything from NCEA.* (student #1540)

But these stories were apparently in the minority at Putu, where there was an *"overriding move by the community that you make success through education. And only through education. It totally supports the idea of getting on with, you know, the qualifications and moving out,"* the deputy principal explained.

So in the higher decile school, there was typically a congruency between parental and school expectations supported by active career planning. The outcome was that although students may have dropped out from school, judging from the ones interviewed, they did not generally drop out of the education system. They left with some taste of academic success (accumulated credits towards NCEA, see Appendix G)

and went on to further study with another provider, usually polytechnic: “*Semi-trade type courses is where they’d go.*” Members of the guidance network thought that “*some [students] are far better served by alternative courses than what we offer them, so we encourage them to leave.*” They maintained that polytechnic courses were “*totally suitable for them and are great.*” Many of the students who left this school still maintained aspirations to gain a degree level qualification, and saw the polytechnic as providing an alternative route to achieving this.

Some particularly bright students, who had outgrown what the school had to offer, were taking a break in study to go overseas or to work. They would then resume their studies at degree level once they reached 20 years of age, by which time they could apply for special admission. Student #1401, for example, stated that she planned to be completing “*a child psychology degree*” in the Intentions Survey: “*I didn’t like the teacher but I was really good at that subject [psychology].*” She felt like leaving school “*all the time*” because she “*hated school. I didn’t enjoy school, the teachers, or the style of teaching and controlling.*”

However, in the Telephone Interview she described how her plans had changed. After attending a STAR programme she became interested in computing. She was subsequently offered a scholarship to do a full-time computing programme at the local polytechnic, which altered her long-term plans significantly: “*I woke up one morning, decided to go, and left two days later.*” Her goal for the next year then became to “*pass the computing course and to sort out the rest of my life.*” In five years time she hoped to “*have a degree and to have travelled around the world.*” Further on she thought that she might be married with children. The deputy principal said that this student was very able academically and her parents “*would’ve loved to see her stay at school, and gone to university.*”

*You know she was quite independent, had strong opinions. Part of her assurance comes from having older parents—and she’s got older brothers and sisters who tell her she’s being stupid when she is (big laugh) you know, so she’s got quite a grounding of life experience in a way. She had outgrown school and I think I could see that if she stayed at school she would end up with so much trouble, we’d end up having to ask her to leave anyway. Mum came in with [student #1401], really sweet, hard to leave but they had to do the hard thinking I guess. And she did think it through, I think.*

Before she could be contacted to arrange details to meet for the Face-to-face Interview she had agreed to, her friends advised that this student had left already for overseas. Obviously her plans post-school had changed again. However, from the information provided by key informants it is likely that this student will complete a degree at some later stage. Her long-term aspirations of gaining a degree were similar to those her parents held for her, and the school staff had a high regard for her ability and potential. There was congruency amongst the social agents likely to yield greatest influence. The input of teachers and her family allow her to make informed decisions in a supportive atmosphere. There is respect for her decision to make a change to her career pathway. Her decision to leave school at that time was also made easier by the fact that some of her friends (Students #1388, 1261, 1395 and 1401) had all been disenchanted with school, had all been on the STAR course together, and subsequently all decided to leave school that year. As well as support from her parents and the school, what this student also had was a strong sense of self-agency, of her own ability to shape the direction of her future. It is this characteristic which led the deputy principal to predict that *“She’ll be a success whatever she does because she’s got the people skills and she’s intelligent.”*

In summary it seemed that early leavers were in the minority at this high decile school, so for the most part guidance activities at Putu were focused on assisting students to select the appropriate course and best university for their chosen career. Even when students left school early there was still consideration of an alternative route to higher education being available and achievable.

This view was in contrast with the focus of guidance activities at lower decile schools where staff spent considerable time trying to convince students and their parents that staying on at school was a good option. This was particularly so where students felt that they were not achieving.

*They are dropping, I think for a lot of parents and the girls, they’re still not achieving but they’ve had enough and that’s it. They don’t see a future in it and a lot of their parents are having to give up on them. A lot of our community doesn’t have a history of tertiary education. They’ve done Year 11, they’ve done the 5<sup>th</sup> Form, got [internal credits] and then they’ve gone. That’s their achievement. So if they’re not doing School Certificate and not doing an exam, well, they may as well go. “You wanna go? Okay.” Yeah. And that’s as you would have found in lower decile schools, that’s the way it is. There’s little*

*tertiary education in many households. I think in higher decile schools, girls stay on. Because that's the expectation.* (principal of Putu)

Many parents of low decile school children are “*intimidated by education and educational institutions*” the deputy principal of Putu said, reflecting on her past experience of working in such schools. That this was a reality for the low decile schools was also suggested by staff at Repo:

*[Parents] all care, you know, and sometimes I wonder if school is intimidating to parents. When I came here and applied for this job, I was absolutely petrified, sitting outside the principal's office.* (home liaison officer)

This was particularly so for parents whose first language was not English, the home liaison officer maintained.

*Sometimes I wonder if school is intimidating to parents. Yes, and some parents are very, umm, the ones whose English is not so good. I mean there is one lady who comes, and she always stands back at the door and waits 'til she sees me. Her son and my son are friends. And, she will just give me her kid's name and I will say “Oh, she's not too good,” because I can understand her—she can't speak it too well. If I wasn't here, I wonder if she would come?* (home liaison officer, Repo High)

Unlike the situation in high decile schools, then, it was more difficult to get parents involved in discussions about further education. Meetings with parents were more likely to be initiated about attendance or discipline issues, and even then the home liaison officer found that “*their parents don't come to the fore until they turn 16 because the benefits are cut if the kids aren't at school.*” Some parents did want to discuss their daughter's academic progress but they were frustrated by the school's focus on these other aspects. Uniform in particular was a contentious issue, and there appeared to be a lack of understanding on the part of the school as to what real difficulties parents faced in complying with the uniform regulations.

*They're at school to get an education and what they wear really shouldn't be making the child. I mean, fair enough, if they had to wear a uniform they have to wear it but, you know, people like me, I mean, I'm a single mother, I've always basically done everything I can to get what they want but my wages will only go so far. Yes, she has a uniform. Oh, it's mainly, I mean after you spent lots and lots and lots of money on a uniform for her and then, you know, it was either too*

*long, or too short, or she didn't have the correct socks on or she didn't have the correct shoes. Well, if I can't afford to buy her shoes, well, you know. It makes it very, very hard. And there's only so much and we've still got to live, and we've still got to have food, and everything else that goes with it. Well, I feel, uniform shouldn't really matter. I mean, she was coming home all upset all the time because of [the deputy principal]. She wasn't doing that at all, and it wasn't anything to do with her school work at all. So, I mean, that's why I used to battle all the time, because [daughter]'s sitting outside the office. I mean, I didn't do very well at school either but I would have gone over to them and sorted it (little laugh). (mother of student #3167)*

This mother experienced similar problems at school and consequently this coloured her perceptions of events and the expectations she had for her daughter. The school had low expectations of this student and focused not on the learning difficulties, which could conceivably be the underlying problem leading to this student's lack of engagement but on her attention-seeking behaviour. This student did have quite definite career plans which, with greater flexibility in the school programme, might possibly have been able to be used to increase motivation to study.

*That goes right back to about Form 3. I can't believe at that stage, I mean, if they were [given a] chance, that school should do it. I'm going to do this as a job, or this as a job, can you teach me the skills that I need. They're not altogether saying [leave school] and going out doing another course, so they can get to the job. Well, she's always wanted to do child care right from the start of high school. So we gave her three months to think about what she really wanted to do and she drew up the details and yes and she, yes, she got that through tech and we've grown up now and she's going. (mother of student #3167)*

As it was, this student ended up leaving school and joining a polytechnic course which catered better for her learning needs and career development requirements. She was enjoying the course, mainly because they treated her as an adult.

*They treat you like they don't ask you to do all the work. And of course, you don't have to ask to go to the toilet. (student #3167)*

Her mother was clear about the value of education, and expounded in depth on what it was that schools should be offering to ensure girls got into employment.

*I mean, she should have an education and she was saying you know, so much maths. You need to learn English, maths and science at school whatever the case but sometimes history and all that, what a waste of time. I mean I don't [have] very much time for that. And to me it wasn't interesting. She knows a lot more than she lost. Teach them nowadays, teach them life skills, things like, I don't know but teach them life skills, what they do, so much English, do anything you want. Things like algebra and all that, what good is that?* (mother of student #3167)

A key point she was making was that schools should offer courses which developed skills which were “relevant” to the workplace and useful in dealing with the demands of living in today’s society. Once again this mother’s primary goal was to ensure her daughter was happy, and this came through in the advice she gave her daughter about how to go about making the important decision about what to do after she leaves school.

*I said to her “I don't mind what you do in the next three months but it's up to you to decide what you are doing in January, and then when January starts, beginning this year, I want you to....” I went and talked to them [school] and [said] “she's not happy” (pause). Then she can decide what she wants to do... (mother of student #3167)*

One parent from Repo felt that students needed to be advised to take a programme which included computer skills as “*they [employers] all want computer*” (mother of student #2126). This view reinforced the general impression that work relevance was a key expectation in parents views of an effective education programme for their daughters. This mother was disappointed with the level of career guidance her daughter received, arguing that the school “*maybe could have done more career counselling.*” So it seemed that parents at low decile schools expected the school to prepare their daughters for the world of work, through both the programme content and careers advice.

Whilst parents seemed to wield more influence than the school in career development, teachers had a role to play in shaping expectations about staying on at school and career opportunities. The contribution which positive relationships with teachers make to students’ achievement, enjoyment and subject choice and career selection is highlighted by Vaughan (2003, p. 6). Positive relationships with teachers have been shown to be a significant factor in keeping students at school in research by Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, and Tiakirai (2003b, pp. 97, 102), Hill and Hawk (2000,

p. 16), and also in this study: *“It was the relationship with some of the teachers that kept me there—and at school,”* student #271 explained.

A genuine interest and caring about future career direction was illustrated by her experience:

Researcher: *And, what sort of things did [teachers] say to you?*

Student: *Really disappointed. Came down with “What’re you going to do when you leave, once you leave? Have you got any, a job lined up or are you going to do training?” Yeah.*

It seemed that careers advice at school was relayed most commonly by informal discussions, such as this, with subject teachers. However, there were some examples of very effective career development and guidance taking place within schools, as student #1261 described.

*She dealt a lot with career lives and outdoor activities at the polytechs and sort of things like that as well but she was understanding. Well, the thing is also, because of the subjects we were taking, how we’d have to draw up, you know, life plans and what we were going to do like and where and when and if we were doing those sort of activities in class she’d, you know, she’d give you one-on-one time as well, and she’d sit there and you know, she’d like “what’s going on with you?” you know. I mean, you’d sit there and be like, well, you know, “I just can’t handle anymore” kinda thing and she’d sit there, and she’d talk with you and take you further down the line and that was that.*

Sometimes questions about the assumptions underpinning the advice staff gave were raised by the student’s stories. For example, the following student wanted to leave school to join a computer course. She returned to school after the Christmas break to get her leaving certificate signed by the dean.

*[The dean said] “I’m not going to sign this because I want you to come back to school.” She took me into her room and told me the subjects I could take and stuff. My course I was supposed to be doing had already been set up and she said “I’m going to ring them [tertiary provider] for you and say, you know, that you are coming back to school.”* (student #271)

That funding for secondary schools is based on the actual roll on March 1 each year may have been an underlying driver in this teacher’s desire to keep this student at

school, or she may genuinely have thought that the school programme might be better for this student. As it was, this student did ultimately leave school mid-year, so this action only delayed the outcome.

The situation which follows, where the student was determined to leave against the advice of staff, was one of the few recorded where a student mentioned the guidance counsellor as part of the process in deciding to leave school. The counsellor's approach is of interest:

*I ended up seeing the counsellor and she told me that I'm, you know, pull my head in and stop acting, like, the way I was acting. But, I wanted to be something and go somewhere else. But, I told her, what I've told you, I've done what I wanted to do and I finished my sixth form year. She said it would be good, to, like, [gain] extra qualifications. But, no, nothing anyone was going to say would've made me change my mind. (student #271)*

Such a response might explain why very few students cited meeting with their school's guidance counsellor as part of the decision-making around leaving school. However, there were a number of reasons for students not accessing advice and guidance, ranging from the limited time allocation for the roles (which meant that there was neither the ease of access nor the ongoing opportunities to develop the required level of trust), to a feeling of discomfort about the particular person or his or her way of operating. In fairness to the career counsellors, they often reported a disparity between what they would like to be doing and what the school expects them to do (Seligman, 1994, p. 226).

However, the fact remains that some students did not relate at all well to the idea of receiving guidance counselling, which frequently incorporates careers counselling, as shown by this young Maori girl's story (student #2348).

Student: *Yeah, they told me to [sigh]. I could go to the counselling and the deputy principal.*

Researcher: *And did you take it up?*

Student *No. No, but I went to see someone else. Yeah, aye, I didn't get along with her. [Whispered] Yeah, you know.*

This may be a matter of personality differences but the lack of comfort in going to see the counsellor may also have been a cultural issue as Love's (1999) work seems to suggest. She maintained that Maori require a holistic approach to counselling which

involves physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions. Adding a component of cultural sensitivity and knowledge of tikanga<sup>154</sup> to what was otherwise a Western practice based on an individualistic orientation does not meet the needs of Maori. Using Love's explanation that Maori may feel whakamaa (shy, ashamed) if they are not doing well at school, or if they are chastised for their behaviour, assists in understanding why there is a higher Maori drop out (1999, p. 218, citing Williams, 1971). Love maintained that underpinning the notion of feeling whakamaa is a consciousness "'of being at a disadvantage' and directly related to a perceived loss of or diminution in mana, and to a consequent defencelessness because of a lack of mana in relation to another or others" (ibid.). She advocated for an indigenous model of counselling built on the whanau (family) concept as more effective in assisting young Maori to deal effectively with their problems. Such an approach, which incorporates ongoing family support and monitoring, could be extended to include an element of futures planning for more effective careers development in Maori youth. There is no obvious impediment to adopting such an approach for, although there is a Ministry requirement for schools to provide career information and guidance, there is no set way in which this is to occur.

## Discussion

What is interesting about these findings is that they seem to support previous research which indicated that "dropping out of school is a process that often begins early in a student's school career" (Llehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005, p. 64). Frequent absences and failure to complete homework were amongst the visible indicators of disengagement from school which occurred much earlier in school life than the final act of dropping out. This scenario suggests that interventions should also begin early, so that students experience school success, and then if some "chance" events or problems do occur the student has the confidence and problem-solving skills to deal with them. Various strategies for increasing school retention—including a greater focus on learner engagement, targeted student support and the provision of career and academic counselling—are suggested in dropout literature. How successful these strategies prove to be must be the topic of future research. Certainly the three schools in this study had a range of student services available, covering pastoral care, learner support, counselling

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<sup>154</sup> Tikanga are the customs and traditions of Maori people handed down over generations ([www.Maori.org.nz](http://www.Maori.org.nz)). The glossary for the Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum defines tikanga as "custom, rule, way of doing things" (Exploring Te Ao Kori: Tikanga guidelines, Ministry of Education, 2002). However, tikanga has become modified with Western and church influence, and today following tikanga is taken to be about making sure that activities are culturally appropriate.

and careers advisory services. The stories in this chapter suggest that, although some students had taken advantage of these services they had not been successful in preventing them leaving school early<sup>155</sup>. The informal careers advice provided by parents and teachers appeared to be more influential than the advice available from careers advisors tasked with this role officially in schools.

Effective career counselling requires a good understanding of what is meant by the term “career.” Career can be defined as “a sequence of roles or positions, including work, leisure, volunteer, and educational pursuits,” according to Seligman (1994, p. 25). This conceptualisation is based on a developmental perspective congruent with the ecological theory underpinning this thesis. People have only one career, extending from early childhood to retirement, although a career may encompass several occupations and many jobs or positions across the life span. Zaccaria (1970, cited in Seligman, 1994, p. 6) explained that this approach assumes that “people are capable of being happy and successful in a number of jobs and that satisfaction is a function of overall lifestyle.” Career development reflects a person’s accumulated life experience, which inevitably has a profound effect on all aspects of that person’s life. It includes paid employment, leisure activities, volunteer work, time spent on education, and time spent at home caring for the family. Career development involves more than just a decision to enter a specific job because occupational choices are really lifestyle choices. In this conceptualisation careers have multiple functions for both the individuals and for society, sustaining the economy, providing individuals with products and services as well as a sense of identity, through self-awareness, self-confidence, self-definition and self-actualisation, giving “form and substance to their lives” (Seligman, 1994, p. 26).

In this study some students who left school hoping to gain employment, such as student #2126, realised quickly that labour market conditions did not favour the unskilled. Despite having aspirations to be “*working in an office, or something that earns heaps*” this student was working part-time as a commercial cleaner two years after she left school. “*It was better than nothing,*” her mother advised. The transition to work is seen as a rite of passage to adulthood, so for young people leaving school into casual, part-time work or into unemployment this can lead to a loss of self-esteem and loss of confidence. They do not have the status which society accords those who are in

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<sup>155</sup> That is not to say that these services had not been effective in supporting the persisting students to stay on at school.

full-time paid employment. Much will depend on how buoyant the job market is at a given moment.

National data included in Chapter 4 showed that many New Zealand students leave school with few qualifications. Of course, with changing economic and labour market conditions school leavers may find themselves unemployed when they leave school whether they have got qualifications or not. However, “numerous studies have shown that those without high school diplomas are significantly more likely to be among the unskilled or semi-skilled labor force, or to be simply unemployed” (Lefrancois, 1976, p. 265). Whilst at school, these students are commonly those who pose special challenges to schools trying to retain them and raise their levels of achievement. Once they leave school, the same unresolved issues frequently reappear in the new learning contexts as employers attempt to raise skill levels through on-job training or tertiary providers strive to provide a smooth and effective transition to mainstream tertiary programmes.

Thus “effective career planning looks beyond educational and occupational choices and considers the interface between career and personal goals...[recognising] other areas such as health, leisure, interpersonal relations, and other personal goals” (Seligman, 1994, pp. 32-33). This wider perspective on careers development has implications for the wider curriculum, as well as for the provision of careers guidance and advice in schools.

The main forms of career counselling experienced by leaving students were advice and guidance relayed by teachers and deans who, although they attempted to keep up-to-date with changes in the labour market and occupational requirements, did not have the additional training required of an “empowering role” which would enable students to develop the career maturity to explore career directions, first by crystallisation and then by specification. Career maturity involves a level of “planfulness” and decision-making which can be assessed and developed, according to McIntyre (1998, p. 128). This process requires support from suitably qualified counsellors:

The “information broker”, the “informed networker” and “skilled communicator”...are valuable aspects of this service, but they also require a well developed “teacher”, “assessor”, “coach” and “integrator” to make effective decisions about which aspects of career education to cover, in what order, and at which form levels in the curriculum.” (McIntyre, 1998, p. 197)

Whilst they may not have the level of skill McIntyre considered necessary to provide for effective career development, this study indicated that parents and subject teachers are very influential in decisions about whether to leave or stay, or what to do beyond school. Friends, much to the surprise of teachers<sup>156</sup>, seemed less influential.

These findings provide support for Bronfenbrenner's hypothesis, that, in terms of the power to influence "developmental trajectories," the "most pervasive and potent primary settings in human society are...the family and the workplace....A close third is the peer group, although its unstable and short-lived character limits its impact" (1979, p. 285). So it is important that parents, teachers and deans involved in the process and outcomes of career development have close liaison with careers counsellors to ensure congruency between these important influences on students' lives and what is happening in the external environment, the economy and labour market.

What my study showed was that it is not enough to have a career goal and high aspirations for educational achievement because these plans can easily be derailed by seemingly minor unanticipated events, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. A student with particular characteristics (a strong sense of self agency arising out of previous success), high aspirations (articulated clearly in a career development plan), and the support of family, school and friends whose expectations of her success are transmitted to her is almost certain to succeed. This conclusion is supported by the work of Llehr et al. (2005) and is congruent with the recommendations made for the provision of whanau-inclusive careers development counselling based on Love's (1999) model of indigenous counselling services. To be able to "set in motion patterns of motivation and activity in the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 285), the "primary settings," of family and school exert their influence through regular interaction over a sustained period between the "active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate external environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005a, p. 6).

In this chapter the important influence the environment has had on retention and drop out was touched on. As well as the physical and social aspects of the environment, symbolic aspects such as language were also seen to influence behaviour through media messages. A big attraction for students, such as student #3138, to leave school was access to greater disposable income to support their leisure activities: A major factor for

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<sup>156</sup> At a number of presentations (Coutts, 2004b, 2006a) this view was expressed by teachers and guidance staff in the audience.

this student had been to earn more money “*because I wanted more stuff.*” Much leisure activity of teenagers revolves around television viewing or commercialised leisure activities which require higher income levels than most can generate through part-time work (and even through full-time employment in many instances). Widening the view of leisure activities available at school could thus have a positive effect in reducing this *pull* factor. As well as promoting confidence, health and wellbeing, leisure activities provide relaxation and challenge: Seen as part of a wider conceptualisation of career development they can foster friendships, enhance interpersonal and social skills and raise self-esteem, complementing, or compensating for, success in other life endeavours (Seligman, *op. cit.*).

However, the leisure activities schools provide traditionally through a mixture of curricular and extra-curricular activities, with the addition of schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award and community service, are very narrow in range. They appeal more to white middle class students than to those from ethnic minorities and from working class backgrounds (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 176). There may also be gender specific aspects to leisure, with boys needing to express their physicality, while girls prefer leisure activities which meet their need for a relational component: “Young women also need ‘space’ to develop confidence and leisure interests” (Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 176, citing Spender, 1982; Young 1980). Especially in coeducational schools, “areas where young women ‘hang out’, where they spend time together away from ‘the lads’ and the teachers” are required according to Griffin et al., (1982, cited in Coleman & Hendry, *ibid.*). In contrast, in single-sex boys schools Lashlie (2005, p. 44) found most young men’s leisure focusing on alcohol, drugs, sport and girls, and in schools they needed to have the space to “get the rough and tumble out of their system.”

Through the mechanism of play the schools appeared able to accommodate and support the frequent dashes maturing students make between the gateway of childhood they’re moving away from and the gateway to manhood they’re inexorably approaching. (*ibid.*)

Leisure counselling and preparing the young person for periods of unemployment, including possibly development of the skills to be self employed, are emerging as roles school personnel can play in this wider notion of career development.

In a very complex fashion then, this wider conceptualisation of careers development has implications for not only the curriculum and the quality of the human

resources deployed but also for the facilities, in the provision of appropriate social and physical spaces.

Boyd, Chalmers, and Kumeakawa (2001) found that career intentions differed according to ethnicity and decile, with lower proportions of Maori, Pasifika and students from decile 3 schools intending to go on to tertiary study after leaving school and an even smaller group achieving this goal compared with their European and Asian counterparts.

Although the majority of school leavers did what they had intended to do immediately on leaving school, one year later it was found that significant changes had occurred to student plans. “The fact that they had changed or developed their plans further was something that most respondents had in common” (Boyd et al., 2001, p.17). Reasons for the changes ranged from developing a personal interest in a new area to finding another career that had better job prospects or salary. For some it was getting new careers information because, although family and whanau were the most common sources of career advice accessed, the most useful information for assisting with transitions was reported as that provided by employers, schools, or tertiary providers. This study identified issues with the quality of careers information, and it also raised questions about readiness and career maturity.

Readiness for career planning is thought to be affected by many factors, including the level of self-awareness, knowledge of options, level of congruence between self-image (abilities, interests, values, personality) and career goals, independence and planning capability, and ability to learn from experience (Seligman, 1994, pp. 28-29). Many of these aspects can be developed through incorporating into the wider curriculum problem solving, research and analytical skills, in association with opportunities for confidence building and leadership. Incorporating work experience, through schemes such as Gateway or part-time employment, and contact with tertiary providers, through STAR and Curriculum Alignment<sup>157</sup> initiatives, can allow students to taste experiences and facilitate development of career goals. Experiences, as well as people, influence career development. Generally, adolescents who acquire employment

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<sup>157</sup> As one example, it is thought that the Curriculum Alignment Project (Coutts, 2004b, 2006c) underway at Northland Polytechnic will assist in motivating local secondary school students to stay on at school for longer by giving them a “taste of tertiary” education and training in the context of a clearly articulated career framework which links secondary to tertiary to industry in a seamless pathway.

experience have higher grades and better self-esteem than those who do not” Seligman maintained (op. cit., p. 261). Although high school work experience seldom provides direct preparation for work, students learn about work ethics and gain first-hand experience of the role of an employee and of the world of work. However, some caution is needed in considering this possibility. If school personnel have not instigated a mechanism for evaluating the value of work experience within the longer term career development plan, students with potential to reach higher level career goals may be influenced to drop out from school and accept the most readily available employment.

Careers can satisfy three major personal needs (Super, 1957, cited in Seligman, 1994, p. 25): perceived human relations needs (e.g., socialisation, recognition, independence, status); activity needs (e.g., structure, stimulation, creativity, use of skills), and livelihood needs (e.g., security, compensation.). Concern for youth in transition led to the New Zealand Council for Educational Research *Pathways and Prospects* project, which found that “young people face different responsibilities and insecurities during this period than previous generations” (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. 1). In a more fragmented and global labour market, where individuals face increasing casualisation of employment and possibly periods of unemployment, the challenge for young people leaving school “shifts from securing a job at one point in time and then keeping it to finding jobs over and over throughout life (Wijers & Meijers, 1996)” (ibid., p. 90). In “a society where the roles of learner and worker continue to change” (ibid., p. xi) career guidance, with its focus on skill matching, is “increasingly difficult to sustain” (ibid., p. 90). The first report on this project found that careers decision-making did not occur at a single point in time and that “similar orientations may be based on quite different, but equally valid, reasoning” (ibid., p. xi). In considering the most effective way to support this more encompassing notion of careers development, of “career as process” (ibid.), school personnel need to review not only the way in which careers advice and support is provided but also how, when and where it fits into the wider curriculum.

It is in late adolescence that there is typically a greater focus on career interests and identity exploration. The fact that society generally recognises that completing school, or taking a first full-time job, signals the exit from adolescence and entry to adulthood (Santrock, 2001, p. 18) signifies the impact such milestones have on an individual’s ongoing development. However, developmental problems both during the

childhood years and in adolescence are recognised in the literature as setting the scene for later drop out.

Career development work, then, needs to begin before the high school years. But in advocating this, it is essential that a vocational emphasis does not come to dominate people's perception of the role of schools and schooling. With its focus on "managing your self, perhaps with expert direction, for careers that are possibly as-yet unheard of" (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. 9), career development in schools "needs to move away from pathways and navigations within a simple model of transition-to-labour market to something that takes account of *identity production* and *career as process*," according to Vaughan et al., (2006, p. xi, emphasis in original).

### **Summary**

As the social constructivist view of identity highlighted, "the loss of family, friends, and community alters not just our relationships, but our sense of self" (Gergen, 1978, cited in Schiffrin, 2000, p. 2). In the telling of her experience of becoming a dropout, student #2286 revealed how multiple and complex changes of identity occurred during this ecological transition. Of particular interest is the student's desire to express herself, which is a major contributing factor in dropping out. This story illustrates that an individual's development is both a consequence and the cause of drop out behaviour (Bronfenbrenner, 2005b, p. 96).

Poor relationships with teachers were a major influence on this student's decision to leave school as soon as she was able to legally. To a certain extent this problem had developed because of conflict over uniform and hair: her desire to express her identity against teachers' insistence that the school regulations be adhered to. There was also a certain level of resentment towards teachers because she did not understand the work and she was not getting the assistance she required.

For the mostpart this student's behaviour seemed timid, yet on occasion she could be provocative. She was influenced by the school environment but also active in shaping that environment, resisting the school's attempts to make her conform to the uniform code. By the very way she dressed and wore her hair she flaunted the authority of the school. Some of the problems in the classroom that resulted in what teachers considered defiance undoubtedly arose from frustrations stemming from her inability to keep up with classmates.

Student #2286 had apparently always struggled academically at school, well before going to high school, and public humiliation by a teacher at a previous school had knocked her self-esteem and confidence. This student appeared to have developed a victim mentality and spoke of situations of being picked on by various teachers from primary and intermediate school days, as well as at high school. Problems at school led to so much stress that this student became physically ill. Parents' attempts to solve the problems through discussions with the school were unsuccessful, and so leaving school was a move away from an untenable situation.

How she behaved in school, her "school self," was portrayed as a very different person from her "dancing self." Her dancing was the one area she seemed to excel in, and when she spoke about this she spoke confidently and self-assuredly about her dreams to travel to Britain as a choreographer or dancer. She was pulled by her dreams "toward[s] something tangible in career terms," like the "Passion Honers" in Vaughan et al.'s study (2006, p. 90; emphasis in original). So both a push away from careers such as hairdressing and fashion and design, which would have required staying at school longer, and pulls towards ballet, influenced this student's career exploration.

This student's story illustrates well the reciprocal interaction of the individual with her proximal settings of school and home. When she was unhappy at school, the school problems affected how she was at home. The way student #2286 experienced the school environment was coloured by past experiences at school. That particular environmental conditions produce different developmental consequences depends on the personal characteristics of the individual student, as is shown in this story. As Bronfenbrenner explained:

*The characteristics of the person at a given time in his or her life are a joint function of the characteristics of the person and of the environment over the course of that person's life up to that time. (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 2005c, p. 108)*

This student's experiences with teachers at school and the past experiences of her mother, which were similar, acted to reinforce each other and, over time, to shape a change in the "properties" of student #2286. This personal development was a joint function of the interaction of the person with their environment. Bronfenbrenner defined the ecology of human development as the study of

the progressive, mutual accommodation, *throughout the life course*, between an active growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate

settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (emphasis in original, 2005e, p. 107)

Dropping out, then, is the result of the interaction between the student and the social agents within the proximal settings.

The exosystem influence of media culture was particularly significant in creating a tension between student #2286's idealised image and the identities available at school. The work experience gained at the hairdressers gave her the opportunity to taste a possible career path and probably contributed to her self confidence. But work and future careers were not central motivations in her decision to leave school. Nor did they feature largely in her concept of self, supporting Vaughan's contention that "music, fashion, and leisure are more central to how young people think of themselves (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000)" today (2003, p. 6).

The support of parents, schools and peers in the young person's quest for self and life direction can ease the transition between adolescence and adulthood. The vital role which others play in supporting students from school to work or further study, in the transition from child to adulthood, was illuminated here. The concept of career development and how relationships with parents and teachers affected the course of students' career trajectories was discussed, and the question of the school's role in providing support in this transition are raised for further attention in Chapter 6.

As a result of processing her experiences student #220 became clearer about her future aspirations and career possibilities. She matured as a result and had a greater sense of self agency than she exhibited previously. The first time she left school, there seemed no other alternative because she was pregnant. However, prior to that she had found school boring and, although academically able, she was not focused on her studies. Her experiences as a job seeker without skills provided the motivation for her to return to school, raise her skill level, and achieve her career goal. The period of "milling and churning" (OECD, 2000, cited in Vaughan, 2003, p. 8) during which this student moved between unemployment and work activities before getting a clear career goal is apparently a phase experienced by many young people today.

There was a level of collaboration evidenced between the "primary settings" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 285) of school and home which appeared to provide the ideal career development context. In this ideal situation, parents, teachers and students work together in the process of career exploration and futures planning, supported by their

peers. When this collaboration occurs the student's aspirations are known and there is encouragement to succeed, so when obstacles arise there is a level of trust and support which allows problems to be dealt with openly. Similarly when opportunities congruent with the plan arise they also can be considered. But this ideal was not the mainstream story.

Despite difficulties in the proximal settings which led to leaving school early, many of the students did not appear to have a negative career outcome—they were able to find employment or alternative routes to continue their education. But the trajectory was determined not by a single decision at a single point in time, as Vaughan, Roberts, and Gardiner (2006, p. xi) also found. Dropping out was rarely the result of a rational decision-making process associated with planned career development. There were signs of a lack of engagement in learning, such as academic problems or boredom at school, which pointed towards early school leaving over a period of time prior to students actually dropping out of school. This was something that the students themselves were often not fully aware of, with the result that decisions about their immediate post-school destinations were not researched carefully or well considered.

## Conclusion

The pattern of drop out and differences between school sites were described in Chapter 4, and then, to gain a greater insight into what was going on at the level of the individual, Chapter 5 focused on the experiences of selected early leavers at home and at school. Coupled with feedback from other key informants, these students' stories told of the complexity of drop out; of the myriad of inter-related factors which influenced these young women to leave the programme of study for which they had enrolled in 2003.

The comparison of students' intentions with later events (Chapter 4) showed that many students had plans to continue with schooling in the next year, yet they still ended up leaving. Leaving sometimes appeared to be an impulsive reaction to chance events, such as a fall out with friends, an altercation with a teacher, an accident, illness, or economic change such as the father losing his job. For many students there were problems at school which brought about these changes in plans. For others the problems were centred outside school, often within the family.

These students' stories indicated that career development was rarely a rational process and that there were many factors involved in leaving school and determining the post-school destination. Congruent with the findings of Vaughan et al. (2006, p. 89), it was found that careers "exploration can be understood in terms of pushes and pulls." Many of the leaving students in this study were, like the participants in the *Pathways and Prospects* project, "*pushed* into their pathway options as the only viable options and way of becoming successful, moving *away* from unwanted possibilities....from "bad" choices and *towards* imagined better ones" (emphasis in original, *ibid.*, p. 89). A few, such as student #1395 who left school early to be a nurse, and student #2286 who dreamed of being a ballet dancer, were "*pulled* by their dreams and interests" (*ibid.*).

Dropping out was, then, the culmination of the interaction of a complex set of factors of which the student was not fully cognisant. The *trigger* which brought the decision to a head—the most recent, or most pressing, of these many factors—is what gave the impression that dropping out was the result of chance events, or "happenstance" (Coutts, 2006a, 2006d). The decision to leave school early generally evolved over a long period of time.

There did not seem to be significant differences in the characteristics of students who left school early and in those who went on to complete the year. That dropouts experienced problems common to all teenagers is a conclusion reached from this study but it may be that those who came to leave school early had *more than their fair share* of such problems, possibly lacked the personal temperament to deal with them easily, or maybe did not have adequate support to work through the issues. The presence of a parent, a teacher or significant other caring adult (grandparent, elder sister, family friend) was shown to be able to assist these students to grapple with the many problems which beset most young people during adolescence. In their narration of events, students with trusting relationships with caring adults were seen to talk through issues and be assisted in processing their feelings and making appropriate choices.

Bronfenbrenner's hypotheses on what makes for effective ecological transitions and the work of resilience researchers (Clarke & Clarke, 2003) supports the notion that the presence of at least one caring adult can assist in smoothing the transition from child through to adult.

*The developmental potential of a setting...is enhanced if the person's initial transition into that setting is not made alone, that is, if he enters the new setting*

*in the company of one or more persons with whom he has participated in prior settings.* (emphasis in original, Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 211)

In the same way that the interviews with the researcher provided the opportunity for students to process and reflect on events so, too, can the listening ear of a parent or teacher facilitate developmental work. Students with trusting relationships with an adult can talk through issues and be assisted in processing, and coming to understand, the changes in role and responsibilities associated with leaving school early. The first two sections of Chapter 5, where both family members and teachers were shown to have very important influences on a student's ability to deal effectively with concerns, illustrated this well. Whilst the students selected for special focus in this chapter did ultimately leave, those who made smooth transitions from school to further study or work were able to do so because of the support they received.

Dealing with the many problems which appeared to beset the leaving students resulted not only in dropping out but also in personal development, as is illustrated well in the case of student #220 who returned to school after becoming pregnant. She exhibited changes in her attitude towards school and towards her parents which signified development post-drop out. She had both the support of her friends and her mother during this difficult transition, enabling her to return to school and achieve her goal. This story revealed a level of collaboration between school and home which appeared to be the ideal career development context in which parents, teachers, and the student worked together in the process of career exploration and futures planning, supported by the peer group.

The influence of the family on young people's decision-making was also a "theme which resonated strongly in many of the interviews" of Australian early school leavers (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 100). In the literature review the influence of the family was widely recognised as a most important contributor to success at school, with family background explaining much of the variation in educational outcomes, including school achievement and drop out behaviour. Previous research focused commonly on the characteristics of families such as socioeconomic status and educational background, and on family structure. However, the question of what constitutes a family and therefore who is involved was not a simple matter (David, West, & Ribbens, 1994, p. 2), as the girls' stories showed.

Students who had strong relationships with their parents were more likely to stay on at school (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger et al., 1990, cited in Rumberger, 2004, p. 140). There seemed to be some debate in the literature about whether students from single-parent families and step families were more likely to drop out through family disorganisation. Previous studies frequently mentioned divorce, abusive parenting associated with drug and alcohol consumption, poverty, and lack of parental support and supervision as factors associated with young people dropping out. Similar factors were also identified through the particular cases selected for inclusion in this study. Student #2324, for example, was trying to deal with feelings of betrayal, as her mother sides with stepfather over the boyfriend issue, and with stepfather's alleged alcoholic binges and angry outbursts. At the same time, this student was also experiencing stress over mathematics difficulties, fear of failure in Year 11, and lack of fit with peers at school. This girl's story, and others cited in this chapter, provided further evidence of the complexity of the early leaving phenomenon.

A further point of interest highlighted particularly well in this story was the role of the mother in the family dynamics. It was mother who was involved in monitoring her daughter's academic progress and in providing support. She was the first point of contact for the school, if staff had concerns. This may have been because this was a blended family and the mother was identified as the primary caregiver, although other writers (David, 2005; David, Davies, Edwards, Reay, & Standing, 1997; Reay, 2005) have also identified the gendered nature of roles and responsibilities within the family. In this chapter we also saw how strongly parents' own school experiences affected the aspirations they had for their own children. Many early leavers had mothers who had not done well at school, who had also dropped out.

As in this Leaver's Portrait, and consistent with previous dropout research, this study found that many students had been struggling academically before they left school. However, there were also some students who left who were very capable academically and who wanted to continue their education. Some of these dropouts went on to be successful in more vocationally oriented tertiary programmes post-school, where the courses on offer, and the learning environment, catered better for their new-found status as young adults. These students could no longer put up with the constraints which the school context imposed on their emerging adult-selves. They had simply outgrown what school had to offer, and could not continue to tolerate the limitations of the schoolgirl identities available to them there.

At the high decile school this transition was paved for the girls through STAR programmes with local polytechnic providers. In most cases discussions with parents about future career opportunities had occurred. But in the other schools, “*jumping onto a course*” post-school was something more ad hoc and the school staff found it difficult to get parents involved. Parents did not feel comfortable coming in to school, because of their own past experiences, and looked to teachers to assist their daughters in the field of careers advice because they did not have the requisite knowledge or confidence to provide guidance. This finding supports initiatives which involve collaboration between school and home to address issues associated with academic achievement and retention.

“Adolescence” is the term accorded to the transition between childhood and adult status. During adolescence the sense of self identity continues to develop and change, in line with greater cognitive capability, with vocational identity formation commonly a major focus of late adolescence. Leaver’s Portrait # 2286 illustrated that the establishment of an academic self-concept, progress towards vocational identity formation, and changes in body-image were all part of the emergence of a unique identity. However, student #2286’s identity did not present as a “stable” and “consistent” self but, rather, was revealed as a “daily project of establishing a social identity” through her interaction with others (after Tait, 1993, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 67).

Amidst the angst caused by the lack of acknowledgment she received as a creative individual at school, student #2324 also struggled to deal with the problems she was experiencing with school work and the teachers in some subjects. Her narrative illustrated well the complexity of the physical and social context within which drop out occurs.

Student #2286 was another who was struggling academically, although she was apparently not without some ability. Harker and Nash (1995, cited in Nash, 1997b, p. 32) identified the characteristics of students whose educational trajectories were marked by relative decline. By their criteria, this student was one not likely to succeed. She had no immediate employment aspirations for which a school qualification would be beneficial. She had a negative view of school and had had poor relationships with quite a few teachers but the main problem was that she had given up trying. The fact that achieving her career goals as a dancer did not depend on school-based qualifications but on qualifications gained through another provider, was probably a major factor in her lack of commitment to school work. As Nash (1997b, p. 163) explained, “if students

believe...that they have learned enough for their purposes...then they cannot be expected to find further time at school of much value.”

Both this student’s story, and the experience of others, showed that the influence of teachers on drop out was both direct and indirect. That teachers shaped students’ expectations and aspirations by “cooling out” practices, as Jones suggested (1991, pp. 171, 178-179), was also well illustrated by the leavers’ stories in this study. The “*snow job*” was achieved by specific threats: “*you have to leave, or get expelled*” (student #2227) or being picked on incessantly by teachers, as student #2286 described. But teachers also affected drop out indirectly, by failing to assist transferring students to adjust to a new school setting and by not managing the effects which peers had on these students through bullying and ostracisation. Some students who changed schools frequently (about a third of the dropouts interviewed) never recovered from the effects of these transitions. Such an observation is consistent with the work of Roderick (1993, p. xix). The impact on their academic work and their sense of not fitting in, of not belonging, were major factors in students leaving school early.

The students’ experiences recorded here demonstrated how sometimes leaving was initiated by the school authorities while sometimes it was initiated by the student or even the parent. But, in most cases, it was associated with a lack of social and academic integration within the school setting. Students leaving within the academic year relayed little sense of integration with the mainstream school community, a reality that is congruent with Tinto’s theories about the underpinning causes of dropping out (1975, 1987, 2005). However, some of these students had had more involvement in school activities previously, particularly in sports, suggesting that the feeling of alienation may have been the *result* of their progressive disengagement with school rather than a *cause* of it. A sense of academic progress, coupled with a feeling of belonging evidenced through good relationships with teachers and other students, was what seemed to keep students at school.

Interviews with high school students recorded in Nash and Harker’s study (1997, p. 6) suggested it was their aspirations to complete higher education and a positive academic self-concept that were associated with academic progress, hence their retention in school. These dispositions were found more frequently in European students from middle class backgrounds than those from other ethnic and socioeconomic groups, leading to the conclusion that the greater correspondence between the values and beliefs held by middle class families and those of the school was

the real reason why their children were retained in school longer. Children from white, middle class homes knew what was expected of them and fitted more easily into school routines than other students, because family values were similar to those of the school. And if there were problems at school then parents felt comfortable meeting with teachers on an equal footing to sort them out.

In Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, and Tiakiwai's (2003b) study of Maori students' experiences in junior school (Year 9 and 10), there were differing perspectives on what was considered to be the major influence on educational achievement. Students and parents, principals (and some teachers) thought that the most important influence was

the quality of the in-class face-to-face relationships and interactions between teachers and Maori students. In contrast, the majority of teachers suggested that the major influence on Maori students' educational achievement was the children themselves and/or their family/whanau circumstances, or systemic/structural issues. (2003b, pp. 1-2)

The above study concluded that relationships with teachers were the most important factors in Maori educational achievement. However, this study has been critiqued for ignoring the range of factors which interact "in complex ways to influence student performance" (Rata, 2004, p. 12). These differing viewpoints on the issue of Maori educational achievement, and the fact that different groups give weight to certain factors above others, point to the importance of using an ecological framework to bring together the range of perspectives to represent more realistically the reality of the situation as it is experienced.

Lack of educational achievement was highlighted in many international studies as a characteristic frequently associated with dropping out. So it was not surprising to find that the many aspects which affected student achievement and which presented barriers to academic progress were the same ones which also featured in the stories of early leavers, whatever their ethnicity.

For many students considerable changes in their thinking and attitudes were shown to have occurred between the beginning of the academic year, when they returned to school to continue senior studies, and the point where their plans changed and they dropped out of school. Comparison of data from the Intentions Survey, and later Telephone and Face-to-face Interviews, showed that development had occurred,

suggesting that drop out involves an ecological transition: “Every ecological transition is both a consequence and an instigator of developmental processes” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 27).

As students made the transition from schoolgirl to roles outside of school, they became involved in new activities and types of social structures which had developmental consequences. Part-time work brought about developmental changes, for example, with greater maturity associated with work responsibilities resulting in increased frustration at being treated like a child at school by some teachers. In other cases there were problems at home which absorbed so much energy that there was not enough capacity left to deal with the day-to-day emotional work which it seemed many students needed to perform just to stay on at school within a culture they found alienating and unsupportive. Students followed many different trajectories but the dropouts’ transition from school was a significant experience, likely to have a lasting and profound effect on the life of the individuals concerned.

In keeping with Bronfenbrenner’s (2005a) bioecological theory of human development, drop out was a consequence of the reciprocal interaction between the students’ immediate environment (family, school and to a lesser extent, friends and outside settings such as work), the less direct influence of bigger-picture policies and systems, and the biopsychological characteristics of that person. Different stories identified various factors as having greater or lesser influence in particular students’ drop out trajectories. This research is inconclusive in its findings as to whether school or family effects had the greatest influence on students dropping out of school. Student retention and drop out depends on a very complex set of interactions which vary over people, time and place.

This chapter described the nature and interconnectedness of key mesosystem influences on drop out and retention through a study of school and family settings. Previous chapters have focused on how other aspects of the students’ environment affect dropping out on an individual level and on high school students as a group. The final chapter (Chapter 6) considers the effectiveness of the narrative approaches employed to reveal and explain both the changes to an “individual’s diverse social and personal identities in response to contextual influences” (Holmes, 2006, p. 167) and how drop out links with changes in the bigger picture environmental context, through the ecological model.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The idea of high school education for all New Zealand youth is a relatively new phenomenon. Whilst concern about students leaving early has been longstanding amongst educators, it is only recently that failure to complete high school, or dropping out, has been viewed as a problem by the wider community. High school drop out started to feature as more of a public concern when New Zealand sought to become more internationally competitive through increasing the skill level of the available labour pool. Early school leavers find it more difficult to gain employment, and this realisation was part of the economic driver stimulating government interest in particular.

High rates of youth unemployment also gave rise to social concerns. Drop out is associated with substance abuse, juvenile offending, benefit dependence, teenage pregnancy, and high suicide susceptibility. These issues have contributed to intense media focus on secondary school retention and drop out, and have raised concerns from the individual and local school to national and international levels.

The likelihood of a prolonged stay at school, brought about by an increased minimum leaving age and heightened community expectations about universal high school education, raised the aspirations of young people at a time when economic conditions made prospects of future employment uncertain. Ministry of Youth Affairs policies that aimed at assisting school leavers into employment during the 1990s failed to acknowledge the high rate of youth unemployment and the fact that “not enough jobs are available” (Atwool, 1999, p. 385). Retaining students for longer at school was one way of taking the pressure off this situation. In these circumstances the purpose of high schools changed from selecting and preparing elite for university education to mass youth socialisation, aimed at preventing youth offending and dependency.

New Zealand followed an international trend for increased retention rates into senior school. Since 1995 there had been a tendency for New Zealand secondary students to stay at school longer. Even so, more than half of the students starting high school leave before completing five years of secondary schooling. Maori and Pacific students are over-represented in the early leaving group, and many leave without gaining school qualifications. The education reforms in Bahrain, where I am working currently as an education consultant, are underpinned by similar concerns, with 16 per cent of Bahrainis, mainly young people, unemployed (Hassan, 2006, p. 186). As I write this conclusion from a hotel room in East London, I see that these issues are also to the

fore in the United Kingdom: *The Independent* questioned Prime Minister Gordon Brown's proposal to raise the school leaving age further to 18 (Editor, 2007). So, the questions which initiated this study are still of international interest.

As a principal my own particular concern had been to find out why some senior students left school before they had completed the course of study they had enrolled in for the year. There was a dearth of New Zealand research on either retention or drop out but recent work by Bishop et al. suggested that "the most important influence on Maori students' educational achievement was the quality of the in-class face-to-face relationships and interactions between the teachers and Maori students" (2003b, p. 1). Teachers were charged with being "professionally responsible for bringing about change" (2003a, p. 3) to the lower level of achievement and higher drop out rates of Maori students. Whilst there was a political imperative underpinning this case study the motivation to undertake the present project came out of this sense of responsibility, from a desire for social justice as well as from a practical concern for my school's roll.

The biggest challenge, after finding an appropriate theoretical framework within which to develop greater understandings of retention and drop out from a student's perspective, was to find a way of presenting coherently this very rich data in all its complexity. This final chapter reflects on the journey which this research has taken, on the significance of school sites, and the influence of the family on early leaving behaviour and for the development of the individual.

The questions which guided this research have been addressed in detail over the preceding chapters. Here they are used broadly to summarise the findings and identify areas where further research is required:

- **What is the inter-relationship between the many factors known to influence the decision to leave school early?**
- **What role does the family play?**
- **What is the nature of the decision-making process?**
- **What are the differences between those who stay and those who leave?**
- **What is the contribution of the school and educational system in the generation of inequality/difference in retention rates?**

The concept of drop out as an ecological transition has implications for government policy, school practices and transition to employment and tertiary programmes, which are considered in the final section of this chapter.

## **Methodological issues**

Unlike many previous studies, which relied mostly on retrospective analysis of leavers' data, what was unique about the approach used here was that it investigated early leaving behaviour at the very point when it was occurring. There had been very little previous research which placed students' experiences at the centre. The narrative approaches outlined in Chapter 3 were found to be appropriate strategies to reveal the complexity of drop out suggested by the numerous factors identified in previous research, and as predicted by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005a).

Chapter 4 described the local environments in which students' stories of drop out were situated, the proximal settings where the young women went to school and lived a great deal of their lives. Here, and in Chapter 5, the stories were used in two different ways; first, as Leavers' Portraits, to present an individual student's unique experience of dropping out based on data derived largely from the Face-to-face and Telephone Interviews and, second, as intertextual narratives in which segments of non-contiguous text from many leavers' interviews were used to illustrate themes that emerged across the set. Application of a "numbers and narratives" approach (Nash, 2002b) facilitated the discovery of leaving patterns in drop out behaviour across the cohort and within schools, establishing who left, when, and why. Impressions of the three girls' secondary state schools were presented alongside these patterns, to provide a situational context within which to explore the stories of leavers' transitions.

The movement through adolescence was very much affected by both the physical and social aspects of the environment. The expectations held by significant people in the student's immediate environment were highly influential on her dropping out. In particular, variance in school drop out rates was thought to be related to the values and beliefs perpetuated intergenerationally by family practices. These were relayed through the expectations of parents and teachers about length of stay at school and future occupations.

There was a stigma attached to being a high-school dropout, which was underpinned by societal concerns about unemployed youth. This was evident in media articles and revealed in conversations with students, such as with student #3167 who said she did not want to “*be a bum.*” It was also a factor in parents’ responses to their daughters leaving school early—“*Parents wary at first but understand now. They said I had to find something before leaving*” (student #1261)—and the reactions of other students: “*Friends were good, although there are always some who say ‘dropout’ and stuff, you know. Yeah, some of them were like ‘Oh, you’re going to be a bum’ kinda thing,*” (student #1261).

Such stereotyping clearly did not act as a deterrent to those who finally dropped out but it did affect when they dropped out and what they dropped into. In common with other narrative research which focused on people who had undergone fundamental changes in their lives, the interviews with early leavers showed them “grappling with the need to understand and give meaning to complex past experiences that led narrators to claim their present identities,” but also confronting “the adequacy of categories socially established to describe human experience” (de Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006, p. 346). The relationship between individual conceptions of the self, which were changed by leaving school early, and the collective identity of dropouts as a group of no hopers, is of special interest. How the attitudes and behaviours of individuals give rise to such stereotypes is a question which emerges from this study. Future researchers may be interested in following up the ways in which leavers’ stories contribute to the construction of such collective identities.

These narratives provided a resource through which the former students’ sense of self was both developed and presented as “a psychological entity firmly located within a social and cultural world” (Schiffrin, 2000, p. 1). Nonetheless it was found that there is disagreement in the literature over the extent to which self is actually created through narrative; whether it is “a privileged route to the self” (ibid). In this multi-site case study a set of people, places, and events were brought together in a way typical of the narrative approach, to make a point about the narrators’ lives, about how they came to drop out from school (ibid., p. 2).

In addition to providing basic descriptive material (who, where, when), and reconstructing and evaluating a series of events that are temporally and often

causally related, narrators bring together a cast of characters who interact with one another....The interactions between characters within a story world provide a framework within which relationships – and hence the interacting self and other comprising that relationship – can be situated, displayed, and evaluated. (Schiffrin, 2000, p. 1)

The Leavers' Portraits were used to convey what Benwell and Stokoe described as the “project of the self” (2006, p. 18). In “becoming somebody with or without school” (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 67), the development of a sense of self for dropouts is seen in this study to be highly influenced by the reciprocal interaction which occurs with the “persons, objects, and symbols in [their] immediate external environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 2005a, p. 6).

There was considerable debate in the literature over the concept of identity, with some writers claiming that there has been a move away from this notion of a “self-fashioning, agentic, internal *project of the self*, through more recent understandings of *social and collective identity*, to post modern accounts which treat identity as fluid, fragmentary, contingent and, crucially, *constituted in discourse*” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 17, italics in original). The concept of the self as a multi-dimensional framework apparently arose because researchers found that adolescents' portraits of themselves changed depending on who they were speaking to and what roles they adopted (Santrock, 2001, p. 300). Other researchers found that “participants talk as if there is a ‘real you’ on the ‘inside’, out of sight, contrasted with a public identity display that may or may not correspond with it” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 3).

This case study showed that students appeared to present different identities in different contexts. There were often changes in emphasis in the different tellings of the drop out story, a finding attributed to the effects of time and the opportunity afforded by the interaction with the researcher to process events (this notion is expanded in the section on chronosystem effects). Far from providing support for any one view of identity, these findings raise methodological questions as to how different storytelling contexts affect the representations of self. Perhaps some of the debate in identity research is a function of the various approaches employed? It is therefore suggested that future dropout researchers give greater attention to this aspect.

The ecological approach selected to investigate the complicated interactions between dropouts and their environment built on Diana McIntyre's (1998, p. 14) interpretation of Bronfenbrenner's 1979 ecology of human development. It incorporated Bronfenbrenner's more recent thinking about the centrality of the individual that was outlined in his bioecological theory of human development (2005a). As it was essential that the investigative techniques were capable of capturing this complexity several complimentary approaches were adopted, gathering both quantitative and qualitative data over the duration of this longitudinal study. To understand complex phenomena, such as high school drop out behaviour, Stake (2006, p. v) recommended making studies of people and operations at different sites. Hence a "quintain" (2006, p. 6) case study approach of three sites within one case was implemented. Apart from the length of the case report necessitated in trying to convey to the reader a sense of the quality, reciprocity and intensity of the interactions, this approach appeared successful in delivering the rich data required for an analysis of this kind.

The analysis was no easy task. As with many case studies, the amount of data gathered was far more than can realistically be presented here. Further publications are planned to follow up on particular aspects, such as the implications of changes in the nature of qualifications on retention. At the point of writing up the final case report, the government announced changes to NCEA which may in the future affect high school retention (Maharey, 2007). This illustrates one of the dilemmas researchers must confront in determining how long to spend "in the field". The rate of change in schools is such that before completion of the project, the processes that are the focus of the study have been overtaken by other events: "Researchers hoping to find a stable environment in which to conduct their research may find the number and rapidity of changes within schools mind-boggling," Maruyama and Deno (1992, p. 93) maintained. They argued that shorter studies, such as this, have stronger findings (p. 91).

The triangulation afforded by comparing the students' perspectives with those of other key informants allowed for portrayal of the complex interrelationships between the student and her social context. This data included what the girls thought, their reports of what others said about various aspects associated with dropping out, and the views of school staff, family members and friends within the context of macrosystem beliefs (reflected in policy and procedures) about the purpose of schooling and the perceived failure of dropouts. What was eliminated because of the technique used to develop the Leavers' Portraits was the contribution which the researcher made to the

course of the dialogue and to the development of meanings. My dual positionality was highlighted to the Massey University College of Education Ethic's Committee (Coutts, 2001). Chapter 3 outlined the steps taken to redress issues associated with being both principal and researcher, especially considering the greater risks of influence inherent in the qualitative methods employed. One very important strategy was the transparency enabled by the style of presentation, which allowed me to make explicit my own beliefs and values in this case report.

That a change in student thinking often occurred during the data collection processes (and probably afterwards, when the transcripts were sent back to participants) is indisputable. But it is not unexpected. Indeed Erickson suggested that, unlike written forms of communication, in any talking situation “speaking and listening are reflexively related in an ecology of mutual influence” where the parties engaged in any interaction adjust their actions in light of how they perceive their contribution has been received (2004, p. 4). In human information processing participants in a conversation get cues about the past, the future, and “while” they are doing the “work of speaking” (ibid., p. 3). Cues are picked up through “points of emphasis in speech prosody (volume and pitch shifts) and in body motion (postural shifts, gaze, changes in direction of motion in gesture)” (ibid., p. 7). These “contextualization cues” are what would have allowed students interviewed to “‘read’ the ongoing course of the conversational roller coaster as they ride along in it” (ibid., p. 8) and adjust to any reactions which I, or my research assistant, might have made as we listened to their stories. In future dropout research an assessment of researcher influence through verbal and non verbal cues could be considered through analysis of video transcripts, although the intrusive nature of the filming process may raise further issues.

In accepting that some of the changes in thinking demonstrated by students over the course of data collection may be attributable to engagement with the researcher is not, however, to negate their value as indications of chronosystem effects in drop out complexity.

### ***Chronosystem effects***

Erickson drew attention to the two different meanings of time derived from the Greek: “One, *kronos*, refers to the quantitative aspect of time; to time as continuous and thus measurable” and the other “*kairos*, refers to time’s discontinuous, qualitative

aspect”—to the time of “tactical appropriateness, of shifting priorities” (2004, p. 6). Both interpretations were evidenced in the students’ stories. Events at home or school sometimes afforded an opportunity to change direction. The passage of time allowed for a period of reflection, during which events were processed, problems solved, and new trajectories embarked on. Wylie, Hodgen, and Ferral’s finding that “students who arrive at the same level of performance at one age, can have got there through a range of different trajectories” (2006, p. 82) reinforces the need to consider chronosystem effects.

About 30 years ago statistical data which showed cohort differences associated with the influence of diverse historical contexts was published (various works by Baltes and Schaie, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005e, p. 83). This drew attention to the effects of both age-related changes and those related to external conditions or events. Subsequently, interest has focused on exploring the effects which these experiences produced. In particular Baltes and his colleagues differentiated between normative experiences, such as puberty and entering the workforce and non-normative events such as a death in the family or divorce (ibid). They maintained that both types of events provide impetus for the developmental change apparent through both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. The design of this multi-site case study picked up elements of both these aspects. As a result, evidence that development had occurred for some individuals over the period of this case study was able to be gathered. Even as they processed their story in the telling, a change in thinking was often apparent. My role in this has been discussed already from a technical standpoint. What also needs to be made explicit, in the interests of others thinking of conducting similar research, is possible effects of the approach on the students who shared their story.

### ***Therapeutic Consequences of Storytelling***

A high level of trust developed over the process of data collection, facilitating the emergence of rich narrative material. When these young people shared their stories with me, they opened up their hearts in the knowledge that others might learn from their experiences. But there was also a benefit to them because for many this was probably the first time someone with a “listening ear” had been willing to attend to their story. The opportunity to tell how it was that they came to leave school when they did provided students with the opportunity to reflect on, and process, some of the issues of

concern to them. The recognition that there were therapeutic consequences in the storytelling posed an ethical dilemma which I needed to confront.

The therapeutic consequences of storytelling have been well recognised by others engaged in social science research, as well as clinicians: “*Personal narrative is part of the human, existential struggle to move life forward*” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 746, emphasis in original). This discovery offered a degree of comfort to go beyond the bounds normally associated with the researcher role by providing, on occasion, advice on where to go for assistance to remedy specific issues raised by students and staff. The decisions about how best to deal with such situations were not easy but Ellis and Bochner would support the stance taken here: “*Why should we be ashamed if our work has therapeutic or personal value?*” they ask (ibid.).

## The Findings

### ***The Inter-Relationship Between the Many Factors Known to Influence the Decision to Leave School Early***

Most country-wide, regional and school level studies conducted in the past were descriptive in nature. They identified the demographic characteristics of early leavers, their educational experience and environmental factors, such as the caregiving arrangements within families, associated with dropping out. But, as Cross explained, “one problem with correlational outcomes research, of course, is that correlation tells us what goes together but not why” (1998, p. 7). Variables such as socioeconomic status, gender, and ethnicity associated with high drop out rates were found to be of limited value in predicting which students might be at-risk in poor urban schools where the majority of the student population was associated with these variables (Wells, 1990, p. 12). Although wider social and family factors were often identified alongside school factors, few studies have attempted to explain how they contributed to dropout behaviour. The many factors associated with dropping out were commonly treated as *separate causes* in the literature. Studies such as the family resource framework (Nash, 1993) showed the inter-relatedness of some of these factors in student achievement but no one theory accounted adequately for why it was that some students left whilst others, faced with similar circumstances, stayed on at school. Wells concluded that, whilst alienation from the values of the school and disadvantage caused by the effects of economic deprivation and racial discrimination differentiated dropouts from those who

persisted in school, the process of becoming a dropout was much more complex (1990, p. 3). Addressing this complexity, developing “a framework within which models with a reasonable semblance to the complex social processes that generate observed inequalities in educational opportunity might be constructed” is the challenge for a sociology of education, according to Nash (2002b, p. 397). This thesis responded to that challenge.

That “social relations and processes...can be studied through a close investigation of the everyday lives of individuals” (Nash, 1997a, p. 3) has been well illustrated in this case study. The myriad of interactions between the students, their immediate settings, and the wider environment was able to be identified by utilizing ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in which the person is seen as developing within a complex system of inter-relationships with the multiple levels of the surrounding environment. The ecological approach facilitated consideration of the influence on drop out of a range of environmental contexts, visualised as a series of concentric circles from the outermost macrosystem influences to the effects of proximal settings on individual dropouts. Significantly Bronfenbrenner’s later refinements of ecological theory (Lerner, 2005, p. xv) facilitated a greater focus on the reciprocal nature of the interactions between the “biopsychosocial” person, with her repertoire of biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics, and her environment. Adoption of this perspective placed the dropout centre stage and showed the individual student shaping, and being shaped by, interactions with her environment. This reconceptualisation of young people as “active ‘navigators’ of their pathways, not passive travellers (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Vaughan, 2003)” (Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, & Ferral, 2004, p. 220) has major implications for careers education in schools. It implies a shift from information dissemination and skills matching for the workforce to a career development perspective, in which the young person becomes better equipped to expect the uncertainty of the labour market, to problem solve and think critically.

The ecological framework allowed for students’ stories to be viewed through the differing perspectives of both sociologists and psychologists. Nash argued against “an acceptance of a dichotomy between the levels of effective analysis and practice that are, in fact, subject to no such necessary division. We must always work at different levels” (1999a, p. 179). The ecological framework facilitated such an approach, allowing for the bringing together of the ideas of previous dropout researchers working in different fields of endeavour.

At the individual level the psychological perspective facilitated exploration of the meaning of drop out for the students themselves, and it allows for consideration of the exercise of individual effort and will in drop out trajectories. In contrast, the sociological viewpoint acknowledged the prior existence of society and stressed that this was a powerful influence on the way the individual student interacted with others within this context. It suggested that students' options are constrained by the possibilities available to them in a given culture and at a given point in time (Vygotsky, 1978, Vygotsky & Luria, 1956, cited in Bronfenbrenner, 2005b, p. 100).

The "false starts, set-backs and disappointed aspirations that arise from encounters with real structural constraints" (Higgins, 2002, p. 54) within educational institutions, the social welfare system, and the labour market are exacerbated by limitations imposed by the socioeconomic location of some families. The relationship between the degree of self-agency and socioeconomic background has implications for young people, "increasingly... 'responsibilised' into making their own choices" (Vaughan, 2003, cited in Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, & Ferral, 2004, p. 219), which are discussed later in this chapter. The sociological approach, concerned with the processes of socialisation in the school and home—and about roles, role expectations, role conflicts and role changes during adolescence—thus offers a significant contribution to the understanding of drop out, and particularly of differential drop out rates.

The ecological model was able to bring together concepts developed within these different paradigms to convey the complexity of the inter-relationships between the many factors known to influence student drop out. This was done incrementally over the body of the thesis, using the differentiated environmental contexts of Bronfenbrenner's earlier (1979) model. Despite the limitations inherent in this static, two-dimensional, model in portraying the dynamic interaction between the developing individual and her environment, it provided a more than adequate organising framework to structure discussions of the influence of each level.

Changes in the wider cultural and ideological contexts of the macrosystem have important influences on the behaviour of students in their own unique local settings, as described in Chapter 2. Some examples where the social structures of the exosystem were shown to have an effect on schools and schooling practices, and consequently on influencing high school drop out rates, included: attendance requirements; minimum leaving age regulations; opportunities for employment within the labour market; benefit eligibility, and tertiary education entry criteria. The overarching educational,

employment, and health and welfare policies appeared to impact unequally on differing sections of society, adversely affecting school achievement and drop out rates of Maori and Pasifika students and those from low socioeconomic family backgrounds. Whilst this conclusion is generally consistent with findings from overseas studies it has implications which warrant further attention in the New Zealand setting. These system-level influences are mediated through the actions of social agents, the activities of people in the Ministry of Education, for example, whom the student may never meet.

Parents, siblings, friends and teachers with whom the students interacted regularly were identified as the influential social agents found closer to home in the proximal settings. In Chapter 3, where the design of the case study was outlined, the importance of talking to dropouts in their own settings was stressed. Whilst I almost feel a need to apologise for the final length of this thesis, it was only by combining the views of students with those of these significant others, and visiting some of the various sites of importance to the student (their schools, and by invitation, their workplaces and homes), that a real feel for the complexity of the interrelationships and the extent of the influence of the environment on leaving behaviour was able to be provided to the reader. Many different themes emerged over the duration of the case study but most of the key issues affecting drop out and retention were found to be connected through the two major institutions in which students spent most of their time: the proximal settings of the school (Chapter 4 and 5) and the family (Chapter 5).

The original research proposal sought to clarify the relative importance of school and family influence through the very detailed analysis of various documents, and the integration of these data with survey and interview findings. What was revealed was the complexity and inter-relatedness of these microcosms. It was shown that these microcosms formed a network (mesosystem) surrounding, and interacting with, the developing individual, who often took on several different roles within their wider intersection. This inter-relatedness made for difficulties in assessing the magnitude of the effects of the subsystems within the greater integration, in disentangling family practices from factors such as the neighbourhood where the family lives, and the cultural and economic community of which the school is part. Bearing these difficulties in mind, we now focus on each of these settings in turn to consider what role the family play and how the school and education system contribute to the early school leaving patterns exhibited by different groups.

## ***The Role of the Family***

The influence of the family has been widely recognised internationally as an important contributor to success at school, with socioeconomic status, educational background and family structure accounting for much of the variance in educational outcomes of children, including academic achievement and dropout behaviour. A recent synthesis of “best evidence” by Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph concluded that “regardless of ethnic or SES background, families with high levels of educational expectations have the most positive effects on their children’s achievement at senior school level” (2003, p. iv). This research reached similar conclusions. Whatever their backgrounds, each of the parents wanted the very best for their daughters, although not all had the parenting skills, the time, or the access to material resources, which Biddulph et al.’s review suggested are important dimensions of family influence on academic achievement. These are aspects which can be changed (unlike family characteristics such as educational background and marital status of parents) or compensated for, through interventions, such as mentoring and the provision of homework centres, aiming at enhancing the likelihood of retention into and within senior school and of raised academic achievement.

Conflicting messages through a mismatch between what parents said, their dreams and aspirations for their children’s futures, and the realities of their lived experiences seemed to add to the difficulties some students had in relating to parents during the teenage years. Rumberger (2004, p. 140) questioned whether students who had strong relationships with their parents were more likely to stay on at school but the students’ stories in this study showed that strong relationships with parents did not *protect* the student from dropping out. A strong relationship with at least one parent did, however, provide students with the support they needed to survive the experience and make effective transitions into work or further study. Where parents took a keen and active interest in their daughter’s educational affairs they were found to influence dropping out in a number of ways, from providing advice and guidance through to acting as models for gender and work roles.

Within the family there seemed to be a clear division of labour according to gender, with children’s schooling seen generally as the primary responsibility of mother, a finding that is congruent with Reay’s (2005) conclusions. Whilst mothers featured more often than fathers in the girls’ stories, there were differences between

mothers' involvement depending on the family circumstances and their socioeconomic background (congruent with the findings of David, West, & Ribbens, cited in David, 2005, pp. 15-16, and Lareau, 1989, p. 123). Parenting was seen as a *labour of love*, and the term "emotional labour" was introduced (Crozier & Reay, 2005, p. xii) to convey the degree of effort mothers typically expended as they supported their daughters through the high school years.

Of the 28 girls whose stories feature predominantly in this case record, more than one third of them came from families where mother was the lone parent. The proportion may indeed have been higher still because some school records did not include this information. In the cases where a father was no longer living at home many of the problems which students experienced appeared to be linked to unresolved issues associated with father-absence. This finding is in keeping with conclusions reached by earlier research (Conger & Peterson, 1984, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 94), which showed that students from father-absent homes were more likely to experience difficulties at school and to exhibit deviant behaviours. It was interesting to note in this case study how other family members rallied round to provide additional support for the lone parent. This aspect provides a rich field for future researchers to explore, as it was evident from the mothers interviewed that the decision for their daughters to leave had come after much interaction between them, their supporters, and the school.

Indeed most of the stories showed that when families were experiencing difficulties, they often turned to schools to assist them. Where their class and cultural backgrounds were very different from those of the (generally white middle class) teachers, parents had difficulties in negotiating effective relationships with school and addressing issues of concern regarding their children's progress. This lack of congruence between the background of the mothers and that of school staff led to some level of dissatisfaction in the outcomes for the student.

There is a high correlation between single parent families and low income. Poverty affects parents' ability to support their children effectively and it is a factor in high school drop out. Teachers thought that poor parenting skills and lack of adequate supervision were big factors in all students leaving school early but the parenting role was more difficult for the single parent who needed to cope with all the tasks distributed typically by gender in two parent families. Parenting skills are influenced strongly by the personal histories and educational backgrounds of parents, particularly of mothers. This observation confirms overseas findings (Reay, 2005). Maternal employment was

found to have few, if any, adverse effects on children. Some researchers suggested that “the effect of maternal employment on children’s achievement is predominantly positive” (Hill & Yeung, 2000, cited in Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003, p. 120), whereas others consider that a “time squeeze” phenomenon exists for parents as they attempt to balance their family and employment responsibilities. This study of drop out also showed that the amounts of time parents were able to make available and what else was going on in the family at that time affected the effectiveness of their support.

Home language and the level of human and material resources available within families were found to be linked strongly to academic achievement and school retention. Rumberger, Ghatak, Poulos, Ritter, and Dornbusch (1990, p. 283) have suggested that dropouts are more likely to come from families where parents are less involved in their children’s education and in which they are left to make decisions on their own. Because “the relationship between labour market power and qualifications is by no means necessarily commensurate (Brown and Lauder 1996)” (Higgins, 2002, p. 54), the significance of family relationships and resources in young people’s lives should not be underestimated. “The family [is] one of the primary sites through which resources are mobilised and from which access to qualifications, labour market networks and job search resources is negotiated” (ibid., p. 55). Consistent with Biddulph et al.’s review (2003, p. iv), this study also found that “most parents are prepared to help their children as well as their resources permit.” This has major implications for choice making and transition planning for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Their families lack not only the financial wherewithal to adequately support certain options but also the social connections and access to information (for example via the internet) which the middle class take for granted.

The major concern for most parents in this study was their daughter’s happiness at school. Biddulph et al. maintained that parents “believed that if their children were happy at school then they were more likely to want to stay at school and achieve” (2003, p. 118). However, this case study showed that although parents from the range of socioeconomic backgrounds saw the value of education, most were more concerned that their daughters were happy than whether they were at school. This conclusion is congruent with the experience of other New Zealand schools, as Prue Kelly, Wellington High School principal attested: “Students...often with the help of their parents, avoided coming to school” (Haines, 2002, p. 1) as pressure went on from teachers for students to work hard towards end-of-year examinations. This resulted not only in high drop out

rates for some sectors of the school population but also high levels of school exemptions amongst Maori who were less than 16 years of age. Coupled with “patterns of lower mean achievement of M\_ori [sic] and Pasifika children that give rise to profound concern” (Biddulph et al., 2003, p. 62), these data support the need for consideration of different family structures and the wider span of relationships within whanau, when seeking an alternative approach to issues of Maori participation, retention and success in school (Bishop & Berryman, 2002, cited in Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003, p. 56).

The focus on family settings in Chapter 5 showed that whilst drop out was the culmination of a multitude of issues and events, parents’ influence was very powerful indeed. Parents had more influence on both retention and drop out than either they or the teachers realised. It seems that a great deal of the variation between the educational outcomes of individuals with seemingly similar academic potential can be attributed to microcosm effects, such as differences in the beliefs and expectations held by parents of different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. From this conclusion it can be seen that strategies which involve parents in their children’s education warrant consideration, as Biddulph et al. suggested (2003, pp. 148; 181). In the extensive literature on this topic a range of strategies which support and upskill parents in their role and provide outreach programmes through community partnerships (Llehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005, pp. 114-193) have been advocated. Homework centres designed to complement family resources<sup>158</sup>, mentoring (Eller, 2004), and consideration of the role of parents in career advice and guidance (Coutts, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d) are other areas of possible collaboration between school, tertiary providers, community and parents that are receiving attention already. However, because of the complexity of the reciprocal interactions between the student and the home setting, it cannot be assumed that intervention strategies which work in one family context can be applied to another. Research to assess the effectiveness of family enabling strategies is required.

### ***The Nature of the Decision-making Process***

Leaving the school setting and changing roles from schoolgirl to that of mother, worker, unemployed benefit recipient, or tertiary student, is a movement through

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<sup>158</sup> Examples abound, including the Akozone centres (set up in partnership between schools, Auckland City Libraries and the Ministry of Education: [www.aucklandcitylibraries.com/kids/akozonehomework](http://www.aucklandcitylibraries.com/kids/akozonehomework)) and the Somali Homework Centre, set up to support English as a second language learners who are the children of refugees (Stewart, 2001).

ecological space, a shift in context which fits Bronfenbrenner's notion of an "ecological transition" (1979, p. 26). The approach used here studied student drop out during the transition, at the very point of leaving, enabling some conclusions to be drawn about both the reasons for leaving and the nature of the decision-making process.

Chapter 4 and 5 drew attention to the way in which students made decisions about leaving school early. Many students had plans to continue with schooling in the next year, yet they still ended up leaving. The students' stories indicated that career development was rarely a purely logical process. Some students just drifted out of school, becoming increasingly disenchanted with what was on offer there. For others it seemed to be an impulsive reaction to chance events, such as a fall out with friends, an altercation with a teacher, an accident, illness, or economic change such as father losing his job. That future research needed to explore the place of serendipity in relation to transition was suggested by Vaughan (2003, p. 9). Some insight into random effects on career decisions was provided by the present study.

Congruent with studies of youth transitions (Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. 89) and early leaving (Kelly, 1993, cited in Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 14), this study found that a number of students *drifted away* or were *pushed out* from school and did not appear to exert a clear *choice* to leave school, in the purely rational, self-interested way suggested by rational choice theory (Scott, 2000, p. 1). Most did not actively weigh up the costs and benefits of school attendance and then decide to leave school (student #1401 from Putu High was one notable exception). This is not to say that there had not been an active decision to leave but, as Nash also found, it was more commonly through "small step-by-step movements" which are "processes of decision making [...] often difficult to recover" (1997a, p. 51). For Hayley, the student cited in Nash's story (*ibid.*), there was "no 'turning point' but a 'combination of things.'" And so it was with the students in this case study.

In relaying their experience of dropping out of school, students revealed the complexity of what was going on in their lives at that point. The *main reason* given for leaving was usually not the only reason behind leaving school at that time. Sometimes it seemed that it was not even the most significant influence. The reasons students gave initially were sometimes the last thing which had happened over a chain of events (top of mind) but more often they seemed to be socially acceptable attributions, which masked deeper seated issues with which the student had yet to come to terms. It was over the course of several interactions with students that the complexity of drop out

became apparent. The complexity related to the myriad of issues *influencing* drop out, as well as the complexity of the processes involved in *becoming* a dropout. The following excerpt from two different conversations with student #1540 illustrates this point:

*I wasn't happy there, at school. I'd been thinking about it. It was an all girls' school—bitchiness, conflict. Teachers expect you to learn but you've got all these other things going on.* (Telephone Interview, May, 2003)

Later:

*I wasn't sure if I wanted to be back in sixth form, I just thought I'd better go back and see what it was like and if I didn't enjoy it, see what my options were. I was a bit scared of leaving school (little laugh). A bit worried about not having any qualifications and stuff like that but I wasn't enjoying it and didn't like being there so...* (Face-to-face Interview, July 2003)

She had found, like many others, that the step up to a higher level was a big jump academically: *"I realised I was probably going to fail and I didn't want to."* So, there were a number of "push factors" influencing her to leave school early.

The girls' stories show that dropping out can be understood best in terms of both pushes and pulls. Like the young people in Vaughan et al.'s study, some of the girls, such as student #220 who was pregnant, felt they were *"pushed* into their pathway options as the only viable options and way of becoming successful, moving *away* from unwanted possibilities....from "bad" choices and *towards* imagined better ones," (emphasis in original, 2006, p. 89). A few, such as student #1395, who left school early to be a nurse, were *"pulled* by their dreams and interests" (ibid.).

This study also shows that the decision to leave school early evolves over a long period of time. Dropping out is the culmination of the interaction of a complex set of factors of which the student is not fully cognisant. The *trigger* which brings the decision to a head may be the most recent, or most pressing, of these many factors, giving the impression that dropping out is the result of chance events, or "happenstance" (Coutts, 2006a).

Congruent with the New Zealand investigation of youth in transition conducted by Vaughan et al., the present study highlighted the importance of self-concept, of students' "identity investments...in the perception of possibilities and ability to make career decisions" (2006, p. 91). For most students, dropping out was the result of an ongoing and incremental process of evaluation of who they were, what they were doing

with their lives and, within that, where they were at the school. Not all evaluations result in consideration of dropping out and, as the wavering persisters stories showed (Chapter 4), once a student got to the point where she did start to think about leaving school, then she was very likely indeed to go at that point. This *decision point* was often a particular event which brought matters to a head for the student, although there were instances where leaving was initiated by someone other than the student, prompted by school authorities or, less commonly, by the student's parents (read mother). I shall return to this matter later.

The evaluative process, and any subsequent decision to leave school early, was seen to occur within the context of particular macrosystem influences. The belief systems prevailing at the time act as constraints on the range of choices and on the perceived opportunities available. Some constraints are economic, for example the availability of work for students leaving without qualifications but others are cultural; transmitted through family patterns of interaction associated with ethnicity and class. This socialisation develops in individuals a certain disposition, or frame of mind, of which they may not be fully conscious, which affects their choices. As discussed in Chapter 1 this "family resource framework" has received considerable attention from previous researchers in the field, notably Nash and Harker (1997). Their New Zealand study of students' progress at high school highlighted the relationship between aspiration, attainment, and social class but found few differences in student attainment that could be attributed to any of the schools attended.

Nash explained that "occupational aspirations are strongly influenced by ability and social class" (1997a, p. 153). Despite the fact that "the offer of success extended by the school is taken seriously by the great majority of students regardless of their class of origin" (ibid.), situations arose which confronted the students in this study with the likelihood that their hopes would not be realised. With this realisation came a gradual re-evaluation of their plans. Frustrated aspirations were reflected in students' stories through a rejection of school and what it had to offer; claims that the subjects lacked relevance or interest, that school was *boring*; and the realisation that academic failure was imminent.

These students' stories, in line with previous drop out research (for example, Donnelly, 1987), suggest that those not experiencing success in school, those characterised by poor academic performance, low self-esteem and behaviour problems, were more likely to be amongst those who dropped out. Typical of previous studies, this

case study indicated that dropouts were more likely to come from lower decile schools which, by definition, tended to draw their school community from lower socioeconomic areas. Findings such as this led Bourdieu to talk about the “myth of talent, of social mobility through the school system, of the impartiality of the system, of equity in the distribution of jobs according to qualifications” (1993, cited in Nash, 1999a, p. 44). However, there were enough exceptions to this trend, in that there were many other factors involved. Sometimes enough very able students from high decile schools also left school early to suggest the need to look more closely at the role of individual agency and the decision-making process.

Nash reminded us that “sociology lives with the unresolved tension between agency and structure” (1997b, p. 159). Bourdieu’s theory, which assumes that practices are “generated by deep-rooted frames of thought acquired as the result of socialisation into social class communities”—which can also be regarded as a “value theory” (Nash, 1997b, p. 282)—gives “little recognition to conscious action” (Nash, 1997a, p. 33). However, rational choice theories, which aim to provide some explanation at the level of individual decision-making, are not incompatible with Bourdieu’s theory (Nash, 1997b, p. 284). When combined these approaches may offer a better conceptualisation of the reality for the leaving student, of the real nature of the decision-making process which is constrained by the possibilities available at that time and place as Erickson aptly explained:

As the individual undertakes interaction with others, he or she does so in a milieu of prestructured patterns and constraints – a given language, a given institutional setting, a given culture, a given economy, a given whole society in a particular course of history. (2004, p. 113)

The notion of “rational action” implies “a conscious social actor engaging in deliberate calculative strategies” (Scott, 2000, p. 3). These deliberations are shaped by past experiences and the “rewards” and “punishments” encountered, Scott maintained. However, as well as an assessment of financial gain, there are social benefits, such as the approval of others, which also need to be considered. Approval is a very “fundamental human goal” which can act as a powerful reinforcer (after Homans, 1961, cited in Scott, 2000, p. 4). The negative reaction which students were likely to get from teachers and parents, and sometimes even from friends, when they left school early (a result of dropout stereotyping) was countered by the prospect of a release from the

things about school which they were finding difficult, and by the attractiveness of taking up the adult role post-school with, even as a tertiary student, access to more disposable income and greater autonomy.

Some proponents of rational choice theory have come to acknowledge that there is a non-rational element involved; that decisions are made often within a framework of internalised norms and commitments which are the result of socialisation (Scott, 2000, p. 8). That “the subject’s class of origin...will crucially affect his choices of one or the other option” (Boudon, 1982, cited in Nash, 1997a, p. 151) suggested that there is little or no incompatibility between these different perspectives, although further research to explore this relationship is required.

The norms of trust and justice are experienced as obligations to behave in certain ways that are sometimes counter to the direction of greatest personal interest. These obligations are felt very strongly as “shame and guilt, rather than through rewards and punishment” Elster (1989a, 1989b, cited in Scott, 2000, p. 9), explained, thereby providing a possible explanation for the behaviour of the “tune-outs” (Schargel & Smink, 2001, p. 26). Tune-outs are students who attend school but do not participate actively in class. These may be students who never wanted to return to school in the first place, and who are there under duress. This group is worthy of further attention by researchers because a lack of engagement with learning and other school activities seems to be a first step in dropping out.

A later phase in the dropping out process is indicated by irregular attendance. The average attendance of all students generally declines throughout adolescence, Roderick maintained (1993, p. xix), although dropouts from senior school attended less regularly than those students who went on to graduate. The seminal work of Hargreaves (1967) identified poor attendance as a symptom of lack of engagement with the school social order. Irregular attendance can be taken as an indication that the student does not feel a sense of belonging at school, and this lack of integration into the mainstream school community is thought to be a cause of dropping out (Tinto, 1975, 1987).

Some students *faded away* from school, skipping the odd class initially and then increasing periods of absence until it became obvious to both themselves and the school that they had given up on their studies. Missing classes meant inevitably that students, however able, got behind with their school work. Those who did not draw attention to themselves in other ways, becoming what the school saw as behaviour management problems, were able to hide in the system for quite a period of time, until a dean got

around to checking attendance records and following up on those missing classes. By then it was often too late because the student was behind in her work. The scene was thus set for academic failure.

This was a surprising finding because most schools monitor attendance and contact parents for unexplained absences (Hipkins & Hodgen, 2004, p. 165). Accordingly a more proactive approach, such as that observed in Repo, may be more effective in preventing truancy and aiding school retention rates. The home liaison officer visited homes and talked to caregivers and students about the underlying causes of disengagement from school. It was the trust she developed with the wider school community which enabled her to follow up on issues and concerns.

Various events trigger a *reality check*. Meeting with the dean over poor attendance or academic performance was just one scenario which was likely to bring the situation to a head. Confronted with imminent failure unless changes were made—“*shape up or ship out*” (Teacher C, Putu focus group)—most students then decided to leave. Receiving a poor school report, a request from the school to pay NCEA examination entry fees, or notification from Social Welfare that benefits are attendance dependant after age 16, were events prompting similar discussions at home. These events provided examples of the way in which government and school policies intersected with the life of the student to contribute to a drop out trajectory.

Bronfenbrenner suggested that the primary settings of family and school exert their influence over a sustained period of time so, although the situations described here are the *marker* events which people recall as significant points in the process of leaving school, dropping out is typically the culmination of a multitude of interactions which lead finally to a change in the student’s attitude to school and to dropping out.

Students who left early were *bored* but teachers generally thought that this was a euphemism for other problems, such as lack of academic progress, which they were not ready to confront. Where there were other school activities which engaged them, such as sports, students would stay on typically until the end of the season, or in the case of cultural activities such as drama or music until the production was held. That the cessation of these activities had prompted a re-evaluation of staying at school was suggested by the chronological patterns of leaving shown in Chapter 4.

As already noted some students who had done well the year previously found the level of work much harder than they anticipated, and they did not want to put in the extra effort required by higher level studies. This was often because they were working

in part-time jobs. The choice between earning to support an adult lifestyle (sex, drugs, and rock n'roll) and doing homework was a conflict of time and priorities that proved difficult to resolve. Many students' stories featured significant affiliation with out of school friends or workmates they related to with a greater degree of comfort, and this was a factor in deciding to leave school early. Retrospectively it would have been good to explore the pull factor inherent in students' out of school interests as part of the Intentions Survey, especially involvement in part-time work, because the stories indicated that many were employed regularly. Such a finding is consistent with Australian studies (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 94).

The experience of work can be advantageous in teaching young people about work ethic, developing their sense of responsibility and interpersonal skills, and contributing to the development of their sense of self. However, seeking qualifications to secure a career goal did not receive the priority in students' decision-making which transition policy assumes, a finding that is consistent with the conclusions reached by Vaughan (2003, p. 6). Adolescents' search for identity is no longer tied strongly to the notion of career because, unlike previous generations, young people are able to engage in a wide range of adult activities, including work, whilst still in school: "They do not see themselves simply as potential workers but as individuals seeking to craft an identity through a wide range of activities in the present" (Higgins, 2002, p. 56).

There were some students in this study regularly working long hours to the detriment of homework and attention in class the next day. Such a finding was in contrast with the Dunedin findings which showed no correlation between time spent on homework and the hours spent working (Dunedin Mayor's Taskforce for Jobs & Dunedin Youth Forum, 2003, p. 3). Working long hours did not necessarily mean that homework would suffer but the experience of working part-time made some students view their school mates with different eyes. School friends seemed so much more immature than the people they mixed with at work and they found them increasingly difficult to relate to: "*It was an immaturity thing, their behaviour. I got pissed off with them so I made a decision to leave, to do [my] own thing*" (student #1123). In other cases the attraction of greater disposable income to spend on clothes, make-up and entertainment, encouraged by media advertising aimed at the teenage market, added to the pull factor away from school: "*All my friends are much older and they work and have money while I'm stuck at school all day and only have part-time work*" (student #1395). These findings suggest that further research needs to be undertaken into the

effects which part-time work has on dropping out, in particular how it affects personal development, relationships with peers, and also students' achievement and progress at school.

On the one hand, changes to legislation affecting youth pay-rates may have encouraged more students to stay at school whilst working but, on the other hand, the influence of the media in creating a consumer society, which targets the adolescent market, is also a major factor. The growing impact of media culture on identity formation was highlighted in recent Australasian studies by Vaughan (2003, p. 6) and Smyth and Hattam (2004, p. 76). The latter considered it to be a significant factor in students' decisions to leave school early: "The interaction with media culture led these young people to reconsider the efficacy of sustaining an academic identity that was seen to undermine or suppress their personal identity" (ibid.). Further exploration of these macrosystem influences, specifically the multi-faceted issue of how working part-time influences student retention, warrants attention in future research.

Although there is an extensive literature on the subject, much of it described the characteristics of early leavers and the factors thought to be associated. This study shows dropping out to be a much more complicated and iterative process than previous studies had suggested. Young people's decision-making about life post-school is not based on the same economic rationality which underpins government policies on the labour market and transition to work. A focus on career and possible employment opportunities is only one of many competing priorities in the thinking of high school students, as they grapple with the sense of who they are and what they might do with their lives in the immediate future and beyond.

### ***The Differences Between Those Who Stay and Those Who Leave***

The findings presented in Chapter 4 showed that there were not significant differences in the characteristics of students who left school early and those who went on to complete the year. That dropouts experienced problems common to all teenagers is a conclusion reached from this study but it may be that those who came to leave school early had more than their fair share of such problems, possibly lacked the personal temperament to deal with them easily, or maybe did not have adequate support to work through the issues.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological perspective stressed the importance of the association between the environment and the characteristics of the person in the development of that individual. Consistent with other research on educational achievement, this study found there was a correlation between the decile rating of the school and drop out rates, with a greater proportion of seniors leaving the lower decile schools than the higher decile schools. The association between the environment and the characteristics of the person is more than a statistical association though, because it "involves a set of *processes* through which the course and consequences of development are determined" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005e, p. 69). Thus in Chapter 4 there was a focus on both the physical and social elements with which the student engaged in the school environment. There were many similarities between the three schools studied, and indeed probably in the backgrounds of some of the students who attended them but it was the way the students *experienced* the school environment which was different, accounting in part for why it was that some students left whilst others stayed when faced with similar problems within the same school.

Differences in *attitude* between those who left school and those who went on to complete the programme of study for which they enrolled in 2003 seemed to be more significant than any other individual characteristic. Consequently students' beliefs about their ability to shape their own destinations through reciprocal interactions with their environment were very important factors in whether a student stayed on at school or not. The work of Bourdieu (1977, cited in Nash, 2001a; 2001b) provided some basis for beginning to understand the relationship between the degree of self agency which a student exhibited and her family background. Through daily exposure to the physical and psychological environment of the home, through day-to-day experiences of the *way we do things here*, students acquire a certain "disposition", or frame of mind, which affects their choices. Children with values which differed from those of the school were found in Nash's study not to achieve as well as their academic potential might indicate. In this way students come to "internalise their statistical fate" he explained (2000, p. 70). The schools at the decile extremes had enough students leave to provide a pattern which seemed to support this view.

In this study the expectations and confidence which the family and the school staff had of students' ability to succeed educationally were major influences on the career trajectory followed. Students from well-off families had high expectations for their children, and they chose a school for their daughters to attend which reflected their

own high valuing of education as the way to *get on* in life. So very few students dropped out from Putu High; those who did generally went on to continue their education with another provider. Because many of the parents of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were not well educated themselves, and had also left school at a young age, when their daughters dropped out because of problems this was accepted by both home and school. The result was that whilst the lower decile school achieved higher than the national average in NCEA at Year 11, many of these able students faded away at the senior school level.

The review conducted by Biddulph, Biddulph, and Biddulph suggested that whilst low socioeconomic status (SES) children have significantly lower achievement than those from middle or high SES family backgrounds, this low level of achievement was “not inevitable; it can be changed, especially if support is available early” (2003, p. iv). Indeed, various dissertations by Nash concluded that the correlation between academic attainment and social class is only moderate (1999b, p. 268) and that the “real key to success at school, particularly at this level, is *wanting* to succeed” (emphasis in original, *ibid.*, p. 273). The findings from this study, combined with the work of other researchers then, poses questions as to the role of individual agency in the complexity of factors which underpin school retention and drop out. The extent to which *real choice* can be facilitated for students whose options are constrained by historical, cultural, and familial contexts, and whose backgrounds differ from those who determine mainstream school provision, is a major challenge facing educational policymakers and schools.

The presence of at least one caring adult in the family and the support of other adults as well were also found to be very important factors in how students experienced the problems they encountered as adolescents, and whether a student stayed on at school or not. The students’ stories showed that these “significant others” were often teachers and support staff at school. Another major difference between the stayers and the leavers then, may have been their ability to forge positive relationships with adults at school. This tentative conclusion provides some level of support for the work of Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, and Tiakiwai (2003b, p. 29). Together these findings suggest that higher levels of teacher responsiveness may make a difference to high school retention, not just for Maori but for *all students*. This aspect has implications for school practice and professional development (Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, & Tiakiwai, 2003a, p. 3), which require further exploration in the context of the complexity of students’ lives.

During the telling, many students appeared to be processing the events that led to the act of leaving school early. Indeed, on reflection, some were not exactly sure why they had left school at that time. Some even said they regretted leaving school, confirming the conclusion that there were not that many differences between those who left school early and those who stayed on to finish the year. Most of the students seemed to really enjoy sharing their experiences with someone else. It may be that they had not had the opportunity to discuss these issues openly with a trusted confidant in the past. Certainly the input of friends, teachers and parents in the decision-making process was variable, suggesting that this was perhaps another difference between those who persisted with their studies and the leavers.

Other researchers have reported that “youth whose parents frequently discussed school-related matters with them in high school had much higher odds [of going on to tertiary education]” (Horn, Chen, & MPR Associates, 1988, p. iii). But it would seem that not all students have access to this level of support within the family. In these circumstances “the connections that a mentor can make can enhance the success of a young person’s transition” (Eller, 2004, p. 53), supporting the findings of resiliency researchers Clarke and Clarke (2003). Together these findings suggest that, whilst career planning and goal setting are important structures guiding a holistic approach to the concern about drop out, introducing relationships with trusted adults outside the family can be beneficial for students disengaged from education, especially those with a history of underachievement, behavioural issues and absenteeism.

The ability of some students to recover from the “moderate declines” (Roderick, 1993, p. xix) in academic performance which all students experience in changing schools was possibly a significant difference between those who dropped out and those who stayed on to complete the year. Transitions are often associated with “a decline in progress and in commitment to learning” (Galton et al, 1999, cited in Wylie, Hodgen, & Ferral, 2006, p. 82), whether they are *within* school transitions (a change in levels) or *between* schools. The girls’ stories, such as that of student #2286, showed some of the difficulties experienced in the transition between intermediate and high school. Almost one third of the dropouts in this case study had moved more than once in their high school careers. Student #1261’s story revealed the additional problems of adjustment for such students. It seemed that the dropouts had never become integrated into the mainstream of school activities or formed relationships with teachers and students

which might have better supported them through difficult times. This sense of alienation was a factor in their dropping out.

Congruent with the drop out patterns observed in this study, transience rates are highest for decile 1 and 2 schools. They decrease progressively, to be the lowest in the decile 9 and 10 schools, Hipkins and Hodgen found (2004, p. 173). Family relocation to follow employment opportunities may mean that parents in the lowest socioeconomic groups are without the support of family and friends at the very time when their children are experiencing transitional problems which might test relationships at home.

Most Year 9 students make the transition from primary or intermediate school into secondary school positively (Wylie, Hodgen, & Ferral, 2006, p. ix). “Contrary to fears that transition to secondary school negatively affects student performance...change was just as likely to be up as down” (ibid., p. 1). However, in an earlier study Roderick (1993, p. xix) found that the transitions between schools were critical junctures for drop outs. The findings from the present study support her contention.

Principals generally do not get sufficient information about students transferring between secondary schools; this was a more ad hoc (Hipkins & Hodgen, 2004, p. 173) process than was the transition from primary. In combination, these findings suggest that high school staff should work to build strong relationships with contributing schools and that they should revisit their orientation and induction policies and procedures, not only to smooth the transition for the annual Year 9 intakes but also to ensure that senior students who join the school part way through a year are given the same care and attention. In undertaking such a review educationists should take account of the major finding from this section on school effects, which is that both the physical and social contexts have an effect on how a student experiences school. Further investigation into the suggested association between inter-school transitions and high school drop out is needed. In addition intra-school transitions warrant special attention, particularly how the “*jump*” in expectations between academic levels within the senior school impacts on retention.

Evidence from the *Competent Children, Competent Learners* longitudinal project showed that, although most students settled quickly into secondary school, there was a “marked increase in boredom and restlessness” (Wylie et al., p. ix) after the transition. Many Maori and Pasifika students, and those from lower socioeconomic groups and lower decile schools, found the transition to the high school more difficult

(*ibid.*). These are the same groups identified as “at more risk” of underachievement than their peers (Hipkins & Hodgen, 2004, p. 161). This was due in part to the more strict discipline they experienced in the new learning context, a “feeling they were treated more as a child,” but they also found it “hard to get used to their new teachers” (Wylie et al., 2006, p. x). These problems mirror feedback from leavers in this study about their experiences at high school. In an explanation equally applicable to the transition to high school as from it, Berger (2000, cited in Zepke & Leach, 2005, p. 53) suggested that students find the transition from school to tertiary studies difficult because:

Students who lack the requisite cultural capital may have a hard time or be unable to fully integrate because their frame of reference is just too different from the organizational habitus and the habitus of the dominant peer group on campus.

Developments of Tinto’s integrative theory and a series of models of student departure discussed in Chapter 1 have led to further research focused on the effectiveness of strategies to promote social and academic assimilation. However, as a result of their synthesis of literature on how tertiary institutions might improve student retention and achievement, Zepke and Leach (2005, p.46) revealed that there is an alternative discourse emerging: “Rather than requiring students to fit the existing institutional culture, it suggests that cultures be adapted to better fit the needs of increasingly diverse students.” In this conceptualisation, “student departure is influenced by their perceptions of how well their cultural attributes are valued, accommodated and how differences between their cultures of origin and immersion are bridged (Cabrera et al., 1999; Berger, 2001-2002; Walker, 2000; Thomas, 2002)” (*ibid.*, p.47). Although the advice of Zepke and Leach was intended to redress concerns over poor retention in higher education, their suggestions that educational institutions look at ways to “support students ‘to transit between two cultures’”( *ibid.*, p. 53) applies equally well to the high school situation. In considering how practices can be changed to allow for a diverse range of students to succeed, high school staff also have responsibilities to consider how to best prepare leavers for the transition into tertiary study or work, about which more will be said later.

### ***The Contribution of the School and Educational System in the Generation of Inequality/Difference in Retention Rates***

The ecological framework allowed an investigation into school effects at the very time they were occurring. The school context exerted an effect through both its social dimension and through the physical nature of the site. Each school had developed a unique context, despite national educational policies and similar economic and political conditions. These very traditional girls' schools reflected their valuing of achievement, leadership, history, and respect for authority in their physical layout and day-to-day organisation. The schools were similar in their affirmation of the place of women in today's society but the students' experiences indicated there were some significant differences between the three sites, largely associated with school expectations. Few students from the highest decile school left with no credits towards qualifications and those who left the school early expected to continue their education. If the small number who left Putu High before completing the year was any indication, the dropouts from higher decile schools had high aspirations and tended to continue their education after leaving. Conversely Harker and Nash (1995, cited in Nash, 1997b, p. 32) identified that students with low aspirations, ill-disposed towards school and tired of trying were more likely to decline in relation to their earlier level of achievement. Underachievement and higher drop out rates were associated with lowered teacher expectations of the students attending low decile schools, of Maori and Pasifika, and of those from lower socioeconomic groups.

Many of these dropouts wanted to continue their education and went on to be successful in more vocationally oriented tertiary programmes post-school, where the courses on offer, and the learning environment, better catered for their new-found status as young adults. At the high decile school this transition was paved for the girls through STAR programmes with local polytechnic providers, and in most cases discussions with parents about future career opportunities had occurred. But, in the other schools, "*jumping onto a course*" post-school was something more ad hoc and the school found it difficult to get parents involved. Parents did not feel comfortable coming in to school, because of their own past experiences. They looked to teachers to assist their daughters in the field of careers advice because they did not have the requisite knowledge or confidence to provide this. This finding supports initiatives which involve collaboration between school and home, to address issues associated with academic achievement and

retention. However, this is a real challenge, particularly for lower decile schools, because most parents do “not want to be more involved because they worked and lacked the time” (Hipkins & Hodgen, 2004, p. xvii). “Parents of students in lower decile schools were more likely not to talk with teachers, and to express discomfort about the prospect of doing so” (ibid.).

In keeping with previous international research a myriad of factors were identified as influential in retention and drop out but in general a sense of academic progress, coupled with a feeling of belonging evidenced through good relationships with teachers and other students, was what kept students at school.

The leavers’ stories in Chapter 4 and 5 identified subtle differences in the nature and frequency of the reciprocal interactions between students and their teachers which were important factors in student progress at school and their ultimate decision to drop out. This is not a new concept. Indeed many other researchers, for example Bishop, Berryman, Richardson, and Tiakiwai (2003b, pp. 29-30, 97, 102), have come to similar conclusions. Bishop et al. argued that teachers need to “understand that they *can* [emphasis added] bring about change in the educational achievement of M\_ori [sic] students in their classroom” (2003a, p. 3). However, Hattie pointed out it is “only teachers who teach in certain ways,” who are able to “make the difference” (1999, cited in Bishop et al., 2003b, p. 7). Bishop et al.’s study of Maori students’ experiences in junior school concluded that relationships with teachers were the most important factor in Maori educational achievement, and that professional development planning therefore needed to provide teachers with experiences which would enable them to “actively engage with the means of bringing about change through altering the relationships they have with M\_ori [sic] students” (2003a, p. 3).

There is a danger in highlighting one aspect of the highly interrelated, complex and fluid context within which the student interacts, as Rata (2004) also pointed out. Such an approach can lead to the adoption of simplistic solutions at the school level which not only may be ineffective but may also obscure the need to focus on family and other issues, which for some students may be to the detriment of their wider wellbeing as well as to their academic progress.

Indeed Bishop et al.’s study (2003b) has been critiqued for ignoring the range of factors which interact “in complex ways to influence student performance” (Rata, 2004, p. 12) and for focusing on Maori as though they were a distinct ethnic group (ibid., p. 6). Harker’s comparative analysis of studies of achievement levels amongst social and

ethnic groups suggested that “some (or all) of the ethnic effect is indirectly related to school achievement through the co-association of ethnicity with such things as ‘level of parents’ education’, ‘family resources’, ‘health factors’ and so on” (2006, p. 27). The relationship between ethnicity and socioeconomic background taken-for-granted in many overseas studies on educational outcomes (including drop out) requires further exploration within the New Zealand context which, it can be argued, exhibits some unique characteristics.

Unfortunately in this research on student drop out few Maori students participated in the follow-up data collection phase, so no specific conclusions on Maori drop out can be drawn from these narratives. The low participation was partly due to the very itinerant behaviour of many Maori students on leaving school and the difficulties in following them up for interview. Equally, it may have been because of my status as a white, middle class female researcher. Recognising that “many indigenous communities continue to live within political and social conditions that perpetuate extreme levels of poverty, chronic ill health and poor educational opportunities” Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 4) advocated for indigenous research into such matters as Maori drop out, so that “Maori people [can] regain control of investigations into Maori people’s lives” (Bishop, 1994, cited in Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 185). The Kaupapa Maori orientation she proposes does not preclude those who are not Maori<sup>159</sup> from participating in such research but the involvement of “*whanau* as a supervisory and organisational structure for handling research” (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999, p. 185) is essential in such situations.

Research of a different kind is required to investigate the low levels of Maori educational achievement and associated high Maori drop out rates because these are related to the level of skills which Maori then bring to the labour market. Similarly for Pacific Island groups. Skill levels determine opportunities to access remuneration levels required to support the adequate housing and good nutrition essential to physical and emotional wellbeing. These factors, more than academic potential and school effects, seem to be powerful determinants of educational outcomes and thus warrant further investigation from the perspectives of school and family.

As I write this conclusion, school teachers and authorities continue to be called to task by the media over the problem of Maori student retention and drop out, with programmes like “Turning the tide” (S. Hill, 2007) claiming to have found “an amazing

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<sup>159</sup> Citing Irwin (1992) on the debate about who is Maori.

new way to turn...round” for Maori students who leave school early, with low levels of qualifications, the “depressing” “facts of failure.” But this study clearly shows that both the home and the wider economic and political contexts also exert a powerful influence. However, this is not to say that schools should give up trying to make a difference for the students they enrol.

## **Implications**

The very complex nature of drop out suggested that quick-fix solutions to the so-called “dropout problem” need to be avoided. Some strategies, whilst effective for one group of students, may not work out for everyone concerned.

Bronfenbrenner maintained that “individuals influence the people and institutions of their ecology as much as they are influenced by them” (2005e, p. ix). This potential for systematic change, the “plasticity” associated with the engagement of “active individuals” with their “active context,” is what “legitimizes an optimistic approach to the possibility that applications of developmental science may improve the course and contexts of human life” (ibid.).

We may have little control over the family situations of our students but as educationists we can influence the school environment, as well as shaping the direction of policies and programmes. This next section considers the implications for school practices of this reconceptualisation of drop out as an ecological transition.

### ***Implications for School Practices***

Increased participation rates in senior secondary school have resulted in a greater diversity of students studying at this level. They have also led to challenges about the way students can be assisted to participate actively and engage in learning in a deep and meaningful way. School programmes and support services need to be more responsive to the cultural and academic needs of students as well as understanding how they can assist them to better adapt to the demands of study in the senior school.

These students’ stories indicate that dropouts may not have resolved the issues which were major factors influencing their progress and achievement during their earlier school years. These issues include personal and relationship problems, a lack of success in engagement with senior academic work, a lack of confidence, and low self-

esteem. The impact of *taken for granted* aspects of their social context and background experiences needs to be considered in implementing strategies to increase retention or to provide for a smooth and successful transition for such students moving into employment or into alternative study pathways.

Calder and Hanley recognised that while many of the factors which contribute to student retention relate to a student's personal circumstances and are beyond the control of the school, "we do have some control over a number of important ingredients of the transition process" (2004, p. 1). Whilst it is up to the reader to decide how applicable the findings from this case study are to his or her own circumstances, there have been some strategies suggested in previous discussion (Chapter 4 and 5) which might warrant consideration for schools as they review their approach to senior student retention. These are summarised in Appendix L.

As well the literature associated with retention and drop out contains many other suggestions to engender student success, as summarised succinctly by Zepke and Leach:

Making sure learners enrol in courses that are right for them, that they are properly oriented to the social and academic opportunities on offer, that teachers are learner centred and available beyond the classroom, that workloads are reasonable, that learning support services are available, that discrimination is absent and that the cultural environment recognises the diverse needs of class and ethnic background, age and gender, ability and location. (Zepke & Leach, 2005, cited in Zepke & Leach, 2006, p. 109)

But the students' experiences recorded in this case study demonstrated that however initiated, early leaving tended to be associated with a lack of social and academic integration within the school setting. Students leaving within the academic year relayed little sense of belonging. They expressed a sense of alienation from the mainstream school community, congruent with Tinto's theories about why students drop out from higher education (1975, 1987, 2005). So this is another aspect which warrants greater attention from schools.

Such findings add support to the challenges laid by Bishop and Glynn that "identifying ways of acknowledging and celebrating cultural differences" (2000, p. 4) are not enough to ensure "all students will benefit from education" (*ibid.*, p. 5). It is only by establishing closer relationships, "in terms of language and culture, between

home and school,” through a common set of goals and principles, that a pattern of interconnectedness can be developed in which the learning of all can be fostered. In their vision (Kaupapa Maori) “learning and teaching are to be reciprocal and interactive; home and school learning are to be interrelated; learners are to be connected to each other and learn with and from each other” (ibid.).

These “messages for the mainstream” (ibid.) reinforce initiatives being considered currently by New Zealand secondary principals to build schools as learning organisations (“Building a learning organisation”, 2006), as this concept offers hope of making high school a more holistic, integrated learning experience for all students (Cross, 1998, p. 4). This interest signals a shift from a “deficit-discourse<sup>160</sup>” (Lawrence, 2002, p. 5), to an alternative view of the contemporary school as an organisation which can encompass the increasingly diverse cultures of its students in a complex and rapidly changing world.

The importance of considering both the social and the physical aspects of the school contexts has been highlighted already. In Chapter 4 the physical manifestations of power and hierarchy evident in the school sites were described. These separations between teachers and students were seen as natural, with staff arguing that teachers need a break from the students; a place of respite in their daily battle with “recalcitrant students,” as the deputy principal of Awa was prone to say. However, schools overseas wishing to create a “community of learners” (Cavanaugh & Dellar, 1997, p. 4) have adopted a more open plan to the school environment, well illustrated by Glen Waverly Secondary School<sup>161</sup> in Melbourne. At this school there are teachers’ spaces, where staff can prepare and mark work but these have large windows with the aim of making teachers visible to students and students visible to teachers at all times. These staff spaces freely admit students wishing to engage with their teacher who is seen as a facilitator of their learning, most of which is computer managed and assisted. However, such seemingly minor changes in the physical layout of school facilities require a

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<sup>160</sup> Whilst writing about trends in higher education Lawrence’s comments about the increasing diversity of students are equally applicable to the high school situation. Across the education sector there has been a tendency for teachers to lay responsibility for academic failure and dropout on the inadequate preparation of students for mainstream education. Rather than blaming these students, the rethink proposed by the Learning Communities concept suggested that the whole community, teachers, parents and students, become involved in creating a culture which meets the increasingly diverse nature of the student body.

<sup>161</sup> Egalitarianism has been one of the “key guiding concepts in Aotearoa New Zealand” according to (Clark, 2005, p. 131), shaping the “aims, mission, ethos, culture and practices” of schools in various ways. But recently policies have swung more in favour of individual choice, resulting in a widening of the inequities prevalent already in New Zealand society. The Glen Waverly model is underpinned by beliefs about social equity which extend to their wider school community. More information about the school is available from their web site at [www.gwsc.vic.edu.au](http://www.gwsc.vic.edu.au) on-line.

reconsideration not only of the relationships between teachers and students, as Bishop et al. suggested (2003b, pp. 1-2) but also a complete revisioning of our beliefs about the purpose of education and the nature of schooling, vast changes in pedagogic practices, and consideration of the way technology might be used to assist learning. Such considerations are underway internationally through OECD's *Schooling for Tomorrow* project<sup>162</sup> and in New Zealand through the work of the Secondary Futures initiative (Durie, Heald, Mene, & Taylor, 2006). This "stock take" is "not about fixing the problems of today," as Secondary Futures Guardian, Ian Taylor, explained:

It's about examining the future. It's about asking the hard questions of what the future may be like, it's about asking what will New Zealand's role be in that future and its about asking how our kids need to be equipped to meet the future and how can we best equip them? (cited in Durie, Heald, Mene, & Taylor, 2006, p. 22)

As part of the Touchstone group (which supports the work of the Secondary Futures initiative) I have been proud to be associated with the "Secondary Futures" project since its inception. I look forward to reading the results of the further planned publications (*Inspiring teachers, Social Effects, Community Connectedness, and The Place of Technology*) and subsequently giving reconsideration to questions of drop out and retention, of engaged learners in schools.

### ***Transitioning from school***

To take advantage of increasingly competitive international markets for goods and services created by information and communication technologies, it has been stated that the New Zealand labour forces needs a higher level of skill and knowledge than in the past (Ernst & Young, 1999a, p. 1). However, there are more ways of achieving this than keeping young people in school.

Unlike many other countries, which have "tight transition and job-matching systems [that] differentiate young people while still at school" (Vaughan & Roberts, 2007, p. 93), New Zealand offers a range of possibilities for people to develop the skills required by a rapidly changing labour market. Modern apprenticeships; on-job training,

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<sup>162</sup>More information on this international project is available at:  
[www.oecd.org/document/6/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_35845581\\_31420934\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/6/0,2340,en_2649_35845581_31420934_1_1_1_1,00.html)

in association with Industry Training Organisations; polytechnic, Wānanga and university courses; and training with a range of private providers, are part of an expanded pathways framework for further education and training.

There have been rapid social changes associated with the shift to an information-based economy and there are expectations for young people as both employees and future citizens which both Gilbert (2004) and Hipkins (2004, p. 3) highlight as having implications for schools and schooling: “We need to **think carefully** about what we think students need to learn (and **why**) as well as the **structure** and **organisation** of schools...” (emphasis in original Gilbert, 2004, slide 31). In the digital age, a world where knowledge evolves and changes so rapidly that it is impossible for teachers to keep up, there should be an emphasis not just on what is taught but also how: “We need to select our teachers for their empathy and guidance abilities rather than exclusively for their subject–matter knowledge” (Prensky, 2005, p. 1).

Schargel and Smink remind us that the primary goal of schools is to provide young people “with an education that prepares them for a full and productive life beyond the classroom” (2001, p. 27). The increasingly diverse range of pathways available to young people in a more fragmented and rapidly changing global marketplace, where employment is not necessarily guaranteed, suggests that the question of major importance is not how can schools increase retention and reduce drop out but how they might best assist their students to navigate the many transitions of adolescence:

In this case study students’ stories were at variance with the linearity of the progression from school to work encouraged by government policies and associated with a Western concept of adolescence. Leaving school into employment has generally signalled the exit from adolescence and entry to adulthood (Santrock, 2001, p. 18) but many of the girls were engaged in a full range of adult activities, which included working part-time in paid employment, smoking, drinking alcohol, drug taking, dating and engaging in sexual intercourse, before they left school. Most had considerable freedoms and were taking on domestic and work responsibilities, and a few had left home and were living completely independently from their parents.

Transition from school to work is envisaged usually as a linear process, with the ideal that “people will experience progression and continuity between educational institutions, between education or training courses, and between careers” (Vaughan, 2003, p. 1). This was not the reality for most early leavers. While some students left

school directly for employment or further education, for many others there was a period of indecision and exploration, what the OECD refer to as “milling and churning” (2000, cited in Vaughan, 2003, p. 8). It has been suggested that this period, in which many leavers were seen to engage in a diverse range of activities, including seasonal work, polytechnic training and periods of inactivity, is “a coping strategy in response to the plethora of choices faced by, and decision making required of, young people” (Vaughan, 2003, p. 8, citing du Bois-Reymond, 1998).

As well as more choices to make, there is also more information available to students today. Indeed it has been suggested that, in the absence of adequate professional development for careers advisors, there has been a “tendency to privilege provision of information over guidance” (Vaughan & Roberts, 2007, p. 94). At no other time in history have New Zealand secondary school students been provided with so many ways to gain information about careers and the different pathways available to them. As well as computer aided and traditional paper information, students can access advice about the world of work from careers counsellors, deans and subject teachers. They are assisted in the career planning process by STAR, Gateway, and Curriculum Alignment programmes which aim to give students a taste of employment and tertiary training opportunities whilst still at school. Through the National Certificate of Educational Achievement, the National Qualifications Framework itself provides the flexibility for students to experiment with different subject interests and still progress towards qualifications. As well as decisions about future careers, this flexibility gives rise to another series of decisions about subject choice which also must be made.

Initial findings from the “Pathways and Prospects” project, which is looking at how young people make decisions about careers and working life, suggest that there should be “more of a focus on career and identity production”(Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. v) in the way in which schools support young people in transition. Young people have many more choices and opportunities than their parents. There are more decisions to make and, with changes to the benefit payment eligibility and the allowances scheme for tertiary study, adolescents are being held accountable increasingly for these “with potentially far-reaching consequences for their future” (Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, & Ferral, 2004, pp. 219-220). There needs also to be an acknowledgement that transition is about exploring identity and a life time conceptualisation of careers development, as “opposed to a single, fixed career-as-outcome choice” (Vaughan & Roberts, 2007, p. 102). Effective transition programmes

should seek not to eliminate the periods of seeming indecision from students' lives but to provide support and guidance through the experience.

An important challenge for school authorities, then, is not necessarily to reduce the number of early leavers but to establish *effective transition programmes for all students* because:

a well planned and positive transition contributes to much more than future employment prospects – it is an opportunity to strengthen identity and self-worth, to recognise skills, personal attributes and aspirations, and to 'set the stage' for life long learning and citizenship. (Ashton, Cutforth, Hudson, & Reed, 2002, p. 1)

In considering what strategies are required to assist students in making the transition from school, there needs to be recognition that adolescents are not "passive travellers" but "active 'navigators' of their pathways" through life (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Vaughan, 2003, cited by Hipkins et al., 2004, p. 220). In an ideal notion of careers exploration, students are confident explorers "approaching it through themselves" (emphasis in original, Vaughan, Roberts, & Gardiner, 2006, p. 91): "Their overall framework [is] generally not attached to a particular job, vocation, or profession; it [is] attached to being a particular kind of person with a range of high-level and adaptable skills" (ibid.). The importance of self-concept, of students' "identity investments...in the perception of possibilities and ability to make career decisions" (ibid.), therefore needs to be recognised in developing effective transitioning programmes within secondary schools. In reviewing the form and place of career development in the school curriculum, as suggested in Chapter 5, consideration needs also to be given as to how decision-making, problem solving, negotiation and thinking skills can be included, so that students feel more confident in dealing with issues of concern to them, including career planning and the decision of when to leave school.

### **Summary**

Dropping out was shown in this study to be a much more complex and iterative process than previous research had suggested. There were students with numerous problems at school, including academic failure, who went on to be successful in other

roles once they left but there were others who left school early, despite earlier indications that they were very able.

There did not seem to be significant differences between the characteristics of students who left school early and those who went on to complete the year. A sense of academic progress, coupled with a feeling of belonging evidenced through good relationships with teachers and other students, was what seemed to keep students at school.

That dropouts experience problems common to all teenagers is a conclusion reached from this study but it may be that those who came to leave school early had more than their fair share of such problems or maybe did not have adequate support from a trusted adult to work through the issues.

The particular trajectory which students took when facing problems was determined by their abilities, knowledge and skills, their temperament and personalities, by the way they experienced their particular environmental context. This was influenced heavily by their family histories and the expectations of parents and their teachers.

Dropouts were found to be a much more diverse group of young people than might have been predicted from previous research. There was little in their characteristics to differentiate them from some of those who stayed on at school. Schargel and Smink also found that the identity of dropouts differed from their predictions (2001, p. 27), making the targeting of those at-risk students for early intervention—as a growing body of opinion suggests (*ibid.*, p. 26)—at the best difficult and at the worst fraught with all the issues associated with labelling and teacher expectations: “Not prejudging students’ likely progress, and approaching their teaching with optimism, is crucial to the chances of students flourishing” (Wylie, Hodgen, & Ferral, 2006, p. 83).

Dropping out has been conceived of as a movement “through ecological space” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26), as a shift in context. It involves leaving the school setting and changing roles from that of high school pupil to parent, worker, unemployed benefit recipient, or tertiary student. Application of later refinements of ecological theory (Lerner, 2005, p. xv) recast the role which an individual plays: Students were shown to be shaping, and being shaped by, interactions with their environment, as active agents in their own development and in the management of the many transitions they make in adolescence, including leaving school. This finding has close links with

the work of Hipkins, Vaughan, Beals, and Ferral, which identified adolescents as active navigators of the pathways through life (2004, p. 220).

That the requirements of the modern economic and social structure conflict with the needs of young adolescents to develop and assert their individuality is an argument Maizels made last century (1970, cited in Coleman & Hendry, 1990, p. 181). Little seems to have changed since that time. Many of the leavers' stories recorded in this study highlight the high level of conflict between the needs of the individual student and school provision today. These students could no longer put up with the constraints which the school context imposed on their emerging adult-selves. They had simply outgrown what school had to offer and could no longer tolerate the limitations of the schoolgirl identities available to them there. Contrary to the expectations of teachers and parents, seeking qualifications to secure a career goal did not receive priority in students' thinking. The girls' stories showed that school was only one part of their very busy lives. Education and work were not always the most important considerations in terms of choices they needed to make and how they saw themselves. Congruent with the work of other researchers, this study found that identity formation was heavily influenced by media culture and that present issues of learning to become "somebody, with or without school" (Higgins, 2002, p. 56; Smyth & Hattam, 2004, pp. 74-75) were of much greater significance to these students than future career and employment considerations.

It seems that the more we find out about drop out, the more complicated we realise it is (Schargel & Smink, 2001, p. 27). The findings from this study indicate that drop out is indeed a complex phenomenon. To this end Battram (1998, p. 12) explained, that a synonym for complexity is "complicatedness": something with many parts and interconnections." It is the interconnection between the many factors associated previously with drop out that the detailed narrative analysis illuminated so well.

There were, therefore, a wide range of issues which emerged as a result of this case study. One of the more important considerations related to the role of schools in preparing students for a future of rapid change and a high degree of uncertainty. The conclusion is that, instead of a focus on drop out and retention, a more apt approach for schools is to facilitate a greater exploration of post-school options and prepare students to deal more effectively with the many transitions they are likely to experience over the life course. However, if such an approach is to be adopted by schools, then this would need to be supported by appropriate changes at policy level. But policy direction needs

to be informed by evidenced-based research. Teachers are concerned by early school leaving at a school level but their interest tends to generate outputs that are not always available in the public domain:

If one is interested in where education policy is made and implemented, then the district or school level is more pertinent. At the individual level of analysis it is difficult to examine the efforts of educators because they are sidelined by individual factors. Individual level studies are concerned with what the student brings to the process, while school and district level analyses are more concerned with what policies work to confront the problem. (Juenke, 2004, p. 4)

The “dualism” of “the micro level of intervention in the lives of individual children [and] the macro level of societal change” (Atwool, 1999, p. 380) must be overcome if we are to “move forward” on the question of high school retention and drop out, and on the role which schools play in shaping the lives of the young people entrusted to their care.

## REFERENCES

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## Appendix A: At-Risk Student Profile Characteristics

Figure A: From Wells (1990, p. 10, adapted from Wells and Bechard 1989).

### School –Related

- Low teacher expectations
- Lack of Language instruction
- Conflict between home/school culture
- Overcrowded classrooms
- Lack of adequate counselling
- Counseling referrals
- Poor facilities
- Lack of educational options/inadequate curriculum
  
- Negative school environment, climate
- Lack of adequate attendance system
- Lack of adequate discipline system
- Institutional discrimination
- Higher graduation requirements
- Grade retention
- Suspensions
- Special program placement
- Placement in tracks other than high academics
- Low ability level
- Low standardized test scores

### Student-Related

- Poor school attitudes
- Low motivation
- Low education and occupational aspirations
- Attendance/truancy problems
- Low self-esteem, external locus of control
- Behavior/discipline problems
- Pregnancy, marriage
- Drug abuse
- Poor peer relationships
- Nonparticipation in extracurricular activities
- Negative police involvement
- Lack of student responsibility
- Friends have dropped out
- Illness and disability

**Symptoms in  
Combination  
Increase Risk**

### Community-Related

- Lack of community support services or response (drug & alcohol abuse programmes, family counselling, mental health & social services)
- Lack of community support for schools
- High incidences of criminal activities

### Family-Related

- Low SES
- Student has to work
- Stressful homelife (dysfunctional)
- Parental non-involvement (low expectation)
- Low parental educational level and occupation
- Non-English-speaking home
- Abuse
- Ineffective parenting
- Number of school moves
- Minority status



## AWA HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEY

At Awa High School we offer a wide range of opportunities to our students. Many features of the school are listed in the box below. We would like your opinion on the school so we know what is great for you and whether there are other things we can do to continue to make education at Awa High School the best.

Please take time to respond to this survey thoughtfully and honestly to reflect what you think . Comment on anything from the box – or add what you want.

Curriculum: range of subjects, teaching, class work, homework. ESOL. Environment: buildings, classrooms, grounds  
Sports: wide range. Culture: e.g. Poutamatia, choir, debating. Social: e.g. ball, dances. Amenities: swimming pool, gyms, computers (email and internet), language room, careers room, music suite, library, learning support/homework centre, successmaker. Organisation: houses, vertical forms, school times, prefects. Guidance: form teachers, deans, administration, peer mentors, peer health, peer tutors, discipline.  
Activities: camps, sports days, fundraising, stage challenge.

I like...	I think...
I participate in...	I would like...

I rate school as:

Uninteresting | \_\_\_\_\_ | Great  
 Boring | \_\_\_\_\_ | Challenging

Any other comments?

Name	Year Level
------	------------

## **Appendix C: Letter and Information Sheet for Parents**

MASSEY UNIVERSITY letterhead

### **STUDENT RETENTION IN NEW ZEALAND GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOLS:**

Dear parent,

I am Chris Coutts and I am the Principal of (School name). I am conducting research into student retention as part of study towards the Doctor of Education at Massey University.

I know that for many students it had been an easy decision about what to do in 2003. For others there was a lot of soul searching about whether it was best to return to school or not.

Most students chose to stay on at school, maybe going on to further studies at school or at polytechnic or university in the future.

Others left without completing this year, despite having the ability to do well academically. Some leavers will have found the perfect job, others may leave for a range of personal reasons.

And that's what this project is all about. Your daughter has agreed that I may approach you to talk about your perceptions and to provide me with some assistance in this project.

**This project is being conducted because I want to find out about retention rates in girls' secondary schools and what we can do to improve them.**

I've attached an information sheet to give an overview of the project but I have also included my contacts if you want me to answer any questions.

#### **What will you be asked to do?**

Students who left before the end of the year were telephoned to get some general information about them and their reasons for leaving. I talked in more detail with some students during a face-to-face, interview.

I'd also like to interview some of their teachers to find out what views they have about the school and why students decide to stay on or leave for something else. I made sure that the school was happy about this idea before approaching you. I have included more details about the interviews on the information sheet, attached.

The purpose of the study is to find out how we can make it easier for students to stay on at school and achieve and your help would be really useful. You do not, however, have to take part in this study if you don't want to.

Yours sincerely (signature)

Chris Coutts

Principal (School name)

## **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS**

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. I am seeking your support to carry out a research project in three girls secondary schools in 2003.**

### **TITLE**

**STUDENT RETENTION IN NEW ZEALAND GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A study of difference /inequality within a social context**

**Researcher:** This research is being carried out by Mrs Chris Coutts, Principal of (School name). This study forms part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Education. It has been approved by the Massey University College of Education Ethics Committee and is being supervised by Dr Roy Nash and Dr John O'Neil.

### **Purpose**

**This research project is being conducted because I want to find out about retention rates in girls' secondary schools and what we can do to improve them.**

This study explores the ability of schools, within their social, economic, political and cultural contexts, to retain the students they enrol.

### **Some background**

With the introduction of competition between schools in the mid 1990s, secondary schools became very aware of the effects of market forces on their roll and, consequently, on their viability. As a principal of a secondary school I have, of course, got a vested interest in monitoring the retention rates in my own school. There appear to be, however, inequalities of educational opportunity associated with poor retention rates and this is my major interest.

New Zealand Ministry of Education data was used to find out how retention rates differ between schools and then, because I am most interested in looking at single-sex schools like my own, three girls' schools were invited to participate in the second stage, which is where you come in.

I aim to find out what it is successful schools do to increase retention and minimise early leaving. A range of methods, including questionnaires, telephone survey and face-to-face interviews, will be used to find out what's involved in student retention and leaving. I hope to gain the views of students, their friends, family and teachers in order to build a better understanding of what's involved in the process of leaving.

First of all senior students completed a questionnaire about their plans for this year and what they had in mind for the future. Students who left before the end of the year were telephoned to ask questions about themselves and their reasons for leaving. They also gave permission to access their school records.

I talked in more detail to some students after gaining their consent, at a face-to-face interview. The board gave me permission to follow up with teachers and other staff who they thought might be able to assist us in learning more about what makes people decide to leave. The best way to do this is by way of a face-to-face interview.

### **What we are asking you to do**

If you are prepared to be interviewed then a consent form will be given to you to be signed. The face-to-face interview sessions may take about half an hour. I'd like to tape-record the conversation. This is the best way to get an accurate account of what you have said. If you should decide to stop the interview earlier, or have the tape recorder switched off, or not answer particular questions, then you just say so. It is up to you: that's your right. The face-to-face interview will be tape-recorded, with your permission and then transcribed by a typist. I will give you a typed copy of the transcription so you can make sure it is accurate or give me any feedback on anything which has been left out or you want changed. No-one who can identify you will ever listen to the tape.

### **What can those who take part expect from me, as researcher?**

As the senior researcher I will take all reasonable steps to ensure that no one who takes part in this study can be identified in the research report. The research notes and transcripts from each school will be coded, so it will not be possible to link them to a person. Tapes will be destroyed at the completion of my thesis. The transcripts will be securely filed for a period of five years in accordance with Massey University policies. The computers used to code and record transcripts have secure access codes. The secretary who will transcribe the tapes will also be asked to sign a Confidentiality Agreement to ensure that reasonable steps are taken to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of people being interviewed. In the final thesis, direct quotes will be used but findings will be written in such a way that it will be difficult to identify either people or schools, except in the broadest way (teacher, parent, friend).

I would like to assure you that I have the interests of the students and the schools at heart and I am very aware of the dangers which unwanted disclosure can sometimes bring.

### **You have the right to:**

- decline to participate in this study,
- refuse to answer particular questions,
- withdraw from the study at any time,
- ask any questions relating to the study at any time,
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher,
- be given access to a summary of the findings of the study when it is concluded.

### **What next?**

**If you agree to take part, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time with questions or concerns.**

**To contact me:** (address and phone/email details)

**To contact supervisors:** (names and phone/email contact details)

## ***Appendix D: Letter and Information Sheet for Students***

MASSEY UNIVERSITY letterhead

### **STUDENT RETENTION IN NEW ZEALAND GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOLS:**

Dear student,

Welcome back to the senior school.

I am Chris Coutts and I am the Principal of (School name). I am conducting research into student retention as part of study towards the Doctor of Education at Massey University.

I know that for many of you it has been an easy decision about what to do this year. For others there has been a lot of soul searching about what's best.

Whatever, I do wish you all the very best for the year ahead!

Most of you will stay on at school, maybe going on to further studies at school or at polytechnic or university in the future.

A few of you will leave without completing this year, despite having the ability to do well academically. Some leavers will have found the perfect job, others may leave for a range of personal reasons.

And that's what this project is all about.

**This project is being conducted because I want to find out about retention rates in girls' secondary schools and what we can do to improve them.**

Permission has been granted by the school's board of trustees to involve you in this project.

I've attached an information sheet to give an overview of the project but I have also included my contacts if you want me to answer any questions.

#### **Students - what will you be asked to do?**

I am asking you all to complete and return an 'intentions' questionnaire. This will give us an indication of the plans which you have for the forthcoming year, your aspirations and future goals.

Students who leave before the end of the year will, if they agree, be contacted briefly by telephone to get some general information about them and their reasons for leaving.

I'd like to talk in more detail with some students and if you are one of them, you will be telephoned to ask your permission for a longer, face-to-face, interview.

I'd also like to interview some of your friends to find out what views they have about the

school and deciding to stay on or leave for something else. The impressions of other people such as teachers, parents and brothers or sisters, might also be useful but I will make sure you are happy about this idea before any approaches are made. I have included more details about the interviews on the information sheet, attached.

The purpose of the study is to find out how we can make it easier for students to stay on at school and achieve and your help would be really useful. You do not, however, have to take part in this study if you don't want to.

Yours sincerely

(signature)

Chris Coutts

Principal (School name)

**MASSEY UNIVERSITY letterhead****INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENTS**

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. I am seeking your support to carry out a research project in your school during 2002.**

**TITLE:**

**STUDENT RETENTION IN NEW ZEALAND GIRLS'  
SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A study of difference /  
inequality within a social context**

**Researcher:** This research is being carried out by Mrs Chris Coutts, Principal of (School name). This study forms part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Education. It has been approved by the Massey University College of Education Ethics Committee and is being supervised by Dr Roy Nash and Dr John O'Neil.

**Purpose**

**This research project is being conducted because I want to find out about retention rates in girls' secondary schools and what we can do to improve them.**

This study explores the ability of schools, within their social, economic, political and cultural contexts, to retain the students they enrol.

**Some background**

With the introduction of competition between schools in the mid 1990s, secondary schools became very aware of the effects of market forces on their roll and, consequently, on their viability. As a principal of a secondary school I have, of course, got a vested interest in monitoring the retention rates in my own school. There appear to be, however, inequalities of educational opportunity associated with poor retention rates and this is my major interest.

New Zealand Ministry of Education data will be used to find out how retention rates differ between schools and then, because I am most interested in looking at single-sex schools like my own, three girls' schools will be invited to participate in the second stage, which is where you come in.

I aim to find out what it is successful schools do to increase retention and minimise early leaving. A range of methods, including questionnaires, telephone survey and face-to-face interviews, will be used to find out what's involved in student retention and leaving. I hope to gain the views of students, their friends, family and teachers in order to build a better understanding of what's involved in the process of leaving.

### **What we are asking you to do**

First of all we want you to complete and return the questionnaire about your plans for this year and what you have in mind for the future. We'd like everyone in the senior school to do this.

If you leave before the end of the year someone will telephone you to ask you a few questions about yourself and reasons for leaving. They will also be asking your permission to access your school records.

I will be talking in more detail to some students and, if you are one of them, you will be telephoned to ask permission to interview you. If you are prepared to be interviewed then a consent form will be given to you to be signed. Anyone who agrees to take part in this study will be interviewed at a time and place convenient both to them and to the school. You can have a friend with you at the interview if you wish. If a friend comes with you, they will be asked to sign a confidentiality statement agreeing to make every reasonable effort to maintain your anonymity and the confidentiality of the information you provide.

The face-to-face interview sessions should take about one hour. I'd like to tape-record the conversation. This is the best way to get an accurate account of what you have said. If you should decide to stop the interview earlier, or have the tape recorder switched off, or not answer particular questions, then you just say so. It is up to you: that's your right. The face-to-face interview will be tape-recorded, with your permission and then transcribed by a typist. I will give you a typed copy of the transcription so you can make sure it is accurate or give me any feedback on anything which has been left out or you want changed. No-one who can identify you will ever listen to the tape.

### **What can those who take part expect from me, as researcher?**

As the senior researcher I will take all reasonable steps to ensure that no one who takes part in this study can be identified in the research report. The research notes and transcripts from each school will be coded, so it will not be possible to link them to a person. The transcripts will be kept in locked filing cabinets. Tapes and transcripts will be destroyed at the completion of my thesis. The computers used to code and record transcripts have secure access codes. The secretary who will transcribe the tapes will also be asked to sign a Confidentiality Agreement to ensure that reasonable steps are taken to respect the confidentiality and anonymity of people being interviewed. In the final thesis, direct quotes will be used but findings will be written in such a way that it will be difficult to identify either people or schools, except in the broadest way (teacher, parent, friend).

I would like to assure you that I have the interests of the students and the schools at heart and I am very aware of the dangers which unwanted disclosure can sometimes bring.

### **You have the right to:**

- decline to participate in this study,
- refuse to answer particular questions,
- withdraw from the study at any time,
- ask any questions relating to the study at any time,
- provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher,
- be given access to a summary of the findings of the study when it is concluded.

### **What next?**

**If you agree to take part, please do not hesitate to contact me at any time with questions or concerns.** (contact details of researcher and supervisors follow)

## **Appendix E: Intentions Survey**

### **Intentions Questionnaire for Senior Students**

Welcome back to the senior school!

This questionnaire is the first part of the study of retention in girls' secondary schools over 2003. The aim of this project is to find out what it is that successful schools do to increase retention and minimise early leaving.

#### **Instructions**

Please complete this questionnaire by circling your choice or by writing your comments or any other details in the space provided. If you need more room, then please can you write on the back of the form or on another sheet?

- 1      What subjects are you studying this year?
- |                                     |                                     |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> | e).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| b).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> | f).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| c).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> | g).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| d).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> | h).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> |

- 2      What other interests do you have at school? E.g. sports, culture, clubs, etc
- |                                     |                                     |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> | d).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| b).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> | e).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> |
| c).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> | f).....<br><input type="checkbox"/> |

- 3      What made you decide to return to school?.....
- .....
- .....
-

4 What are your plans for next year?.....

.....

.....

5 What do you imagine you will be doing in five year's time?

.....

.....

Looking back over your time at school, was there ever a time when you felt like leaving?

Yes/No (*circle one*)

If you said yes, then when was this?.....

.....

What made you decide to continue with your schooling?.....

.....

**Thank you** for taking the time to tell me a little about yourself and the plans you have right now.

Signed.....Date.....

...

First name.....Family name.....

Birth date: ---/---/19---

School.....Year level: 11/12/13 (*circle one*)

## **Appendix F: Coding for Intentions Survey**

The following codes were allocated to the Intentions Survey responses, on the basis of the themes which emerged.

**An ID number was allocated, as a unique identifier, to preserve the anonymity of each student:** Each ID had up to 4 digits-The first digit represented the school. The next three digits were potentially allocated by levels based on rolls provided by the schools, which were sometimes by form class and sometimes by whole school alphabetically.

### *Question 1 - Subjects studied this year*

#### **Excel data**

**sub1, B;**  
**sub2, C;**  
**sub3, D;**  
**sub4, E;**  
**sub5, F;**  
**sub6, G**

#### **Subjects named by students**

1. accounting
2. art (painting, sculpture, design, printmaking)
3. art history
4. biology/human biology
5. chemistry
6. childcare studies/nannyng/  
human development
7. classical studies/classics
8. economics
9. electronics
10. English (academic English)
11. alternative/practical  
English/communication  
English/communication skills
12. ESOL/ESL/IELTS
13. food and hospitality/food &  
nutrition/home  
economics/consumer, food and  
nutrition
14. financial literacy
15. geography
16. graphics
17. health
18. history
19. horticulture/Agriculture
20. information  
technology/IT/computing
21. literacy/numeracy
22. languages (Japanese, French,  
Spanish, German, Maori,  
Chinese, etc)
23. management for living/life  
skills/employment skills/general  
studies

24. mathematics with calculus
25. mathematics with statistics
26. mathematics
27. mathematics  
alternative/practical  
mathematics
28. media studies/journalism
29. office skills/typing/text  
management/business  
admin/information  
management/text management
30. performing arts (dance, drama,  
music)
31. photography
32. physics
33. physical Education
34. psychology
35. science/general Science
36. applied/practical science
37. social studies
38. technology- hard materials  
(metalwork/woodwork),  
biotechnology, etc
39. textiles, art and design/fashion  
design
40. tourism
41. Youth Award Scheme (YAS)
42. outside course
43. other (named other)

**Not stated or No response was left blank.**

*Question 2 - Interests at school*

**Excel data**

**int1, H;**

**int2, I;**

**int3, J;**

**int4, K;**

**int5, L;**

**int6, M**

**If more than 6, the first six were taken.**

**Interests named by students**

1. aerobics
2. art/art  
associate/photography/photography  
associate
3. assignments/study
4. athletics(running/high  
jump/javelin/etc)/cross-country  
running
5. amnesty international/other NGOs /  
conservation committees
6. badminton
7. basketball
8. BOT rep
9. bowls/lawn bowls

10. canoeing/kayaking
11. canoe polo
12. charities committee/deaf club
13. chess
14. Christian fellowship/the  
Rock/ISCF
15. choir/singing
16. common room
17. cricket
18. croquet
19. cross country
20. culture council/culture  
committees/culture
21. dance
22. debating
23. dragon boat racing
24. drama/theatre sports
25. Duke of Edinburgh/Spirit of  
Adventure
26. gymnastics
27. hockey/underwater hockey
28. horse riding/equestrian
29. House leader/house events
30. information technology/  
computing/surfing the net,  
chat room
31. international committee
32. kapa haka or named Maori cultural  
group
33. karate or other named martial  
arts
34. languages
35. library assistant
36. lifesaving
37. line dancing
38. magazine/  
publication/newspaper  
committee
39. music or named  
instrument/band/sound  
technician
40. netball
41. performing arts (not specified)
42. peer support: peer tutoring/peer  
health/peer counselling/form tutor
43. physics club
44. Polynesian club/Poly Club/Pacific  
Pride
45. Poetry

46. prefect /school leadership/hostel  
prefect
47. recycling committee
48. rock climbing
49. rugby
50. SADD
51. sailing
52. sewing/fashion design
53. school  
production/musical/play/theatre
54. small bore rifle shooting
55. soccer/football
56. socialising/lunch/friends
57. speech competition
58. sports committee
59. sports not specified/PE
60. squash
61. stage challenge/smoke free stage  
challenge
62. stock market game/share market  
challenge
63. student Council/executive council,  
school council/youth council
64. student office helper
65. swimming
66. tennis/table tennis
67. tech angels
68. touch
69. young enterprise
70. volleyball
71. water polo
72. windsurfing
73. world vision/forty hour famine/famine  
group
74. yoga /aerobics/gym (fitness)
75. helping out in school in a general way
76. plays sports/etc out of school
77. cycling
78. softball/baseball
79. rowing
80. theatre sports
81. skiing
82. golf
83. diving
84. tramping/orienteering/camping
85. aviation
86. reading

**Not stated or No response was left blank**

*Question 3 - Reasons for returning***Excel data****rea1, N;****rea2, O;****rea3, P**

**If only one reason one box was coded; - if two reasons coded two, if three reasons coded three, maximum of three - if there were more, took first three.**

**Reasons named by students**

1. mother/father/parents/grandparents **made me** / Because I had to/no choice
2. **friends** are here/friends
3. **value of education:** Get a good/better education/To know more than last year/It would look good on my record/To learn more/Study/Gain qualifications/Gain rest of NCEA/Get the levels or credits or exams/Get better grades/ pass bursary/education is important/For a good future/To get anywhere/To learn more English / To know all about how to use the words/ There were subjects I wanted to do / I want to do tourism (any named subject)
4. **future study:** Go to university / continue on to tertiary / To do the course I want to do
5. anything to do with **careers** or **jobs:** To get the job I want to / best thing to help me towards my career
6. I wanted to / because I really enjoy school/'it'/ Sports /drama/**being involved** in areas of school life/ social things
7. **I didn't have a job**
8. **nothing better to do**
9. **I can't leave until I turn 16** anyway
10. **I didn't leave school-** indicates a different interpretation of this Question
11. **no reason to leave**
12. **siblings have dropped out**
13. **my conscience**
14. **knew it was a better option**
15. because God told me to
16. stated other

**Not stated or No response was left blank**

*Question 4 - What are your plans for next year*

**Excel data**

**pla1, Q;**

**pla2, R;**

**pla3, S**

**(if 1 plan, coded 1 box, if 2 plans, coded 2 boxes, maximum of 3 plans. If more, took the first 3)**

**Next year plans named**

1. no idea
2. get a full-time **job**/ get a job so that I can go to university/get a job so that I can travel (where 2 reasons- code second reason also)
3. go to **polytech**/technical institution of any type or a named course at a polytech eg Nursing
4. go to **university** or a named university course, such as study towards BA/law.
5. go to a **private provider** course such as YMCA or other named such course
6. go on a course/ tertiary study not specific type
7. **return to school** /to complete form seven / Year 12 etc/to pass bursary/ carry on with the subjects (eg. tourism or other named subjects)
8. wants to be a **prefect** or other school **leader**/To do well in sports or some **non academic reason for returning to school**
9. **save for** a car, stereo, etc
10. **travel overseas**/ take up a gap scholarship, etc
11. **study in NZ**
12. **go back to** Thailand (or other **country of origin**)
13. army/navy/air force
14. go flatting (no elaboration)
15. apprenticeship (no elaboration)
16. leave school (no reason/plan stated)
17. gap year between school and tertiary education.

**Not stated or No response was left blank**

*Question 5 - What do you imagine you will be doing in five year's time?*

**Excel data**

**fut1, T;**

**fut2, U;**

**fut3, V**

**(if more than 1 future plan, code 2 boxes, 3 boxes, etc - maximum of 3 futures and if more, took first 3)**

**Five year plans named**

1. **undecided** / No idea/ no clue/ I don't know
2. **working** / working in a named job/ Career or named career eg teaching/ Army/ navy/ air force
3. **polytech**/named polytechnic course eg Nursing
4. **university**/ named university course- medical school, law
5. on a private training providers course, eg YMCA, or a particular such course
6. married/looking after children/childcare
7. have a restaurant (in London- implies travel- no 2 reason) / other named business
8. travel/OE
9. **playing sport** or named sport, such as soccer / Silver Ferns / touch for NZ
10. actress/musician/performer/kapa haka leader
11. unemployed/dole
12. drugs/detox/rehab
13. prison
14. back to country of origin

**Not stated or No response was left blank**

*Question 6 -Did you ever feel like leaving? X 1-yes or 2- no*

*7 If you felt like leaving previously, when was it?*

**Excel data**

**time1, Y;**

**time2, Z;**

**(maximum 2 times stated)**

**or / and reasons:**

**rea1, AA;**

**rea2, AB;**

**rea3, AC**

**(maximum 3 reasons - take first 3)**

**Named reason / time when felt like leaving**

1. **teachers/ deans/principal** - or named adult person employed by the school/counsellor
2. bullying or **problems with other students,**
3. **no friends** / friends leaving
4. **academic reason, such as lack of interesting subjects/boredom / don't like NCEA**
5. **lack of achievement/** not doing well/ school work too hard

6. **too busy/** full on/time problems/failing/exam time
  7. **personal issues** outside school-name?
  8. because **had enough** - general statement / wasn't getting anywhere
  9. I **don't want to talk** about it
  10. personal issues within school
  11. lack of sporting or cultural options
  12. hate the school (no elaboration) / school is not good
  13. I was being a typical teenager /hated getting out of bed early
  14. hostel food / accommodation
  15. wanted job to make money
  16. other students were leaving
  17. because of injury or illness
  - ALL ABOVE ARE REASONS**
  - ALL BELOW ARE TIME**
  18. last year or a year ago, or states the last year e.g. 10, 11 or 12.
  19. the year before last or two years ago, or states so, as above
  20. three years ago or states year, as above
  21. often (more than once)
  22. holidays (between years, say 10 and 11)
  23. 4 years ago
  24. 5 years ago
  25. this year
  26. ages ago / a long time ago (no elaboration)
- Not stated or No response was left blank**

*Question 7 - What made you decide to continue with your schooling*

**Excel data**

**decisions:**

**decn1, AD:**

**decn2, AE;**

**decn3, AF**

**(maximum of 3 reasons, took the first 3 if more)**

**Named reason for decision to continue**

1. mother/father/parents/grandparents **made me** / because I had to/I had no choice
2. **friends** are here / friends/ friends influenced me to stay
3. **value of education:** Get a good/better education/to know more than last year/it would look good on my record/to learn more / Study/gain qualifications/gain rest of NCEA/get the levels/credits/exams/get better

- grades/pass bursary/education is important/  
for a good future/to get anywhere/to learn  
more about (named subject, e.g. English)  
/there were subjects I wanted to do/I want to  
do tourism (any named subject)
4. **future study:** go to university/continue on to  
tertiary/to do the course I want to do
  5. anything to do with **careers/mentions job:**  
To get the job I want to/ best thing to help me  
towards my career
  6. I wanted to/because I really enjoy it (drama,  
etc.)/ **being involved** in areas of school life/  
social things/like playing sport
  7. **I didn't have a job**
  8. **nothing better to do**
  9. **I can't leave until I turn 16** anyway
  10. **I didn't leave school**
  11. **no reason to leave**
  12. **siblings have dropped out**
  13. **my conscience**
  14. **knew it was a better option**
  15. **moved schools / moved class**
  16. **don't know**
  17. it got better after I decided to buy my own  
food (re. hostel)
  18. Talked to teacher who convinced me to stay
  19. Received medication for mental illness (so  
motivation increased)
  20. God told me to.

**Not stated or No response is blank**

**Year level:** AG-11; 12; 13

If not stated – blank - If can find out from school, then insert.

**Birth date:** month: AH; year: AI

Students must be aged 16 or above at time of officially being recorded as leaving  
only. Not stated was left blank but if could find out from school, then inserted later.

**School:** AJ: (Putu) Boot High 1; Repo (Swamp High) 2; Awa (River High) 3

**Ethnicity:** Data provided by each school.

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Code</b>
Unknown (U)	1
Maori (M)	2
Pacific Island (Pasifika) (PI)	3
Samoan	4
Chinese (C)	5
New Zealand European (E)	6
South East Asian plus other Asian (SEA = O) Ministry of Education categories	7
Other (e.g., USA)	8
Cook Island Maori (CIM)	9

**Qualifications on leaving:** Data provided by each school.

<b>Qualifications on leaving</b>	<b>Code</b>
No formal attainment	1
University Bursary A or B, or scholarship	2
Higher School Certificate	3
NCEA Level 3	4
Entrance to University	5
14-41 credits Level 3	6
1-13 credits Level 3	7
F6 Certificate in $\geq 1$ subjects	8
NCEA Level 2	9
$\geq 42$ credits Level 2	10
14-41 credits Level 2	11
1-13 credits Level 2	12
NCEA Level 1	13
$\geq 42$ credits Level 1	14
14-41 credits Level 1	15
1-13 credits Level 1	16
Unknown	17

### **Appendix G: Summary of Leavers Interviewed**

Table G:

#### *Summary of the Students Interviewed Face-to face*

Code	Date left in 2003	Age	Ethnic group	Year level	Highest qualifications on leaving		SES		Data collection		
							Prnts	Dstn.	IS	Tel	Ff
2324	02/07	16	E	11	NCEA	L1 10	4	5	✓	✓	✓
2227	14/08	16	M	11	nil		4	5	✓	✓	✓
220	16/05	20	E	13	F6C	“a few”	4	3		✓	✓
2286	31/10	16	E	11	NCEA	L2 1- 13	4	7	✓	✓	✓
271	21/07	18	M	13	FSC	3	2	6	✓	✓	✓
2126	09/05	16	E	12	NCEA	L1>=42	3	S	✓		✓
2348	28/05	16	M	11	nil		7	6	✓	✓	✓
2178	15/09	17	M	12	NCEA	L2 14	5	7	✓	✓	
2122	23/05	16	M	12	NCEA	L2 1-13	2	S	✓	✓	
298	18/03	18	E	13	NCEA	L2 1-13	?	S		✓	
2258	16/10	16	E	11	NCEA	L1 27	?	S	✓	✓	
2247	15/08	16	M	11	NCEA	L1 14-41	?	AWOL	✓		
1395	20/06	16	M	12	NCEA	L2 1-13	3	S	✓	✓	✓
1123	12/06	17	E	13	SC 5	F6C ?	3	S	✓	✓	✓
1540	07/03	16	E	12	NCEA	L1 15	2	S		✓	✓
1261	25/07		E	12	NCEA	L3 1-13	3	S		✓	✓
1388	?/10	17	E?	12	NCEA	L1 100	5	6	✓	✓	✓
1178	12/06	18	E	13	F6C	1	3	4	✓	✓	
1401	25/07	17	E	12	NCEA	L3 1-13	1	7	✓	✓	
3333	18/03	16	E	12	?		4	S			✓
313	12/08	17	M	13	NCEA	L2 14-41	6	4	✓		
3138	16/09	17	M	12	NCEA	L1 14-41	5	6	✓	✓	
33	04/07	18	M	13	nil?		7	6	✓	✓	
378	04/07	17	E	13	SC 4	L3 1-13	3	S	✓	✓	
3144	18/09	17	M	12	NCEA	L2 1-13	2	3	✓	✓	
3150	31/03	16	E	12	NCEA	L1 14	4	4	✓	✓	
310	22/07	17	E	13	NCEA	L2 >=42	5	5	✓	✓	
3167	19/09	17	E	12	nil		3	S	✓	✓	✓

**Notes to Table G:**

Ethnicity is indicated by:

- E for European;
- M for Maori; and
- PI for students identifying as Pasifika.

Student engagement in data collection methods:

- Tel. is Telephone Interview;
- Ff is Face-to-face Interview; and

A tick indicates student participation. A tick against the Intentions Survey (IS) indicates that this survey was completed.

Age is the age on leaving school in years.

Code is the unique identifier for that student. The first number in the code indicates the school:

- 1 is Putu;
- 2 is Repo and
- 3 is Awa.

The socioeconomic status (SES) of the parents (Prnts) and the leaver (Dstn) was developed using a modification of the Elley-Irving Index (Elley & Irving, 2003) as described in Chapter 3. The symbol S has been used to indicate where the student transferred schools or continued education at tertiary level: WOL indicates student could not be located.

Qualifications (Quals) are the highest gained on leaving, expressed as NCEA levels (L) with the number of credits achieved (some schools identified this as within a range); or as School Certificate (SC) or Sixth Form Certificate (F6C).

## **Appendix H: Telephone Interview Schedule**

### TELEPHONE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Date of call:

Phone number:

Interviewer:

Project ID no.

Last Name:

First Name:

Consent:

*It is assumed that completing the telephone survey indicates consent. You have the right to decline to answer any questions and to terminate the call at any time. In giving your consent, you are agreeing to provide information on the understanding your name will not be used without your permission.*

*Outline protocols-have you read the information sheet? You can ask questions about the study at any time. Is there anything you would like to ask before we begin?*

Date left school:

Section A: Educational and employment record:

*Record all periods of activity. Note start and completion dates and any qualifications awarded. Make a list for each year since leaving school.*

Section B: Reason for leaving school.

*Obtain as much detail as possible. Note whether voluntary or consequent on suspension or other school action.*

Section C: Reflections on school experience.

Key questions:

- 1 'Did you get what you wanted from school?'
- 2 'Can you remember what you wanted to be when you were doing SC?'
- 3 'Did it work out?'
- 4 'Why (not)?'
- 5 'What was the biggest influence on you?'

Section D: Future plans:

Key questions:

- 1 'What's the goal for this year?'
- 2 'What do you hope to be doing in 10 year's time?'
- 3 'Do you think you'll make it?'
- 4 "Why (not)?"

Section E: Living situation.

*Are people living at home, with non-related others (flatting), or in a partner relationship (own place).*

Home/flatting/partner/other

Section F:

Permission to contact again re face-to-face interview?

*Outline second stage and get an indication of whether they are prepared to be contacted for a follow-up interview, if they are selected.*

"THANKS FOR YOUR TIME – I HOPE THINGS WORK OUT FOR YOU.  
GOOD LUCK!"

***Appendix I: Leavers Without Telephone Contact***

The standard letter used to contact students who were not on the telephone follows:

[Date]

[Name]

[Address]

Dear [Name]

RE: LEAVERS SURVEY 2003

We have heard from your school that you have recently left.

Enclosed please find information about a leavers' survey we are conducting across three schools.

If, after reading the information, you would be willing to tell us about your experiences, please either phone Katherine Ansley on (04) 974-5965 or (027) 201 2659, or alternatively return the slip below in the stamped-addressed envelope provided to (name of school where I was working).

Thank you for your time.

Chris Coutts

## **Appendix J: Face-to-Face Interview Schedule and Consent Form**

### FACE TO FACE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

NOTE: the style of interview is naturalistic, with the researcher allowing the participant to follow the ideas which seem important to them, round a central set of themes which will emerge from the telephone survey of leavers. The questioning sections proposed are based on findings from the literature and the research questions but they may require modification in light of findings from prior sections of the study.

Date of interview:

Interviewer:

Student last Name:

Student first Name:

Date left school:

Consent form (follows):

*Presented, discussed and signed:*      Yes / No

*You have the right to decline to answer any questions and to terminate the interview at any time. In giving your consent, you are agreeing to provide information on the understanding your name will not be used without your permission.*

*Outline protocols: Have you read the information sheet? You can ask questions about the study at any time. Is there anything you would like to ask before we begin?*

*- Tape on -*

(Check tape for volume and clarity)

## INTERVIEW COMMENCES:

School – circle one 001 002 003 Student ID no. ....

*[note: more space was allowed in the original form]*

INTERVIEW	EXAMPLES OF PROMPT QUESTIONS	COMMENTARY
<p>1 In this section I want to update any of the information since the telephone survey:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education and employment since leaving school</li> <li>• Current living situation</li> </ul>	<p><i>When did you leave school?</i></p> <p><i>What did you do when you left?</i></p> <p><i>What are you doing now?</i></p> <p><i>Are you living independently (i.e. not with parental family)?</i></p>	<p>Extend interest in any changes, noting time frames.</p>
<p>2 Do you think schools are having problems retaining their students in the senior school?</p>	<p><i>Were you the only one of your circle of friends who left at that time?</i></p> <p><i>What did your friends think about you leaving?</i></p> <p><i>Who has left since?</i></p>	<p><u>Peer relationships</u>- friends at school- who were they? Have friends dropped out? Participation in school activities? Influence of peer pressure?</p>

<p>3 In this section I want to ask you about several of the key features which other studies on the same topic have shown to be important:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School-related</li> <li>• Student-related</li> <li>• Family-related</li> <li>• Community-related</li> </ul>	<p><i>Did you get what you wanted from school?</i></p> <p><i>When did things start to change?</i></p> <p><i>What did you enjoy most about school? (What were your best subjects? Your worst? Favourite sports, were you ever good at that? Cultural, social?)</i></p> <p><i>How did you come to leave school?</i></p> <p><i>How were you getting on at school at this time?</i></p> <p><i>Did you ever get tired of trying?</i></p> <p><i>What were the main things which made you (decide to) leave?</i></p> <p><i>Anything else which you would like to comment on?</i></p> <p><i>Other reasons?</i></p>	<p>Link in these with any reasons this student noted in their telephone survey, get them to talk about these other aspects as well. A list of prompts, for use if required, follows:</p> <p><u>School-related</u> - teacher expectations; teaching quality, relationships with teachers? facilities; lack of resources; disruption?? suspended? Discipline system /behaviour problems? Held back? Special programme placement? Counselling referrals? Curriculum interest?</p> <p><u>Student-related</u>- school attitudes; motivation; aspirations; Their attendance at school/ truancy? achievement/progress? Behaviour/discipline? Police involvement? Illness or disability? Health or other problems? Drugs? Alcohol? Pregnancy?</p> <p><u>Family-related</u>- occupations of parents, SES? Student has to work to support family? Stressful home life? Involvement of parents in school? Parental expectations; parental educational level; English speaking at home? Number of moves? Minority status?</p> <p><u>Community-related</u>- lack of community support services; proximity of school to home? Transport? Places for recreation?</p>
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<p>4 Do you think that your friends who stayed on at school (left?) experienced similar problems? Expand ideas.</p>	<p><i>Did X who left just after you have the same problems?</i></p> <p><i>Who do you know who stayed on at school? How are they getting along?</i></p>	<p>Here we are trying to ascertain if there are any differences between those who stayed and those who left?</p>
<p>5 How did your family respond when you told them you were leaving?</p>	<p><i>What did Dad? Mum? Auntie? Your parents? think about this idea?</i></p>	<p>This question may already have been answered in section 3.</p>
<p>6 When did you decide to leave?</p>	<p><i>When did you start thinking you might not stay on and finish the 5(/6/7 Form year?</i></p> <p><i>Was it a definite decision or something that just came about?</i></p>	<p>This question and section 5 assume that there was a conscious decision to leave. If this aspect has not come out this way, note leaving pattern (e.g., attendance declined over time, realised falling behind, so just stopped attending altogether) and modify questioning accordingly</p> <p>See intention survey results</p>
<p>7 What was the school's response to your decision?</p>	<p><i>Was there any teacher you got on particularly well with?</i></p> <p><i>What did s/he (your teacher) say when you told them you were leaving?</i></p>	<p>See comment above</p>

<p>8 See whether there are any differences in the reasons suggested for leaving now and those given in the telephone survey.</p>	<p><i>Questions if a difference</i></p>	<p>Modify in light of information in section 3.</p>
<p>9 The aim of this question is to gain an insight into how they feel about what has occurred?</p>	<p><i>If you had your time all over again, is there anything you might have done/ wish you had done differently?</i></p>	
<p>10 See if any differences from telephone interview and expand if there are- what made them change their mind?</p>	<p><i>What are your plans for the future?</i></p>	
<p>11 Other themes may have emerged in the discussion or as a result of telephone interview which need to be added.</p>		

"THANKS FOR YOUR TIME - I HOPE THINGS WORK OUT FOR YOU. GOOD LUCK!"

**STUDENT RETENTION IN GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

**CONSENT FORM FOR FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me by researcher, Chris Coutts. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the information sheet.

I understand I have the right to withdraw from participating in the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

If I agree, the interview will be taped.

I also understand that I have the right to ask for the tape to be turned off at any time during the interview. If this happens, then I understand that the researcher will take notes of the interview.

I understand that I will be sent a transcription (typed copy) of my interview for me to comment on, amend or add to.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. The information I give will be used only for this research and for publications arising from this study.

**I agree to participate in this study as outlined above and**

**I agree / do not agree (*delete one*) to the interview being taped.**

**Signed:**.....

**Name:**.....

**Date:**.....

## **Appendix K: Editing and Notation in Key Informants' Transcripts**

I found Smyth and Hattam's research presentation captivating because of the way the students' stories were used to engage the reader in the wider issues of concern. I too sought to "minimize the overt interference of the researcher in the story as presented" (2004, p. 30). I employed a commonly used counselling technique to reflect back to the student (or other informant) what she had been talking about. There were references back to data provided previously, such as the Telephone Interview, and to earlier statements in the Face-to-face Interview situation. I have removed the questions asked, these "mirroring" statements and the encouraging "umms" in the editing process, so that wherever possible it is the students' words which are the prime focus. I also removed "uhms" and repetition in the speech and incomplete sentences, unless these add intended emphases. Text was moved round to put together information on the same themes, where these came up several times in the conversation. Where quoted directly, the key informants' voices can be recognised by the use of italics, either in quotation marks or blocks of texts.

The following transcript notation is used:

- ? interrogative or upward intonation.
- ... if unfinished sentence and trailed off, in original.
- (Pause) longer self interruption or break in the flow of the sentence.
- *CAPITALS* are used where an informant very strongly emphasises this word.
- (...) indicates deleted material and where more than one sentence is deleted, (...). Deleted material is not always indicated, as in the Leaver's Portraits, and in the case of repletion, as explained in Chapter 3.
- [...] material indecipherable in original or is usually replaced by the insertion of appropriate words which conveyed the sense which the researcher recalled from the interview, as [*author's words*].

The following excerpt from student #220 provides an illustration of the editing process.

### **Original transcript:**

Student # 220: I got sick and tired of working at Supermarkets and fast food restaurants and then being called a 'loser' by people.

Researcher Umm

Student #220 And people can be nasty

- Researcher Umm. You mean like your friends or
- Student #220 No, my friends never, no, my friends have always been supportive, just, just people's general reaction
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 A young person working full-time – in a fast food restaurant, people come in and look at you like, what are you doing here,
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 why aren't you at school?
- Researcher Is that what they actually said to you?
- Student #220 Oh, yeah. I had a couple of people saying that to me. "Why aren't you at school?" (pause) Umm. I wasn't going to tell them, why I left. I just
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 (quietly) Ignored them. I wasn't going to [...] that person. Yeah.
- Researcher Umm, but you obviously, you know, took that to heart
- Student #220 Yes, I did, I, I, I've got a lot of pride.
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 [...] of pride. I
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 I was very proud of myself, and I wanted my mum to be proud of me. I mean, my mum was always proud of me whatever decisions I made. 'Cuz, I don't know, she's. That's just the way she is. But she wasn't. She thought it was really stupid that I left school
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 Yeah.
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 I didn't see it as being particularly stupid at the time but, as time got on, I thought, I'm not going to get anywhere
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 I'm not going to get anywhere unless I settle [down]
- Researcher Umm. And then, you went back to school
- Student #220 I went back to school last year. And that was very embarrassing but I swallowed my pride and I did it and got laughed at. Oh, "Why are you back at school. Didn't you do it – couldn't you do it the first time" because I was 20 years old and all the other girls were 17
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 In the seventh form, turning 18,
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 I got a lot of hassles but I just
- Researcher From the girls?
- Student #220 From the girls at school. Yes. I mean, I mean, they were segregated groups and I was left out on my own but I didn't know them – the girls my name, because my friends were out working
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 In good jobs because they stayed at school (laughingly)
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 And they got Bursary
- Researcher Umm
- Student #220 Umm, yeah. So I just, went back
- Researcher And. But, you commented to me on the phone that you felt there was a lot of respect from the teachers because you had gone back.

Student #220 I did, I definitely, I definitely did. Because there was one teacher (named)

Researcher Umm

Student #220 And, umm. I definitely, I got a lot of praise from teachers, and that made me want to carry on.

Researcher Umm

Student #220 I mean, I didn't really. I thought, well, that was what I was like when I was 17 [you're not] right in the head. I was, very foolish, very stupid as you are when you're young but, didn't listen.. I thought, those girls are hassling me, I'll really just going to ignore it because the teachers know best and,

Researcher Umm

Student #220 Yeah. I was particularly, particularly happy about my, about my mum, because she's been, she's incredibly, incredibly... I made me [her] cry when I was [back] at school.

Researcher Umm

Student #220 And she's. Yea.

Researcher So that gave you the incent[ive]

Student #220 Yea. Gave me the incentive to carry on.

Researcher Incentive to carry on.

**In the final presentation this narrative segment becomes:**

*I got sick and tired of working at supermarkets and fast food restaurants and then being called a "loser" by people. And people can be nasty. My friends have always been supportive, just people's general reaction. A young person working full-time in a fast food restaurant, people come in and look at you like, "What are you doing here," Oh, yea. I had a couple of people saying that to me. "Why aren't you at school?" I wasn't going to tell them, why I left. I just quietly ignored them. Yea. I was very proud of myself, and I wanted my Mum to be proud of me. I mean, my Mum was always proud of me whatever decisions I made. 'Cuz, I don't know, that's just the way she is. But she thought it was really stupid that I left school. I didn't see it as being particularly stupid at the time but, as time got on, I thought, I'm not going to get anywhere unless I settle down. I went back to school last year. And that was very embarrassing but I swallowed my pride and I did it and got laughed at. Oh, "Why are you back at school. Couldn't you do it the first time" because I was 20 years old and all the other girls were 17, in the 7th Form, turning 18, I got a lot of hassles but I just [carried on].*

## ***Appendix L: Strategies to Reduce Drop Out and Increase Student Retention***

Finding the time and energy to deal with the many students under their care was difficult for deans because most carried out a heavy teaching load in addition to providing pastoral care and academic guidance for students. Thus one of the major strategies suggested was to use a survey, like the Intentions Survey, to identify the “wavering persisters” for further attention.

- Target<sup>163</sup> undecided students (those with no career goals and plans), and the “wavering persisters” (those who have been thinking about dropping out) for early interventions, including career development activities.
- This would allow deans to prioritise their time, at least at the beginning of the year, towards those students who did not have future plans and who were not engaging in wider school activities, such as sport, which are typical signs of lack of engagement with school and possibly indicators of students at-risk of leaving school early. With early intervention these students may be persuaded to stay on at school a little longer, at least until they have been assisted in formulating a plan for the transition to work or tertiary study.
- Schedule a range of sporting, cultural and social events (e.g. the school ball), to engage a wider cross section of students positively in school life, and particularly, to make contacts with teachers in out of class situations.
- As part of the mainstream curriculum, ensure all students are aware of the changes to the labour market and of employment law, contracts and the implications for them

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<sup>163</sup> There has been interest shown from a number of quarters in identifying these groups using a survey tool, like the Intentions Survey, in combination with other indicators of engagement and progress (Coutts, 2004a, 2004c, 2004d, 2004e). However, in targeting these at-risk students for support, careers development and early interventions, the caution that teacher judgments were one of two main factors contributing to variability in student performance (Wylie, Hodgen, & Ferral, 2006, p. 82) needs to be borne in mind. Aiming to target students for early intervention, whilst not prejudging students’ likely progress, is the challenge here for teachers.

of a more casualised labour force. Alternatives within and to employment need to be explored before leaving school.

- Use technology (mobile phones and computers) with which young people already engage, as adjuncts to classroom situations, to create a deeper level of student engagement in learning, allowing for greater individualism in what is learned, how it is learned, and in the pace of learning.
- Involve parents in activities associated with career planning (subject selection evenings, employment updates, tertiary provider visits, and role model talks) and (especially in low decile schools) ensuring they are aware of the financial support available and any conditions to be met, for students wishing to stay on at school.
- Provide students with early feedback on their academic progress and support those struggling with the level of the work or with other problems affecting their engagement with school.
- Set up after-school homework centres to engage the community in providing support to students in families where parents are working or lack the facilities, such as a quiet study space, books or computers, necessary for effective study.
- Adopt personalised and proactive attendance follow-up and specific achievement initiatives targeting Maori and Pacific Islanders and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to provide opportunities for other students to contact other adults and to foster better home-school liaison.
- Establish peer counselling, peer tutoring and peer mediation, to build on students' existing friendship groups, and ease the tensions of day-to-day living within a diverse student community.
- Encourage a sense of school community through the formation of student councils, and other student decision-making forums, which engender a sense of belonging and provide leadership opportunities.

- Make it easy for students who have dropped out of school to return, should they wish to, especially young mothers.
- Consider what the students found appealing about polytechnics and ascertain whether a similar environment might be able to be implemented in the senior school.
- Use STAR in conjunction with Gateway funding to allow all (not just “transition”) students to experience the reality of work and to taste particular career options before becoming committed to costly training.
- Provide professional development to ensure that teachers have the repertoire of teaching and interpersonal skills needed to be effective in responding to the learning needs of a diverse senior school. Teachers need to be made aware of resilience theory in order to recognise the very important role they have in the lives of many, many young people.

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