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# Exploring the Transition of First-Generation Mexican American Students from Grade 8 to High School

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# Walden University

College of Education

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Mary C. Curry

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2016

Abstract

Exploring the Transition of First-Generation Mexican American Students

from Grade 8 to High School

by

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MA, Seattle Pacific University, 2002

BS, Central Washington University, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Walden University

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## Abstract

The dropout rate for first-generation Mexican American students in American schools has increased in the past decade. The purpose of this study, as reflected in the central research question, was to explore the factors that influenced the decision of first-generation Mexican American students to transition to high school or drop out after Grade 8. The research design was a phenomenological case study. The conceptual framework was based on current research surrounding first-generation Mexican American student dropout questions. In addition, how the concepts of family and community involvement and relationships between the home and school have an impact on the first generation Mexican American dropout rate. Participants were 10 first-generation Mexican Americans between the ages of 18-24, who either dropped out of school at the end of Grade 8 or completed high school. Data was collected from multiple interviews with participants. Data analysis involved coding, categorization, and analysis of themes and discrepant data. Factors that influenced students' decisions to stay in school or drop out included lack of support at home, lack of support at school, and financial needs. This study contributes to positive social change because educators may develop a deeper understanding about how to prevent first-generation Mexican American students from dropping out of school. In helping these students to graduate from high school, educators will assist these students in developing educational and employment goals that will confidently lead them to lives that are more productive.

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## Dedication

To my Nana, who always believed I could do anything. To my mother and father who instilled in me a great desire to learn all that I can learn and to use that learning for the good of others. I would also like to dedicate my work to my students past, present and future. You are the reason I strive for excellence. In addition, I wish to dedicate this to Mrs. Brown, my Grade 2 teacher, and Mr. Hundis, my Grade 7 and Grade 9 history teacher, who instilled in me a love of learning and teaching. They went beyond what was necessary as teachers, and I am the result.

## Acknowledgments

This journey began because I was seeing my students not succeeding in high school, and all I could think of was that they would have to work harder for a living if they did not succeed in school. I then spoke with someone in the district where I was working and learned that Mexican-Americans had the fastest growing dropout rate in the nation. The problem kept haunting me; something had to be done to identify the causes and what changes could be possible. Exploring that question led me to strive for this degree. I want to use what I have discovered to change the lives of my students and all students in our nation. I need to acknowledge all my students past, present and future who inspired me on this journey.

I would also like to thank my committee, including Dr. Johnson who stuck with me through this whole process, Dr. Crawford who helped me through the difficult times, Dr. Dawidowicz who made this dissertation possible, and Dr. Boddie who ensured me I would succeed.

I would also like to thank my children, Michael and Megan, and my family. I could not have completed this journey without their support. I would also like to thank my husband Jerome for his complete understanding and willingness to help me in all things. Finally, I want to thank Angela. We met at my first residency, and we formed a bond no one will tear down. Without her support and encouragement, I would never have made it to completion. I would also like to honor the memory of our former classmate Anthony. This dissertation is for you, too.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction to Study.....	1
Background.....	1
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	7
Research Question.....	7
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Nature of the Study.....	12
Definition of Terms.....	13
Assumptions.....	14
Scope, Delimitations, and Limitations.....	15
Significance of the Study.....	16
Summary.....	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	18
Literature Search Strategies.....	18
Conceptual Framework.....	19
Historical Background.....	20
Literature Review.....	23
School Environment.....	24
Perceived Barriers to Completing School.....	30

Programs that Reduce Student Dropouts .....	44
Summary and Conclusions .....	48
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	50
Research Design and Rationale .....	51
Role of Researcher .....	53
Participant Selection Logic .....	53
Instrumentation .....	54
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	55
Data Analysis Plan.....	56
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	57
Ethical Procedures .....	58
Summary.....	59
Chapter 4: Results.....	59
Setting .....	60
Participant Demographics.....	61
Data Collection Procedures.....	63
Data Analysis Procedures .....	64
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	66
Results.....	68
Participants Who Dropped Out of School .....	68
Participants Who Graduated from High School .....	74
Factors that influenced Decision to Stay in School or Drop Out.....	81

Summary .....	85
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, Reccommendations.....	85
Interpretation of Findings .....	86
Support or Lack of Support from Home.....	87
Support or Lack of Support from School.....	88
Financial Support or Lack of Support.....	90
Conceptual Framework.....	91
Limitations of the Study.....	93
Recommendations for Future Research.....	94
Implications for Social Change.....	95
Conclusion .....	95
References.....	97
Appendix A: Interview Questions.....	112

List of Tables

Table 1 Student Demographics Public High School.....60

Table 2 Student Demographics Charter High School .....61

Table 3 Description of Participants who Dropped Out.....62

Table 4 Description of Graduates who Participated.....62

Table 5 Times and Place Where Interviews Occurred -Dropouts.....63

Table 6 Times and Place Where Interviews Occurred -Graduates.....64

Table 7 Ranking of Reasons for Dropping Out of School.....70

Table 8 Ranking of Graduates’ Reasons for Staying in School.....78

List of Figures

Figure 1 Reasons for Dropping out of School .....69

Figure 2 Led to Thoughts of Dropping out of School .....75

Figure 3 Reasons for Staying in School .....78

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Middle school students who successfully completed Grade 8 can anticipate attending high school. For some of these Grade 8 Mexican American students, finishing one year of high school will be the highest educational achievement they attain (Maxwell, 2012). When dropout statistics are disaggregated, the data indicate that the majority of students dropping out of American schools are first-generation Mexican American students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). The experiences and consequences of the choice to leave school are different for each student (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Mexican American students who do not complete high school face a life of uncertainty that may include early pregnancy, unemployment, jail time, poor health care, and poverty (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Belfanz, 2009). Therefore this study explored the factors that compel Mexican American students to drop out of school or complete high school.

### **Background**

According to the United States Census Bureau (2012), in 2009, more than 32 million children of all ethnic backgrounds enrolled in elementary schools in the United States. Caucasian students numbered just over 24 million, African American students numbered just over 1 million, and Asian American students numbered just over 1 million (United States Census Bureau, 2012). All other non-Hispanic students numbered just over 18 million (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Over 7 million Hispanic students enrolled in elementary schools in 2009 (United States Census Bureau, 2012). An examination of the statistics for the three major ethnic groups in America, which include Caucasians, African Americans, and Hispanics, demonstrates this study's relevance in terms of identifying the reasons why Mexican American students drop out of school at the end of Grade 8.

The United States Census Bureau (2012) indicated that the dropout rate has an impact on all races. Approximately 7% of Caucasian students dropped out of school in 2009 (United States Census Bureau, 2012). These statistics included students at all age levels. For Caucasian students, the dropout rate decreased by 2.2% from 2000 to 2009 (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Data from 1980 to the present day indicated that the Caucasian student dropout rate decreased each year. The African American student dropout rate, which was 8.2% in 2009 decreased to 2.7% since 2000 (United States Census Bureau, 2012). The African American student dropout rate has been decreasing since 1980 as well (United States Census Bureau, 2012). For the Hispanic student population, the dropout rate for 2009 was 14.7%, which was higher than the dropout rate for Caucasian and African American students (United States Census Bureau, 2012).

Mexicans currently are the largest group of immigrants coming to the United States from other Hispanic nations (United States Census Bureau, 2011a). The Hispanic population in the United States consists of 61.2% of Mexican descent (United States Census Bureau, 2011a). Of the more than 73 million children under age 18 living in the United States today, over 10 million have Mexican origins, which is the largest group of minority children in the United States (NCES, 2010). This group of immigrants has come under scrutiny due to the large number of Mexican American students who drop out of school. According to the United States Census Bureau (2011a), Mexican Americans represent the largest group of Hispanic students who drop out of high school. Of the total number of students identified as Hispanic, which includes any person of Latin American descent living in the United States (e.g., Puerto Rican, Cuban,

Mexican), 44.2% were of Mexican descent. Of those students identified as Mexican American, 55.8% were likely to drop out of high school (NCES, 2010).

A critical step in analyzing the data within the Mexican American population is to identify the sub-group that has the highest dropout rate in these demographics. Some data suggest that first-generation Mexican American students contribute in large part to the reported high dropout rate for Mexican Americans as a whole. In comparing the statistics of first-generation students to the statistics of second-generation Mexican American students, the NCES reported that first-generation Mexican American students are more likely to drop out than second-generation Mexican American students (as cited in Chapman, Laird, Kewal, & Ramani, 2010).

For second-generation Mexican Americans born in the United States, the likelihood of graduating from high school is almost as high as for non-Mexican American white students (Chavez, 2001). This statistic suggests that Mexican American students could graduate successfully from high school. However, the United States Census Bureau (2012) also noted that first-generation Mexican American students often choose not to attend high school. Of all first-generation-Hispanic students in the United States, 8.4% did not complete high school (NCES, 2010). However, of the total number of Hispanic students attending school in the United States who are second generation and beyond, the dropout rate is 7.1%. Therefore, this study focuses on first-generation Mexican American students to determine the factors that influenced this group of students to drop out of school or to stay in school.

These statistics also do not take into account the number of students who never make the transition from middle school to high school. These students may also contribute to the high

dropout rate. A comparison of the 2011 enrollment rates of students ages 10 through 15 revealed a significant difference (United States Census Bureau, 2011a). In 2011, students ages 10-13 had an enrollment rate of 97%. However, the enrollment rate of students ages 14 through 15 was 81.7%, indicating a clear difference in the number of students who are still enrolled after middle school (United States Census Bureau, 2011a). These numbers only consider students enrolled in school and do not take into account race or how long they have resided in America (United States Census Bureau, 2011a). Therefore, this study focuses on students who successfully complete Grade 8 but then choose not to attend high school. Because evidence exists that a large number of Mexican American students drop out of middle school, this study, which focuses on identifying reasons why these students drop out of school, may provide an opportunity to publish the voices of these students. The focus on this group of students may also facilitate the creation of programs to help them make a successful transition from middle school to high school.

In the United States, the expectation is that all students will complete their K-12 education and graduate, but for many students, this expectation is unrealized (Spelling, 2009). Without a high school diploma, students face an uncertain future, which could include prison time, adversely affecting a student's opportunity to earn a diploma. The majority of individuals in prison do not have a high school diploma (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004). Large numbers of students who do not graduate from, or even attend high school, cost the public billions of dollars through increased numbers on welfare, who are unemployed, and who are often involved in criminal activities (Lehr et al., 2004). Students who do not complete high school earn less than students who complete high school (Lehr et al., 2004). Students who make

a successful transition from middle school to high school are also better prepared for the challenges facing them in high school and in life (Langenkamp, 2009). If first-generation Mexican American students do not complete high school, they could end up in jail and become part of the public cost of social welfare.

This case study focused on first-generation Mexican Americans because of the large number of students represented in K-12 public schools and the lack of research about the dropout rate that has been conducted with this demographic. This case study explores whether or not Mexican American students drop out of school before they enroll in high school. Focusing on this problem may identify new information about the obstacles that keep first-generation Mexican American students from making a successful transition to high school.

### **Problem Statement**

Since 2000, the dropout rate of African American and Caucasian students has decreased; however, this fact is not true for all student populations (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The problem is that the dropout rate for first-generation Mexican American students continues to rise. Additionally, a lack of attention has been given to the transition from middle school to high school. The large number of first-generation Mexican American students who drop out of school at the end of middle school creates an ever-widening learning gap. Students who drop out of school cost United States taxpayers money in terms of health care, incarceration, welfare, and other social service programs (Belfield & Levin, 2007); therefore, solutions to this problem could be useful to American society.

Researchers, however, have not focused on the transition between middle school and high school and the impact this transition might have on first-generation Mexican American students.

Current research suggests that this time when students decide to stay in school or drop out is critical (Kieffer, Marinell, & Stephenson, 2011). This transition is a pivotal moment when students make the active choice to transition to high school. Grade 9 retention and failure rates are higher than for any other grades, which has resulted in a higher dropout rate at this grade level (Kieffer, Marinell, & Stephenson, 2011). In an analysis of three nationally representative longitudinal data sets, Kieffer et al. found that successful Grade 8 students who come from low-income backgrounds are twice as likely as their peers to fail to graduate on time or at all.

Although some research has been conducted on this transition, the research is not focused on first-generation Mexican American students. Studies, instead, are focused on low income students, urban students, students with learning disabilities and students with mental health issues. Several studies have focused on different aspects of the dropout rate in the United States (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Altshul, 2011; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Burke Morison, 2006; Bridgeland, DiIulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008; Kieffer, 2011; Langenkamp, 2009; Lundetrae, 2011). One study focused on low income students, while another study focused on urban students. Other studies concentrated on students with special education needs. A plethora of research has also been conducted on the transition from high school to college for all groups of students. For example, Rodriguez and Cruz (2009) examined the transition from high school to college made by undocumented immigrants. Research has also been conducted on the transition from middle school to high school for Latinos as a whole group. Langenkamp (2009) examined the transition from middle school to high school by different minority groups. However, when the Latino group is disseggregated, many different sub-groups emerge that are very different from each other (Gonzalez, 2009).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influence the decisions of first-generation Mexican American student to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8. The findings of this case study may be potentially useful to Mexican American students and their families, K-12 educator, and government officials. This case study may also contribute to understanding why these students decide to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8. By identifying the factors that influence their decision making process, all stakeholders may be able to increase the number of these students who graduate from high school.

### **Research Question**

The following research question that guided this case study is based on the literature review and the conceptual framework for this study.

What factors influence the decisions of first-generation Mexican American middle school students to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8?

### **Conceptual Framework**

A number of researchers have explored factors that influence students to drop out of school (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Altshul, 2011; Arizona Latino Research Enterprise, 2012; Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Burke Morison, 2006 ; Bridgeland, DiIulio, Streeter, & Mason, 2008; Kieffer, 2011; Langenkamp 2009; Lundetrae, 2011; Pytel, 2008;). In analyzing this research, I came to a realization that previous researchers had overlooked a sub-group, which is the first-generation Mexican American middle school students who successfully completed Grade 8. Therefore, I am justified in selecting this group of participants for this study.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on current research about the decisions that Grade 8 students, regardless of ethnicity, make about dropping out or staying in school. In a discussion about predicting those middle school students that will drop out of school, Pytel (2008) contended that the age and developmental level of students can affect why they drop out of school. Pytel posited that Grade 8 students are not prepared for high school and that educators should look for early warning signs that identify those students who will drop out of school, including such factors as grades, behavior, attendance, race, test scores, and socioeconomic status. Pytel's research offers insight into why some middle school students, which is the focus of this study. Alivernini and Lucidi (2011) also analyzed why middle school students drop out of school and if motivation plays a role in the decision to leave school early. Alivernini and Lucidi also investigated if socioeconomic levels and academic performance plays a substantial role in the decision to drop out of school. The results from Alivernini and Lucidi's study suggests a correlation between motivation to attend school and poor attendance or low socioeconomic levels. However, neither Pytel or Alivernini and Lucidi focused on the Mexican American student population, even though they focused on identifying factors at the middle school level. This research relates to the this study by providing an understanding of the mindset of Grade 8 students in relation to dropping out or staying in school.

Certain expectations in middle school impact a student's successful transition to high school. Attendance and achievement both play a role in the successful transition from middle school to high school. In a study about preparing middle school students for high school graduation, Kieffer (2011) suggested that if students struggle with achievement and attendance during middle school, they will also struggle towards graduation. If students are not successful

with expectations like attendance and achievement, they also might be confused by what is expected of them in high school. The Arizona Latino Research Enterprise (ALRE, 2012) posited that Mexican American students may have confused expectations about attending school and suggested that many Mexican American students consider Grade 8 promotion as school completion. Students who do not consider high school completion as necessary for their future success in life often prematurely exit the public school system.

Transitions between grade levels are also places where students often drop out of school. The most notable transition is the one between Grade 8 and Grade 9, or the transition to high school (ALRE, 2012). Lagenkamp investigated (2009) the transition from middle school to high school and found that students who make a successful transition are better prepared for the challenges facing them throughout their high school years. Langenkamp also found that students with known pathways to high school were more likely to transition successfully than students who do not know what high school they would attend. Students in rural settings have less choice in the high school they attend and therefore know where they will go. Students in urban settings often have many different high schools to choose from and can become confused about where they will attend. This confusion often leads to an unsuccessful transition to high school. The ALRE noted that “over the past nine years, nearly 10% of students who completed eighth grade dropped out either before entering or during the ninth grade” (p. 2). This research can help middle school and high school educators create a system so that students can make a successful transition to high school. This study, therefore, is focused on the transition that first-generation Mexican American students make from middle school to high school and the factors that influence their decision to stay in school or drop out of school.

The conceptual framework for this study is also based on research about the reasons why ethnically and racially diverse students drop out of school or stay in school. In two different studies, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Burke Morison (2006) and Bridgeland, DiIulio, Streeter, and Mason (2008) focused on the parents of ethnically and racially diverse students who had dropped out of school as well as the students themselves. These students ranged in age from 16 to 24 and came from rural and urban areas. Bridgeland et al. noted that students gave five reasons for dropping out of school: (a) classes were not interesting, (b) students missed too many days and could not catch up, (c) students spent time with people who were not interested in school, (d) students had too much freedom and not enough rules to follow, and (e) students were failing in school. In a study about parental perspectives of American high schools, Bridgeland et al. included 1,008 parents of ethnically diverse backgrounds, with children who were current or recent high school students. These parents resided in suburbs, small towns, rural areas, and cities. The races represented were African American, Mexican American, and Anglo American. The results of this study showed that parents are very concerned about why students drop out of school. Students with involved parents, regardless of their family income or background, are more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, enroll in advanced classes, attend school and pass their classes, develop better social skills, graduate from high school, attend college, and find productive work. Bridgeland et al. also found that parents and students often have many of the same concerns about the dropout rate. Bridgeland et al. concluded that communication was a key issue for parents who believed that educators did not listen to them or their needs and that earlier notification of problems with their children was important.

The problem of students dropping out of school also applies to other countries such as Norway. Lundetrae (2011) conducted a comparative study of Norway and the United States in relation to the dropout rate and parental involvement. Lundetrae found that students whose parents expected them to graduate did. Students without high parent expectations often would drop out of school. In an examination of parental involvement and academic achievement of Mexican American youth, Altshul (2011) discovered that although involved parents at home have an impact on the achievement these students, little data was found to suggest that involved parents at school have any bearing on whether or not students stay in school or drop out. Altshul suggested that studies need to focus on Mexican American students who are newly arrived as well as those students whose families have been living in the United States for generations. Therefore, this study focuses on Mexican students whose families have been living in the United States and are established and are not first generation Mexican American students. First-generation Mexican American students fill the void that exists in this area. The students in both the Lundetrae (2011) and Bridgeland et al. (2008) study are older than the participants in this study, but their reasons for dropping out of school are similar.

Thus, the conceptual framework for this phenomenological case study is based on research that indicates students drop out of school before they reach high school. The reasons for dropping out of school include lack of parental support, not understanding the American educational system, having to work, not being prepared for high school, and not being held to the same high expectations as other students in the school (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridgeland et al., 2008; Bridgeland et al. 2009).

### **Nature of the Study**

This qualitative research study used a phenomenological case study design. Case studies contribute to the knowledge of how organizational, social, and political phenomena affect individuals or groups (Yin, 2014). Case studies are also used in all aspects of research, including psychology, social work, business, and education (Yin, 2014). The unique feature of case study design is that it provides researchers with a deeper understanding of multifaceted phenomena. Researchers select a case study design when they need to ascribe meaning to real-life events (Yin, 2014). Understanding real-life phenomenon in depth, and in the context where it occurs, is what distinguishes a case study from other research methods (Yin, 2014). The goal of this study was to describe the factors that influence the decisions of first generation Mexican American students to drop out of school or to stay in school. This case study included first-generation Mexican American middle school students from a large southwestern city as participants in order to gain a deeper understanding of the decisions they made to stay in school or to leave school before they graduated.

In relation to the methodology of this case study, I used purposive sampling to select first-generation Mexican American students who have made the decision to drop out of school or to attend high school. These participants consisted of 10 adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who resided in a large urban area in the southwestern region of the United States. I used a gatekeeper to help me recruit the participants for this study. The gatekeeper was someone who had access to these participants and was trusted by them because participants may have been hesitant to talk to an outsider. The gatekeeper contacted these adults to ask them to participate in this study. I have worked with the Mexican American population for 18 years, including 8 years

working with first-generation Mexican American middle school students. I used a gatekeeper to ensure that I did not personally know the participants for this study in order to reduce potential bias. The interviews that I conducted with participants were the major data source for this study. Another source of data were phone calls to participants if more information or clarification was needed following the interviews. Data analysis involved coding, category construction, and the description of emergent themes and discrepant data to determine the key findings or results for this study.

### **Definition of Terms**

The defined terms for this study are as follows:

*At-risk:* Students who are not experiencing success in school and are potential dropouts; these students are usually low academic achievers and may or may not be minorities. At-risk students are usually from low socioeconomic status families. At-risk students probably will fail academically and/or drop out of school (U.S. Legal, 2012).

*Dropout:* A student who leaves school not to return to a regular school program in his or her lifetime. These students include those who drop out of mainstream high schools to attend programs at community colleges where they earn a General Education Diploma (GED; Lehr et al., 2004).

*Mexican American:* Refers to persons who were born in Mexico and now hold United States citizenship or whose parents or more remote ancestors immigrated to the United States from Mexico. This term also refers to persons who trace their lineage to Hispanic or Indo-Hispanic forebears who resided within Spanish or Mexican territory that is now part of the southwestern United States (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1971, p. 7).

*Latino(s)/Hispanic:* These terms are used interchangeably in this dissertation. The term Hispanic is a more formal term used by the government to label people from Spanish-speaking countries. Latino is a more informal term used by the Spanish-speaking community and means virtually the same thing (Vázquez, 2004).

*First-generation:* Mexican American children born in Mexico but living in the United States (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1971).

*Second-generation:* Mexican American children born in the United States with one or more parents born in Mexico (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1971).

*Third-generation:* Mexican American children born in the United States to parents born in the United States with one or more grandparents born in Mexico (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1971).

### **Assumptions**

This study was based on the following three assumptions: (a) participants are truthful in their interview responses, (b) participants comprehend English enough to participate in the interviews, based on brief discussions on the phone when setting up the interview as well as during the actual interview, and (c) participants represent the population under investigation. These assumptions were necessary for this study to be valid. I do not speak fluent Spanish, and if a participant could not speak English, I would not be able to understand their responses. Participants also need to be first-generation Mexican American students in order to accurately represent the findings of this study.

### **Scope, Delimitations, and Limitations**

The scope of this study was the decision-making process that Mexican American students used to decide whether or not to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8. The participants for this study were identified as first-generation Mexican American students who were 18 years or older and who had completed middle school but did or did not transition to high school.

This study was further narrowed by several factors. This study did not address whether or not a student was documented or undocumented, only that the student was a first-generation Mexican American who had successfully completed middle school and decided to either stay in school and attend high school or who had dropped out before Grade 9. I did not seek reasons why students in Grades 10 and 12 dropped out of school. Therefore, the intent of this study was to describe the factors that influenced the decisions of these first-generation Mexican American students to either drop out of school or to stay in school. The results of this study on this specific population may lead to future research on this topic.

This study demonstrated several limitations. One limitation was the the location where the participants resided. This study focused on first-generation Mexican American students who resided in a large southwestern city in the United States. Students from this area may have had different points of view from students who live in other regions of the United States in terms of the factors that influenced their decisions about dropping out of school or staying in school. Another limitation concerned how open the participants were to being interviewed by someone they did not know, which could have limited their responses to the interview questions. Another limitation was a language barrier because English was a second language for some of these

participants. Efforts to minimize the impact of these limitations on the findings of this study are discussed in the section about issues of the trustworthiness of qualitative research.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of a study is related to advancing knowledge and contributing to social change. In relation to advancing knowledge, hearing the voices of these students and analyzing their perspectives about why they decide to either drop out of school or stay in school may lead to a deeper understanding of their decision making processes. The new knowledge gleaned from this research could lead to more research on this topic and eventually to other avenues that could help first-generation Mexican American students successfully complete high school and college. In terms of contributing to positive social change, understanding why first-generation Mexican American students make a successful transition to high school could reduce the population of Mexican Americans in United States prisons, raise graduation rates, lower the drain on public assistance, and ensure better quality of life for these graduating students.

This case study was needed because of the lack of research about the decision making process that middle school students go through to determine whether or not to go on to high school. The transition from middle school to high school is crucial because many students drop out at the end of middle school and are unaccounted for by either the middle schools or the high schools (ALRE, 2012). By focusing on this population of first-generation Mexican American students, insight may be gained into why students at the middle school level leave school. A clearer understanding of contributing factors can potentially lead to different programs, support systems, or strategies that could influence this population not to drop out of school, but instead to complete high school and attend college.

## **Summary**

This chapter was an introduction to the study. In this chapter, I presented background information, which included a brief summary of research related to the scope of this study, and a description of the gap in knowledge that emerged. In addition, I presented the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research question, and the conceptual framework. I also described the nature of the study, assumptions and limitations, and the significance of this study.

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature. In this chapter, I describe the literature search that I used to conduct this study and the conceptual framework. In addition, I review current research related to the Mexican American dropout rate, factors related to this dropout rate, and programs that address this dropout rate. I conclude this section with a summary and conclusions about the relevance of this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The U. S. Census Bureau (2011c) stated that the Mexican American population had increased by another ten million people since 2000. Large portions of this population are first-generation children under the age of 18, and this number is on the rise. Mexican Americans have a larger dropout rate than any other minority group in America today. These students are more likely to drop out of high school, and the majority will drop out before entering high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011a). Historically at-risk students have been more likely to drop out of school than peers not identified as “at risk” (Donnelly, 1987). The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influenced the decisions of first-generation Mexican American students to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8.

This chapter is a review of the research literature. Included in this review is a description of the literature search used to conduct this search and a detailed description of the conceptual framework. In addition, the historical background of the dropout rate in America since 1989 is included. A review of the current research addresses some major themes that involve the Mexican American dropout rate such as the school environment, perceived barriers to completing high school, and programs that reduce the number of student dropouts. This chapter concludes with a summary and conclusions about the relevance of this study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I conducted a thorough search of the following academic databases: Academic Search Complete, EBSCO, E-Library, Education Research Complete, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, and SAGE. I read each peer-reviewed journal article and checked for current research using key words and phrases, which led to additional articles. Some key words and phrases included

*dropouts, Mexican American dropout rate, programs for Mexican American dropouts, and first-generation Mexican Americans.* I also read books on topics dealing with research practices, minority education, at risk students, qualitative research, assessing English language learners, culturally diverse families, and the Mexican American dropout rate. I contacted researchers on this topic through emails to ask them questions and suggestions for finding more information on this topic.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This case study is based on numerous concepts that emerged from a review of the literature presented in the first two chapters. The first concept is the decision-making process that students experience in deciding to attend or not attend high school. Another concept is students' perceptions of the school environment, which includes the physical environment, school engagement, and gender differences. Another concepts for this framework included perceived barriers such as ethnicity and cultural perceptions, family and community involvement, first-generation and second-generation Mexican American students, the relationship of home and school, and the transition from middle school to high school for these students. Finally, another concepts about programs that address how to reduce the student dropout rate and keep students in school.

Of the different concepts that I analyzed for this literature review, I selected two concepts that I aligned with the interview questions. These concepts were family and community involvement and relationships between the home and school. A review of past and current literature about the first-generation Mexican American student dropout problem indicates that students who have strong relationships with school and home make better educational choices.

Students with support from the family, school, and community often make the choice to stay in school. I asked students if relationships with schools and support from family, school and community played a role in their decisions to stay in school or drop out of school. A review of current research played a significant role in this study by helping me narrow my focus and prepare the questions I needed to ask participants.

### **Historical Background**

In the book *Latino Education in the United States: A Narrated History from 1513-2000*, MacDonald (2004) noted that the recorded history of the Mexican American dropout rate begins as early as 1860 when the United States government passed laws prohibiting Mexicans as well as other minority groups from receiving a free and fair public education. After the United States government took possession of land that once belonged to Mexico, people who lived on these lands now found the need to become United States citizens. These immigrants had one year to complete and submit the paperwork, making it possible for them to become citizens (MacDonald, 2004). However, the information announcing this fact remained in obscure newspapers where most people would miss this important news. Once the year was over, all people from Mexico who had been living in the United States or those people coming from Mexico had to follow rigorous guidelines to become “legal” residents (MacDonald, 2004). Due to how this information was publicized, an uneasy relationship formed between the United States government and Mexicans who were seeking a better life in the United States.

Families from Mexico have been coming to America for over a century, looking for a better life not only for themselves, but also for their children. Often these families have little formal education, because the educational system in Mexico is quite different from the

educational system in the United States (Hanratty, 1996). In 1992, Mexico began requiring students to attend kindergarten through Grade 8 in order to receive a certificate of completion. Mexico's educational system consists of primary school (Grades K-5), secondary school (Grades 6-8), and post-secondary school (Grades 9-12). Fifty-four percent of students attend a six-year primary school (Grayson, 2008). If students live where a secondary school is available, students are required to attend school through Grade 8. When special education and preschool programs are available, students participate in these services as well. The primary school day (K-5) is 4 hours. Usually only one teacher is assigned to the school, and the method used for instruction is rote learning and creativity is discouraged (Grayson, 2008).

Another difference between the Mexican and American educational systems is that the Mexican government pays for schooling through Grade 8. Upon completion of secondary school, Mexican students may attend a 3-year college preparatory program at the expense of the parents. However, due to the cost of post-secondary schools, students often do not continue schooling after they complete Grade 8. A high school education often costs up to \$11,000, making it unaffordable for most of the middle class of Mexico (Grayson, 2008). About 10% of those students who finish elementary school never enter secondary school because families cannot afford to have children in school when those children could be earning a living (Grayson, 2008). Students who successfully complete high school are able to attend universities.

The quality of education in Mexico for all grades is poor, but at the middle school level, it is at a critical point. Enrollment would be higher but the schools lack room, skilled teachers, and instructional materials (Grayson, 2008). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD; 2012) found that students in Mexico scored at the bottom quartile in

reading and mathematics among the other 30 OECD member nations. The elementary day is only 4 hours long, which creates problems for some students to successfully complete school.

Mexico's dropout rate has continued to increase since the 1980s; many of these dropouts did not attend middle school. In 1995, only 5% of post-secondary students continued to college (Hanratty, 1996). In 1989, of the schools available to the general population of Mexico, 20% (about 15,000 schools) did not offer all six primary grades (Merrill & Miró, 1996). Moreover, the government during that time could only meet 10% of the special education demands (Merrill & Miró, 1996). Thirty percent of all secondary school students failed to graduate from a three-year program (Merrill & Miró, 1996). These deficits carry over to post-secondary education (Hanratty, 1996).

The Mexican educational structure is significant because often the expectations of first-generation students are that schools in the United States will function the same way as in Mexico. Families assume they will have to pay for high school, and the thought of this expense often causes students to drop out of school after Grade 8. In coming to America, these children face a new system of education; the parents must know enough English to understand communications sent from school to home. In this study, I wanted to ask questions about the possibility that first-generation students do not understand the American educational system and to determine if this lack of understanding contributes to the dropout rate.

Several other factors need to be considered. As these undereducated Mexican students grow up, marry, and arrive in the United States, quality jobs are often unattainable due to their low level of education. Another factor that has been in place for many years is that uneducated Mexican migrants end up with the lowest paying jobs in the United States. Mexican migrants

tend to have the wrong skills or be in the wrong place at the wrong time, which creates an excess of low-skilled workers (Grayson, 2008). Students from these low-income families often drop out of school due to lack of money for their families (Grayson, 2008). These students may also be at a disadvantage due to low income, poor health, cognitive problems, and/or behavior issues (Johnson & Perkins, 2009). Immigrants from Mexico often cite better education opportunities as one of the main reasons for immigrating to the United States (Diaz & Kuhner, 2007).

However, Mexican Americans have often found challenges related to American schools, such as impoverished schools; lower performance in mathematics, science, and reading; higher retention levels; discipline problems; and racism and acculturation issues (Villaba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007). Some of the predictors for why students dropout include perceived barriers between schools and Hispanic families; lack of school support; poor relationships between teachers and students; academic and behavior issues; the need to find work to support the family; and no support during the transition from junior high to high school. Determining these predictors of the dropout rate could help future research and program development in relation to these students.

### **Literature Review**

In this section, I analyze current literature related to the following three concepts: (a) environmental issues related to the physical environment of schools, school engagement, and gender differences, (b) perceived barriers to completing school, such as ethnic and cultural perceptions, family and community involvement, first-generation and second-generation Mexican American students, the relationship of home and school, and the transition from middle

school to high school, and (c) programs to reduce school dropouts, including fast track programs, tutoring and mentoring programs, and teacher education.

### **School Environment**

Current research suggests that the school environment plays an important role in whether or not students stay in school or drop out. The school environment includes the ability of educators to meet the needs of all students, the actual condition of the school buildings, and students' perceptions of the school environment, which includes how dangerous the school appears to be to students (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005, 2013). Support offered at school is required for student success because parents might not be aware of the challenges their children are faced with at school. Teacher support is essential to counterbalance pressures in the school environment. Woolley, Kol, and Bowen (2009) discovered that the support from teachers, parents, and friends leads indirectly to time spent on homework and improved grades. The more teachers support students, the higher the motivation to do well in school and to be satisfied with going to school (Wooley, et.al., 2009). Supporting Mexican American students with positive, healthy environments that include responsive adults such as teachers and parents may help them thrive in the school environment and improve their decision-making process to stay in school. (Garcia-Reid, Peterson, and Reid, 2013). The school environment consists of a number of different elements and factors, including the physical environment, school engagement, and gender differences.

**Physical school environment.** The physical school setting plays a role in how students feel about school. Neild, Stoner-Eby and Furstenberg (2008) found that larger numbers of students who drop out of school come from urban schools rather than non-urban schools. In fact,

the number of dropouts from large city high schools often exceeds 50%. Neild et al. concluded that the high dropout rates during the freshman year in high school was the result of a mismatch between students' academic and social skills and the organization, practices, and demands of the large high schools students attended.

In related research, Mayer (2008) examined the dropout rates of Mexican origin students in two California cities and found that urban schools with large populations of minority, lower income, and at-risk students tend to have higher rates of dropout students. Mayer's findings were consistent with Neild et al.'s findings. Urban settings often come with higher risk factors for student safety (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005).

Another important environmental issue is the safety of urban schools. Garcia-Reid et al. (2005) investigated school engagement among Latino youth in an urban middle school context and found that adolescents viewed their school environment as dangerous. According to the NECS(2008), a higher number of crimes are found in urban areas than in rural or suburban areas. Safety strategies should extend beyond the places in and around school but should also focus on behavior that can cause an unsafe feeling at school (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005).

Another environmental issue is that large schools in urban settings tend to have larger class sizes and more minority students. In a discussion of Hispanics and the future of the United States, DeSipio (2006) reported that urban schools with large class sizes usually have high at-risk populations, and schools with high minority populations are more likely to be underfunded and lack resources. The United States census (2010) reported that the top ten places in the country where the most Latinos live are all major cities. New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Chicago, Phoenix, Dallas, and San Diego were just a few of the cities mentioned. Each of these cities has

over a million Hispanic residents. DiSipio also noted that Hispanics comprise one-quarter of the student population in central-city schools. How safe Mexican American students feel at school could influence their decision to drop out of school or remain in school. In analyzing the school environment, many aspects must be examined, including demographics, setting, gender, race, social economic status, urban/rural settings, and student engagement. These aspects are all important facets of the school environment. Due to the emotional nature of school safety, educators need to address these safety issues by implementing interventions that help students feel safe and build greater opportunities for school engagement.

**School engagement.** Students who engage socially and academically in school often choose to stay in school. One aspect of student engagement is whether or not students feel attached to the school they attend. This attachment also includes how involved students are in the school activities and the curriculum. Scholars have suggested that student engagement is not consistent among different ethnic groups. Ream and Rumberger (2008) explored student engagement, social capital, and school dropout rates among Mexican American and non-Latino white students and found that Mexican American youth are less engaged in school activities than non-Latino youth. Controlling for socioeconomic status, grades, and other background factors and only viewing student engagement behaviors in Latino youth, they found significant predictors for the dropout rate. Students who are involved in school through activities feel engaged in the school they attend. Engaged students tend to choose to stay in school instead of dropping out.

Another issue that is important to consider about student engagement is in relation to academic learning. In a similar study on student engagement, Garcia-Reid et al. (2005; 2013)

examined parent and teacher support among Latino immigrant youth in relation to how school engagement among Latino youth affected school achievement. Garcia-Reid et al. found that Latino youth enter school at a disadvantage and are five times more likely to have lower language, cognitive, and early reading skills compared to non-Latino students. Students who struggle in school are typically not the students who are involved in school activities. One reason that Stearns, Moller, Blau and Potochnick (2007) suggested was that students who repeat a grade are more likely to drop out in high school. Students who have learning difficulties are also more likely to drop out (Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, Royer, & Joly, 2006). Thus, preparation to face the academic and social rigors of high school is often a predictor about student dropouts.

Many different predictors, however, play a role in the student dropout problem. Academic preparation, career development skills, parental assistance, and social/environmental barriers often predict how psychologically well-prepared high school inner-city adolescents are for high school. Academic performance particularly relates to the psychological preparation of inner-city adolescents as they transition from middle school to high school (Turner, 2007). In a study about promoting Latino student achievement and development through a counseling model, Villaba et al. (2007) suggested that Latino students' unique challenges play a significant role in their decision to stay in school or drop out of school. Often Mexican American students attend impoverished schools; have low test scores in mathematics, science and reading; and are retained more and disciplined more. Villaba et al. found that particular challenges are detrimental to their school success, including English language difficulties, acculturation, racism, and limited educational and economic capital. Villaba et al. found that school counselors, through specific curriculum, individual student planning, and responsive

interventions that include cultural awareness, could improve the school success of these students. Students who are struggling in school often believe that their academic learning is too challenging, and therefore, they demonstrate lower engagement with the school. These low achieving students are more likely to drop out of school.

Both internal and external pressures influence the decision of students to remain in school or drop out. Behnkel, Gonzalez and Cox (2010) conducted a study of Latino high school students in North Carolina and found four areas that need to be addressed to support student attainment within the Latino community, including difficulty with school work, personal problems, the need to support the family economically, and peer pressure. The one area that struck me as most important is that once they are employed, Latino youth often have ambivalent feelings about finishing school. However, without a high school diploma, these students often face a life of unrewarding work. In addition, those students who have a questionable legal status often become disengaged from school both socially and academically, feeling that high school will not help them in the future without legal status (Behnkel, Gonzalez and Cox, 2010).

In related research, Ream and Rumberger (2008) contended that dropping out is a long-term process of disengagement and withdrawal from school and that school-oriented friendship networks increase student engagement, which often leads to school completion for Mexican American and Non-Latino adolescents. These studies suggest that ethnicity plays a role in school engagement and whether or not students stay in school. Researchers have suggested that students must have a strong relationship to the school they attend and to the staff with which they interact. Student engagement is the ability of students to connect to the school they attend through friends, ethnic identity, staff relationships, and even the physical setting. If students do not perceive their

school as a safe place that welcomes and encourages them, they often become disengaged and choose to leave school.

**Gender differences.** Within the student population, natural differences occur that affect the student environment. These differences also play a role in whether or not students remain in school or drop out. In looking at the demographic differences between genders for students, Stearns and Glennie (2006) found that boys are more likely than girls to drop out of school in Grade 9 and that the dropout pattern varies for different ethnic groups. The school environment includes different predictors that affect a student's decision to drop out of school or remain in school.

Similarly, parental support plays a role in whether or not young women will stay in school or drop out. Students, particularly females, who perceive that their parents expect them to get good grades, study hard, and complete their homework reported higher achievement and aspirations. Aguilar (1996) focused on educational achievement in relation to young Mexican American women. According to Aguilar (1996), in the home and in school, Hispanic female students believe that expectations are different for males and females. Aguilar found an increase in the enrollment of female Hispanic students in the elementary grades, but these numbers decreased in the uppergrade levels. If students believe they are supported by their mother, they tend to stay in school. This finding is especially true for Mexican American females; if students receive academic support from their fathers, they also choose to stay in school. Similarly, Mayer (2008) found that society, the school, and the family influences the decision of Mexican female students to stay in school or to drop out of school. Those Mexican American female students who perceive support from the father also demonstrate higher achievement than females who

believe their fathers do not support them academically (Plunket, Henry, Houlberg, Sands, & Abarca-Mortensen, 2008). This finding is also evident in relation to mothers' academic support for academic motivation and achievement of their sons (Plunkett et al., 2008). The higher the parental involvement in school, the lower the dropout rate is for female students (Mayer, 2008). Differences in achievement were also found in expectations from families for first-generation and second-generation Mexican American students.

Family and societal expectations influence personal control, parental consultation, and academic progress, which has an effect on students' decisions to stay in school or drop out. Aguilar (1996) suggested that outside of the family, female students often feel the need to prove themselves to teachers and often hold themselves due to their gender. In addition, Crosnoe and Huston (2007) examined socioeconomic status, schooling, and developmental trajectories and found that too much or too little parental support adversely affects progress in school for students. In a longitudinal study about high school dropouts, Alivernini and Lucidi, (2011) discovered that parents who support their children emotionally and academically discover that their children are more intrinsically motivated to do well in school. Students who lack enough parental support tend to be apathetic towards the school environment. Thus, both family and society have a role in whether or not students achievesuccessful in school or if they fail. If a student experiences supportfrom the school, home, and community, they often stay in school and graduate.

### **Perceived Barriers to Completing School**

Perceptions from both students and the community need consideration during any investigation into the dropout rate. A perceived barrier is an issue that researchers have become

aware of and understand at a deeper level in relationship to what they are studying. Researchers have examined the dropout rate from all aspects, which includes how students perceive family support. Another perceived barrier is that culture or ethnicity influences a student's decision to drop out or stay in school.

**Ethnic and cultural perceptions.** Current studies suggest ethnic differences play a role in the dropout rate. Benner and Graham (2011) examined the transition to multi-ethnic urban high schools for Latino adolescents and found that the consequences of discrimination in the first two years of high school significantly increase the risk of dropping out of school later. Benner and Graham suggested that teachers need to be a buffer for students to build more understanding of the different cultures that are present at the school. Second-generation Latino students tend to acclimate far better than first-generation students. To ensure success for all students, Portes et al. (2009) recommended the creation and support of voluntary after-school programs, improved relationships between teachers, counselors and students, and the creation an incentive packages for school personnel who take a real interest in the future of minority students. In schools where multiculturalism is encouraged and staff create an accepting environment, Latino students are often more successful. Latino students who perceived an accepting community that valued diversity reported more positive outcomes. This finding was also true for teachers who valued diversity in their classrooms. Instead of perceiving immigrant students as a burden in the classroom, teachers used this diversity as an opportunity for enrichment with positive outcomes for all students (Spears, Brown, & Chu, 2012). Thus, educators need to create a more accepting environment for all Mexican American students, including those that may be undocumented. Often institutionalized forms of racism, or bias, carried out by staff, are a barrier to student

success. These practices often leave students feeling rejected and inferior. Due to these feelings, students are more likely to leave school rather than to tolerate discrimination (Castro-Salazar, Bagley, & Durham, 2010).

Researchers also recognize the role ethnicity plays in the dropout rate. Aloise-Young and Chavez (2002) explored ethnic differences between Hispanic and Non-Hispanic youth and discovered that Hispanic youth are less likely than non-Hispanic youth to report that they left school or give any reasons for leaving school. The perceived barrier is that because of the Hispanic ethnic group they belong to, students are more likely to drop out of school compared to students from other ethnic groups. This perceived barrier has led researchers to conclude that inconsistent dropout rates are found among different student populations.

Ethnicity is not the only perceived barrier that should be considered. Culture is an important predictor for academic success as well. Considering the many smaller micro-cultures, significant differences in these predictors about academic success have often been found. For example, the ethnic group of Hispanics is a macro-culture that includes anyone of Spanish, Portuguese, Latin American, Cuban, or Puerto Rican descent. Yet each of these sub-groups has very different and unique cultural patterns in relation to perceived barriers about education. The Mexican American culture may include barriers that might not affect a member from a different micro-culture.

Researchers have examined ethnicity in relationship to the dropout rate, but few have explored the dropout rate concerning different sub-groups of the same ethnic population. The dropout rates are not consistent between the different Latino subgroups. Not all Hispanics are the same, and in fact, they hail from 24 different countries and cultures. Chavez (2001) noted

that “Mexican Americans make up about two-thirds of the overall Hispanic population” (p. 22). In an examination of ethnic differences related to reasons for leaving school and substance abuse, Aloise-Young and Chavez (2002) found ethnic differences were often a barrier to school success, particularly in relation to family factors. Hispanic adolescents are more likely to report that they dropped out for family reasons. Students from Cuba and South America are closer to the national dropout averages. Students from Mexico, Central America, Puerto Rico, and Dominican Republic, however, have much higher dropout rates. Compared to other subgroups, Mexican American students have the highest likelihood of dropping out of high school (Hess, 2000). Investigating predictors specific to the Mexican American cultural group, therefore, may result in the identification of predictors or barriers to successful school completion.

Other perceived barriers addressed by current research includes students’ affinity with school staff and the perceptions students have about their ability to be successful in school. McWhirter, Torres, Salgado, and Valdez (2007) studied perceived barriers and plans for post-secondary education for Mexican American and white adolescents. They found that Mexican American students anticipated more internal and external barriers to completing post-secondary education plans and that these barriers would be more difficult to overcome compared to their white counterparts. Lutz (2007) also explored some of these potential barriers to high school completion for Latino students in the United States, including ethnicity, generation, language proficiencies, family structure, and socioeconomic status. Lutz found that socioeconomic status is the principal factor in whether or not a student finishes high school or drops out. Each of these barriers is also a predictor for whether or not students will drop out of school or stay in school. These barriers keep students from attaining an education.

**Family and community involvement.** The community or neighborhoods where students and their families reside should also be taken into account. Students who feel supported from their neighborhoods had a better chance of being successful in school. Roosa et al. (2009) examined support from Mexican American family and neighborhoods and found that if Mexican American students live in low income neighborhoods, more support is provided for them than those students living in higher income neighborhoods. Mothers are also more supported in the lower income neighborhoods, which helps students to become more successful in school. This finding suggests that language may be a barrier in higher income neighborhoods, or that families are more prepared to live in a low income neighborhood. Roosa et al. concluded that students who have support from the home, school, and community tend to be more successful than students without this support.

Current studies have focused on barriers involving family support and expectations. These predictors also involve cultural and generational differences. Cooper, Chavira, and Mena (2005) examined how families, schools, and communities support the education of their children. Although learning at home appears to have great influence on students' achievement in school, parents' aspirations and expectations for their children's education is a strong predictor of achievement. Cultural discontinuities surface when gaps exist between what families want and what educators want for children, often resulting in lower achievement for students. In related research, Carranza, You, Chhuon, and Hudley (2009) investigated the role that parental involvement, acculturation, and self-esteem play in the high school dropout rate for Latino students. According to Carranza et al., parental expectations influence academic performance

and educational aspirations. If parents are not involved in their children's education, they may not be aware of the challenges facing their children in school.

Yet many Latino immigrant youth live in communities where economic and social opportunities are limited, and they have no ability to control circumstances such as the receptivity and support provided to them at their schools (Noguera, 2004). Garcia-Reid, Peterson and Reid (2013) examined parent and teacher support for students and whether or not this support help children avoid trouble and focus on school. Garcia-Reid, Peterson & Reid concluded that parents may be alert to the problems encountered by their children at school, but they may not understand the type of supporttheir children need. Many students who are new to America face stress and pressure to conform with their peers, but with positive support from approachable adults such as parents and teachers, those students often do well in school and avoid trouble (Garcia-Reid, Peterson & Reid, 2013). These supportive relationships often increase students' abilities to successfully navigate the school environment. Without this support, Garcia-Reid et al., found higher levels of alienation and segregation in the school environments, and this lack of support had an unfavorable impact on successful school completion. Families that promote academic achievement and encourage educational aspirations will help students be more successful in school attainment. At the same time, the child is growing older and making more decisions based on outside relationships with peers and teachers.

Adolescence is a time of change, a time of transition when children become adults. During this time, young students are making choices that can affect their future. Investigating the barriers that influence students' academic achievement, Winston, LeCroy and Krysik (2008) found that academic achievement and other school-related factors are most strongly influenced

by peer and family relationships. Students who have strong support from the people they care about the most are more successful in school. In a related study, Plunkett, Henry, Houlberg, Sands, and Abarca-Mortensen (2008) investigated how students' perceptions of academic support from the people around them creates a positive change in academic achievement. If students perceive support from their family, peers and cultural group, academic success often follows. Students who are successful academically tend to stay in school. In an examination of the expectations and perceptions of students about academic achievement, Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2006), hypothesized that a relationship exists between students' beliefs in their ethnic group and academic achievement and stability. If students think that the cultural group they belong to will not succeed in school, this belief often influences their academic performance. Students have to believe that the group they belong to is academically successful. If an education is not valued in a specific culture, the majority of students in that group are not going to stay in school. Students who believe their parents and peers about the importance of staying in school often complete school. The importance of having a sense of shared cultural values for some students is powerful, and therefore, the importance of staying in school will also need to come from the school as much as it does from the home.

Gonzalez (2010) investigated why Latino students had a higher dropout rate than other minority groups. Gonzalez focused on all Latino groups and not just one subgroup. Gonzalez also believed that three domains must be addressed to ensure success in school for Latino students, which included the academic, psycho-social-cultural, and linguistic domains. In relation to the academic domain, Gonzalez discovered that teachers who promote the learning of content at the same time as promoting the ability of students to learn English demonstrated the most

success with these students. In relation to the cultural domain, Gonzalez noted that activities that promote knowledge through social interactions benefit all students. Gonzalez recommended that school officials be aware of the hidden curriculum that may send mixed messages to students and affect their willingness to participate and learn. Educators must not allow bias to color their ability to teach all students . The final domain is linguistic, and Gonzalez suggested that Latino children need to learn both English and Spanish skill sets. Students will be more successful if they are bilingual both in school and later in life.

Cultural values, which include pride in family, belonging, and obligation to members of the family, both nuclear and extended, play a role in a student's life. Respect for authority, elders, and feeling the family goals are more important than individual ones all are contextual factors that lead to motivation and achievement among Latino youth (Wilkins & Kuperminc, 2010). Family values can potentially overcome the negative effects of peer interactions at school. These home values potentially protect youth from negative effects experienced outside the home (Umana-Taylor, 2010). Thus, a significant factor that emerged from these studies was family involvement. Latino students have reported that family involvement is the number one reason for making a decision to stay in school and attend college or drop out (Sciarra & Whitson, 2007).

**First-generation and second-generation students.** Within the Mexican American group of students, differences exist between first-generation and second-generation Mexican American students. Each of these micro-cultures has a set of shared values and expectations. By analyzing each group, specific predictors that are discovered lead to new information. Cammarota (2006) conducted a study of first-generation and second-generation Mexican American students who

were proficient in English to find out what caused a high attrition rate for these students in their first year of high school. Cammarota suggested that teachers and administrators who care about the progress of these students in school influence their decision to stay in school. In addition, teachers and administrators who value the culture of these students play an important role in whether or not these students stay in school or drop out (Cammarota, 2006). Student perceptions of school in relationship to their culture impacts student achievement. Thus, examining racial, ethnic, and cultural relationships for students often results in the discovery of other predictors for the Mexican American dropout rate.

**Relationships at home and at school.** Different studies have investigated the relationship between home and school. The importance of building strong relationships between students and teachers as well as teachers and parents ensures that more students are successful in school attainment (Blake-Dotson, Foster, & Gressard, 2009). Students take into account their relationship with family members. Many studies illustrate the importance of engaging students, parents, and community if successful school completion is to occur with students that are bicultural (Olivos & Mendoza, 2010). Students make decisions to stay in school based on different reasons. Langenkamp (2010) examined the impact of these relationships on students during the transition from middle school to high school. The bonds that students establish with middle school teachers affects the success they experience in high school in two different ways. First, educators impart a legacy of encouragement and love of learning in students. This legacy provides tools for students to continue to seek out adults who are willing to mentor them and protect them against school failure. Secondly, teachers may be involved in vertical teaming where the curriculum in the middle school is coordinated with the curriculum in the high school.

In this way, students experience less adjustment to new curriculum (Langenkamp, 2010).

Relationships are key issues for this age group. These studies also take into account the relationship that students have with school staff. Finally, the relationship that students have with their peers also needs to be considered.

The bonds that students have with their peers are often stronger than the bonds with their teachers because typically students move as a cohort through the K-12 system. Peers often help each other navigate the transition from middle school to high school. In related research, Benner (2011) examined how loneliness affects the academic performance of Latino students and discovered that students who had peer support performed better and did not exhibit signs of loneliness in school. This peer support also impacted the academic success they exhibited in school. Support from friends created a buffer and a sense of belonging that helped students be more successful in the school environment. This social support also reduces stress and mediates adjustment to the high school climate (Langenkamp, 2010). It is important that families maintain close ties with educators at school to prevent delinquency and lower the negative effects of acculturation on students. Helping prepare students for the transition from middle school to high school ensures that this acculturation is positive. Selective acculturation is the process whereby incoming immigrant families select and retain aspects of home traditions while adopting new traditions from the new country. This type of acculturation often promotes school bonding for students (Bui, 2009). Students need to have support from caring, responsible adults.

In other related research, Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, and Royer (2009) examined narratives from resilient students to discover the factors that helped students be successful in high school. Their findings suggest that students who have difficult situations at home often have

an adult at school who supports them. If students are mistreated at school, the support from home helps them keep a balance and succeed. A key finding was that support from caring adults is needed in some part of these students' lives for academic success to happen.

Wolley, Kol, and Bowen (2009) examined the social context of school success for Latino middle school students and found that the relationship between home and school is critical. . The interactions that parents, friends, and teachers have with Latino students are associated with school behavior, beliefs, and attitudes, which leads to achievement or failure in this student population. Building positive relationships between school and home is important. Wooley et al. recommended creating positive connections and communications between Latino parents and teachers that emphasize common goals for students and avoiding cultural differences that may cause difficulties for students' educational achievement. Establishing frequent and positive communication between school and home leads to stronger achievement at school. In other supportive research, Ramos and Sanchez (1995) explored the educational aspirations of Mexican American high school students and proposed strengthening school home relationships for these students by giving them time to acculturate and to form a cultural attachment to the school and community. Creating a cultural-friendly environment in schools where the home culture is valued and where students are encouraged to develop an attachment to the new American culture makes a difference in whether or not students complete school. This positive acculturation often takes place in the K-8 educational system. These educators need to create positive interactions between home and school, even during the transition into high school, which is critical for student success.

**Transition from middle school to high school.** The transition from middle school to high school requires students to experience many new and different situations, teachers, policies, and often a larger, more teacher-centered organization. Lys (2009) investigated the beliefs of middle school Latino students about going to high school in terms of the might help them be successful once they started to attend high school. Lys found that without support, the transition to high school can be traumatic for students. Middle schools tend to be smaller, more nurturing, and team-oriented, while high schools have minimum attendance requirements that are often not clearly explained to incoming freshmen. Expectations for high school academic success are often not clearly explained, and Latino students are often placed in lower level academic tracks due to lack of English language abilities. Lys also found that students who are already at risk of dropping out are usually the students that are overlooked during the transitional period from middle school to high school. Lys suggested that more research needs to be focused on the transition from middle school to high school.

The transition from middle school to high school also requires students to make more choices in relation to academic and extracurricular activities. The Texas Comprehensive Center (2012) reported that the transition from Grade 8 to high school results in a high level of dropouts and grade level retentions. The Center purports that a comprehensive plan needs to be in place to support transitions from middle school to high school in order for a reduction in dropouts to take place. One important point the Center made is that more students struggle in Grade 9 because a shift occurs in family involvement as parents believe that their children can handle more responsibility as they enter high school (Texas Comprehensive Center, 2012).

Student academic performance will often decline after students start attending high school (McIntosh, Flannery, Sugai, Braun & Cochrane, 2008). McIntosh et al. tracked the academic and school discipline records for students in Grade 8 and Grade 9 to determine if a relationship existed between academic skills and behavior variables. McIntosh et al. found a link between problem behavior in Grade 8 and academic performance in Grade 9. McIntosh also found that several other barriers to success emerged during this transition from middle school to high school. One barrier is related to mastery of academic skills in Grade 8, and another barrier is related to problem behavior in Grade 9. Another barrier is that when students are able to relate to only a few students who are ethnically similar to them, they face more academic worries. This ethnic incongruence also affects some students' sense of belonging (Benner & Graham, 2007).

Students' perceptions of high school also play a role in whether or not students make a successful transition from middle school to high school. Benner and Graham (2009) examined incidents of discrimination that Latino youth experienced in the first 2 years of high school and found that these students entered high school initially excited to be there, but over time, these feelings changed to loneliness and anxiousness. Students in middle school who were successful in relation to academic achievement started to struggle with the shifting academic demands of high school. After the first 2 years in high school, students experienced increased loneliness, higher levels of anxiety, and their grades continued to decline while absences increased (Benner & Graham, 2009). To address this problem, educators with support from the federal government have created programs to reduce the dropout rate and increase graduation numbers. To create a successful transition, however, other factors must be taken into account, including academic achievement in middle school.

The transition from middle school to high school also serves as a point of failure or success for students. Those students who are successful in making the transition to high school are more prepared for the challenges they will face throughout their high school career (Langenkamp, 2009). One important factor to be considered during this transitional time is academic performance (Langenkamp, 2009). In Grades 6-8, educators need to focus on academic achievement for students to ensure a successful transition to high school. Students who successfully complete Grade 8 requirements are often more successful in transitioning to high school. Students who struggle with academic learning in middle school are more likely to drop out of school in Grade 9 (Langenkamp, 2009). Educators should have teams in place to ensure that students are successful in middle school, both socially and academically, so they make the transition to high school without any issues (Langenkamp, 2009).

One final barrier not mentioned in the research literature concerns how educational policies may be a barrier that hinders success in school. For example, current legislation must be taken into account. The traditional definition of a graduate has changed from anyone who completed school, including those students who receive a GED or take longer than 4 years to complete their graduation requirements, to only students who receive a standards-based diploma on time with their class (Swanson, 2004). In spite of these legislative changes, family and societal support through schools and communities continues to help Mexican American students succeed in school. Successful students enjoy a positive relationship between the home and the school. School expectations are integral to the academic success of students. The barriers that come from a lack of affinity with the school often results in students choosing to drop out of school instead of completing school.

## **Programs to Reduce Student Dropouts**

Educators in K-12 schools and in colleges and universities need to develop and implement programs, using different approaches, in order to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout rates. Rodriguez and Conchas, (2009) explored the effectiveness of community-based programs in reducing the dropout rate of middle school youth in an urban setting. Rodriguez and Conchas found that for these programs to be effective, a connection between the program and schools needs to be established. In addition, the place where students meet for the community program needs to be safe, include friendly, caring adults, and be close to the school. Programs that are successful forge a partnership with schools and families, ensuring students' needs are met. Using these guidelines, educators are able to curb truancy and reduce the dropout rate (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). However, not all programs work. Research has shown that Latino adolescents account for the fastest growing ethnic group in America and are at risk for many problems (Calderon, as cited in Kaplan, Turner, & Badger, 2007). Due to this growth and the high number of dropouts in this group, culturally sensitive community programs designed for parents and students work best.

**Fast track programs.** Different types of programs are available to all students, with the goal of lowering the dropout rate. Some programs specifically address stemming the dropout problem in high school while other programs work with elementary and middle school students. Fairbrother (2008) analyzed three "at-risk" programs in a large school district in the southwestern part of America to determine if these programs were effective in reducing the dropout rate. Fairbrother found that if students had an easy way to graduation, which could be a program that allowed students to finish in a faster way even if it did not meet the high

expectations of the district, students would select this option, even if it would not be effective. These fast track, low expectations programs, however, often do not reduce the number of students who drop out of school. Programs devoted to developing challenging and preemptive strategies and processes to engage young people are more effective in reducing the dropout rate (Rodriguez & Conchas, 2009). Fairbrother examined a fast track to graduation program that was easier than traditional schooling. Counselors, teachers, and students knew the program would not prepare students fully for future educational demands. Fairbrother concluded that the people involved in this fast-track program did not recognize the negative impact on students of underestimating and underchallenging them. For Hispanic students, the achievement gap was not reduced by participation in these fast track programs; instead, the gap actually increased. Fairbrother concluded that these types of programs should not reduce expectations but challenge students and give support when needed.

**Tutoring and mentoring programs.** Other types of program often implemented in schools to reduce the dropout rate are tutor-based and mentoring programs. These programs have successfully lowered the dropout rate for school districts using these programs. Webb and Campbell (2005) analyzed the Skills for School Success program, a counseling program that focused on improving behavior and academics for middle school students. Educators taught skills in relation to metacognitive skills, social skills, and self-management skills. Within these three skill sets, students learned specific ways to increase their success at school. Webb and Campbell found that students who participated in the Skills for School Success intervention scored higher in mathematics achievement and showed substantial improvement in behavior.

Students who had fewer behavior problems also had a higher school completion rate (Webb & Campbell, 2005).

Another avenue that researchers have investigated are tutoring programs for Grade 9 students that are created to help them make a successful transition from middle school to high school and that lead to higher graduation rates. Somers, Owens, and Piliawsky (2009) conducted a study of high school dropout prevention and the role models and motivations for school completion for a group of at-risk Grade 9 students. They found that students who participated in a tutoring program maintained a grade point average (GPA) close to the GPA they had in Grade 8. The tutoring program protected them from factors that could cause disengagement from school, including lack of direction, not feeling accepted by their peers, and a poor GPA. Thus, teachers may need to be prepared to work with students on an individual basis, especially those students who come from different cultural backgrounds.

The United States Department of Education (USDE) commissioned a study about the different programs that educators use to keep students in school in order to determine if these programs were effective (2007b). All programs included similar concepts, such as mentoring and monitoring at risk students, offering small alternative high schools for students struggling academically at the regular high school, and reducing student isolation and anonymity by having smaller schools or class sizes (USDE, 2007b). A recommendation was that educators should identify the problems that these students are struggling with, both inside and outside of school, which would be a good investment in improving academic success for Mexican American students, especially boys. Helping students identify role models, either in their families or at school, would also create a supportive environment for these students (Roosa et al., 2012).

Policies and programs often place unrealistic expectations on Latino students. Educators often insist that these students respond with great enthusiasm to their academic courses and that they comply with state-level expectations, particularly by completing state assessments required for graduation. However, many of these policies are punitive towards students (Rodriguez, 2008). These policies can put pressure on students, leading them to drop out of school. Creating realistic expectations and programs that give students skills for school success will help them complete high school successfully.

**Teacher education.** In addition to programs that help prepare students to be successful, programs exist that help teachers meet the needs of all students in their classrooms. Hof, Lopez, Dinsmore, Baker, McCarty, and Tracy (2007) examined teacher preparedness in correlation with students dropping out of school. Analyzing the data from the Platte River Corridor Project, Hof et al. analyzed the impact of teacher training on the Latino dropout rate in the specific K-12 district where the program took place. Teachers received training in addressing biases and stereotypes they might hold that influence the way they work with Latino students. Hof et al. found that the teacher training was successful in addressing individual and systemic barriers to Latino student success in their schools and that teacher education could make a difference in reducing the dropout rate of students.

Current research clearly shows that positive relationships between the school and the home must be cultivated for Mexican American students who have different cultural needs than other ethnic groups, which can lead to a higher dropout rate. Additional research, however, still needs to be conducted to discover why so many Mexican American students drop out of school. Current research does not fully address the transition from middle school to high school for these

students. In addition, more research needs to be conducted on first-generation Mexican American students and the decision making processes that they use to stay in school or drop out. Therefore this study explored the transition from middle school to high school through the eyes of first-generation Mexican American students making those decisions.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

This chapter included a review of the literature. In this chapter, I described the literature search strategy that I used to conduct this review and the conceptual framework that is the foundation for this study. For the literature review, I analyzed current peer-reviewed research in relation to factors linked to the Mexican American student dropout rate. I examined current research related to (a) environmental issues related to the physical environment of schools, school engagement, and gender differences, (b) perceived barriers to completing school, such as ethnic and cultural perceptions, family and community involvement, first-generation and second-generation Mexican American students, the relationship of home and school, and the transition from middle school to high school, and (c) programs to reduce school dropouts, including fast track programs, tutoring and mentoring programs, and teacher education.

In conclusion, Mexican Americans are the fastest growing minority group in America and have the highest dropout rate when compared to other minority groups (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Mexican American high school students tend to experience serious academic interruptions due to fights, gang behaviors, and learning difficulties, and the dropout rate among Mexican American students is estimated at 40% or more (Li & Prevatt, 2007). Some Latino immigrants have never attended school in the United States. Hispanics between the ages of 16-24 who were not born in the United States are more likely to drop out of school than those

Hispanics born in the United States (Hoyle & Collier, 2006). Currently students who drop out of school have few choices available for jobs and typically end up in the low-skilled, low paying positions. In addition, these students who drop out are likely to have increased health problems that taxpayers support. These same dropouts are more likely to go to jail, be on welfare, or ask for other government help (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Christle et al. (2007) noted that dropping out of school had a significant impact on the country, including “forgone national income, forgone tax revenues for the support of government services, increased demand for social services, increased crime and antisocial behavior, reduced political participation, reduced intergenerational mobility and poorer levels of health” (p. 325). Therefore, it is relevant to conduct research on the group of students with the highest dropout rate in the nation. Reducing this rate would save millions in dollars for the government and the American public. The findings of this research might help educators to develop programs that would meet the learning needs of these students and ensure their successful completion of high school. This research could help parents make decisions that would ensure their children’s success in school. However, the dropout rate for all subgroups should be examined if the mission is success for all students. As Mayer (2008) noted, “The future well-being of our economy and society may depend on the improvement of the number of high school graduates of Mexican origin students” (p. 22).

Qualitative researchers try to discover new hypotheses rather than test hypotheses deductively derived from known theories. These qualitative researchers explore new phenomena and describe them from different perspectives, often using the strategy of data triangulation. In this literature review, I analyzed studies that used qualitative methodology, such as grounded theory, case studies, phenomenology, and action research. Some of the current research that I

analyzed for this study were quantitative in nature and used statistical analysis to deduce information from a specific variable introduced into a controlled environment. These studies often examined specific programs and their related outcomes. Other studies were qualitative in nature and included interviews with students or teachers and personal narratives. The studies that I included in this review influenced me to design a qualitative study focusing on the transition first-generation Mexican American students from middle school to high school.

This review of the research literature indicated that research is extensive in relationship to the dropout rate in the United States. This research about the dropout rate includes different ethnic groups, special education students, and socio-economic status. Researchers have also investigated the school environment, barriers to school success, family/school/community involvement, relationships between the home and the school, academic and behavioral variables, and programs implemented to reduce the dropout rate. This review indicates that a gap exists about first-generation Mexican American students in terms of how they make the transition from middle school to high school. This study used a qualitative research design to explore this gap.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that influence the decisions of first-generation Mexican American middle school students to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8. A related goal of this study was to construct meaning from the voices of these middle school students who dropped out of school at the end of Grade 8.

Chapter 3 includes a description of the research method that I used for this study. In this chapter, I describe the research design and rationale and the role of the researcher. In addition, I

describe the selection of participants, the instrument that I designed, the procedures that I used for recruitment and participation of participants and for data collection, and the data analysis plan. I also discuss issues of trustworthiness for this qualitative research and the ethical procedures that I followed to implement this study.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question that guided this study was as follows: What factors influence the decisions of first-generation Mexican American middle school students to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8?

#### **Design**

I chose a phenomenological case study as the research design for this qualitative research study. Creswell (2014) noted that a case study design allows researchers to discover unexplored details of the case. Merriam (2009) noted that a case study is about choosing a single entity or “bounded system,” which is the case. The case has a finite quality about it that is specific. Yin (2014) described the case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within a real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). For this single case study, the case or phenomenon was the dropout rate of first-generation Mexican American students who lived in a large urban area in the southwestern region of the United States and attended public schools in that location. According to Merriam (2009), case study research design emphasizes a search for meaning and understanding, uses thick, rich description, and relies on an inductive approach to determine the findings. Case study researchers also have to deal with “technically distinctive situations” that arise from the working with multiple sources of

evidence (Yin, 2014). However, because this study is a phenomenological case study, the single source of evidence will be interviews with students to emphasize their experiences in relation to making a decision to stay in school or to drop out.

### **Rationale**

In relation to other qualitative research designs, I considered grounded theory and ethnography but dismissed these research designs because they did not address my specific need to construct meaning and understanding from the voices of the participants. Yin (2014) noted that each research design has its own unique advantages and disadvantages, according to the following three distinct conditions: the type of questions being asked, the control the researcher has over the behavioral dealings, and the focus on contemporary or historical phenomena. Creswell (2014) noted that grounded theory research generates a theory that is grounded in the data. Its focus is to create an abstract analytical schema of a singularity that relates to a particular situation. Ethnographic studies focus on sociocultural interpretations of a cultural group. Ethnographic studies are also focused on fieldwork and require the complete immersion of the researcher in the culture and everyday life of the people who are studied (Merriam, 2009). The purpose of this case study, however, was not to immerse the researcher in the culture or everyday life of the participants in order to describe the culture of first-generation Mexican American students who drop out of school. Instead, I was interested in describing the dropout phenomenon as it relates to first-generation Mexican American students. To do that, I described the history of the problem, interviewed participants about their school experiences, and used their responses to provide readers with an opportunity to understand this phenomenon at a deeper level.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as a qualitative researcher was to design the study, review the research literature, design the interview protocol, collect the data, and analyze and interpret the data. As a qualitative researcher, I also had to control my biases about this topic. I minimized these biases by selecting participants whom I did not teach. I also conducted all of the interviews and transcribed all of the data. In addition, I asked three educational colleagues with advanced degrees in education to review the findings of this study for their credibility. All of these colleagues believed that the findings were credible.

As a teacher, I have also worked with Mexican American students for more than 18 years. I have had personal contact with their culture by visiting the homes of first and second-generation Mexican Americans students. This contact has helped me to understand the problems that these students often face in transitioning from middle school to high school.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The number of participants for this case study needed to be large enough to represent this population as a whole, but small enough that I could accomplish the research in a reasonable amount of time. Baker and Edwards (2012) found that 8 to 10 participants provide a good representation for case studies in general. For a single case study, one participant may be sufficient if the participant is unique and not comparable to other participants. Baker and Edwards (2012) also noted that the sample size needs to establish that the phenomenon is possible, and even only a few interviews can demonstrate that a phenomenon is more complex and varied than previously understood. For this case study, I purposefully selected 10 participants who met specific inclusion criteria. These criteria included the following: (a)

participants must be first-generation Mexican American students, (b) participants must be students who have either completed high school or who dropped out of school at the beginning of Grade 9, and (c) participants must be at least 18 years old to ensure that they have had time to reflect on the choices that they made. Five participants were selected who had dropped out of school at the beginning of Grade 9 and five participants were selected who had graduated from high school.

### **Instrumentation**

The instrument that I designed for this case study was a set of interview questions (Appendix A). In determining the questions to ask, I used my own experiences with a sister who dropped out of school. I tried to picture myself as a successful Grade 8 student and the factors that might have influenced my decision to stay in school or leave. I created questions that would help me understand how these students make a decision to stay in school or drop out. After I transcribed and coded the interview data as accurately as possible, I called each participant to ask follow-up questions or to clarify unclear patterns that emerged during the interview process. After I had completed these phone calls, I added the additional student responses to my data analysis. A sample of these interview questions are as follows:

- How important was parental involvement in relationship to your educational aspirations?
- How did parental expectations change when you finished Grade 8?
- What pressure did you have from a specific group other than friends to drop out?
- How did community support play a role in your decision to remain in school?

- How did lack of community support play a role in your decision to drop out of school?

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

In relation to recruitment procedures, I used a gatekeeper to help me recruit the participants for this study. According to Creswell, (2014), a gatekeeper is someone who is a member of a cultural group who has the trust of the group. This gatekeeper makes the initial contact with potential participants and is an initial bridge between the researcher and participants. Because this population may not wish to open up to outsiders, the gatekeeper for this case study was familiar with the population, was also known by me, and could vouch for me. Due to my close association with this population as a teacher and a community leader, I needed to use a gatekeeper to minimize researcher bias. I selected this gatekeeper from a group of former students. I knew that the gatekeeper was a first-generation Mexican American who finished high school successfully. I believed that this fact would give the gatekeeper access to students who had graduated from high school and to students who had dropped out of school. The gatekeeper initially approached the participants. The gatekeeper was instructed to ask both males and females to participate in an attempt to achieve gender balance.

In relation to participation, I selected the first 10 students who agreed to participate in this study. After I obtained signed consent forms for these 10 students, I contacted each of them individually by telephone to determine the time and place for the interviews. If any of the participants decided after I contact them that they would rather not participate, I contacted the gatekeeper for another name.

Concerning data collection, I conducted most of the individual interviews in a private room in the local public library. By holding the interviews in a public library, I hoped to put participants at ease. Although I had three interviews that could not take place at the library, two took place at their residence and one at a restaurant at the request of the participants. I conducted all of the interviews over 3-4 days. At the end of each interview, I asked participants to listen to the recording and invited them to provide any additional information and to note any discrepancies they found.

After completion of the interviews, I identified specific responses that needed clarification and called participants for clarification. After I transcribed the interviews and added data from the follow-up phone calls, I asked participants to read the complete transcripts and check for errors before I began the data analysis. When the study is complete, I will send each participant a summary of the findings with a thank you note for participating.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis plan for this case study involved coding, category construction, and the examination of emergent themes and discrepant data in order to determine key findings. Throughout the face-to-face interviews, I used memoing, recording reflective notes that clarified ideas and insights I had and additional data I needed to elucidate. I chose not to use software to code the data but instead coded the data manually. After I completed all of the interviews, I transcribed the data into a word document. I used open coding to create tentative labels for similar groups of data that summarize the interview data. Next, using axial coding, I identified relationships among the open codes. At this point I used Atlas.ti Qualitative Analysis software to organize the coded data and to discover connections among the codes. Once the coding was

complete, I called each participant to ask follow up questions for each area of concern that the initial analysis revealed. I did not create any predetermined categories or codes because I wanted commonalities to emerge from the data analysis. Once I completed the initial coding, I created a master list of codes. Once I completed the analysis, I created tables using the Atlas.ti software to display the data.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of qualitative research is often discussed in relation to the constructs of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. To ensure credibility, I explained the purpose of this study to each participant and allowed him or her to ask questions. I followed the same procedures for data collection for all participants, using the same interview questions. I also asked several colleagues with advanced degrees in education to review the findings of this study for their credibility.

To ensure transferability, I provided detailed descriptions of the data collection and data analysis procedures that I followed so that readers clearly understand how I conducted the research. I also described the research context in detail, including the location, date, and time of the interviews, any relevant social factors, the geographic location of the urban community where students lived, and assumptions and limitations that were critical to this study.

In relation to confirmability or objectivity, I asked leaders with doctorate degrees of the K-12 education system to conduct a peer review of this study. I addressed any concerns these members had about this study, which strengthened its objectivity. I also searched for discrepant data that challenged the key findings. In addition, I bracketed my assumptions, personal values

and beliefs in relation to this topic. I included an audit trail that describes the decisions I made from the start of this research study to the reporting of findings.

To ensure dependability, I described any adverse circumstances that occurred during the interview process and explained how these circumstances may have affected the way I conducted this study. Dissertation committee members also reviewed this study closely to ensure that data analysis was accurate and that I did not omit or alter any findings.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Before I began the data collection process for this study, I sought and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to conduct this study (06-16-15-0023445). I reassured participants that all information would be kept confidential, and their names would be changed to ensure privacy. I stored all collected data in a locked file cabinet, which only I was able to access. Informed consent also protected the participants because they had full knowledge of any possible risks and benefits from the study before they participated. These consent forms served as a layer of protection for both the participants and the researcher.

I conducted all interviews at the public libraries in a large southwestern city in the United States. After the interviews were scheduled, I confirmed appointments. I collected signed informed consent forms that informed participants about how I would store data for confidentiality purposes. During the interviews, I introduced myself to participants, answered any questions they had, and collected signed informed consent forms. Once the interview was completed, I asked participants sign to an authenticity form stating that the recording was accurate. After I interviewed all participants, I transcribed verbatim the interviews from the audio tapes and asked participants to review the transcripts for reliability and accuracy.

## Summary

In this chapter, I described the research design and rationale for this case study as well as my role as a qualitative researcher. In relation to the methodology of this study, I described the selection of participants and the sampling technique, the instrumentation, and the procedures for recruitment and participation of participants and the data collection procedures. In addition, I described the data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness related to qualitative research, and the ethical procedures that I used to collect data for this study.

Chapter 4 includes the results of this study. I include a description of the setting of the study, the participant demographics, and the data collection process. Additionally, I include a description of the data analysis procedures that I used and evidence of trustworthiness. Finally, I present the results of this study in relation to an analysis of the central research question.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the factors that influence the decisions of first-generation Mexican American middle school students to graduate from high school or drop out of school after Grade 8. The purpose of this study was also reflected in the following central research question: What are the factors that influence the decisions of first-generation Mexican American middle school students to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8?

In this chapter, I present the results of this study. I describe the setting of the study, the participant demographics, and the data collection process. In addition, I describe the data analysis procedures that I used to determine key findings, and I describe the evidence of

trustworthiness for this qualitative research. I also present the results of this study in relation to an analysis of the central research question.

### Setting

The students who participated in this study lived in a major urban area in the southwestern region of the United States. This urban area included a large population of Hispanic residents as well as African Americans, Caucasians, and other races. Poverty and lack of education were at high levels in this area of the city (<http://www.city-data.com/zips.html>).

Participants in this study attended public or charter schools in this location. Of those five students who had dropped out of high school, three attended the same public high school when they dropped out, and two attended same charter high school when they dropped out of school (see tables one and two for demographic break down of these high schools).

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Table 1

*Student Demographics Public High School*

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Asian	160 (6%)
African American	189 (6.98%)
Hispanic	2130 (78.66%)
Native American	60 (2.22%)
White	169 (6.24%)
Total Student Population	2,708

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(<http://www.movoto.com/schools>)

Table 2

*Student Demographics Charter High School*


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Asian	2 (1.6%)
African American	4 (3.2%)
Hispanic	114 (90.5%)
White	2 (1.6%)
Native American	4 (3.2%)
Total Student Population	126

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(<http://public-schools.startclass.com>)

Concerning the graduates, three students started out in the same high school, in the same district as the students who had dropped out. These graduates then transferred to the same charter school as students who had dropped out. Two graduates attended another high school in the same district, which had an enrollment of 2135 students for 2012, of which 70.75% were Hispanic, 22.28% were African American, 4.3% were Caucasian, 2.02% were Native American, and 1.0% were Asian American. It was interesting to note that some participants reported that the public schools were a successful experience for them, but other participants reported that the public schools did not meet their needs. The graduating students attended both public and charter high schools as well (<http://www.movoto.com/schools>).

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### **Participant Demographics**

The 10 participants in this study were all first-generation Mexican American students. Of these participants who had dropped out of school, their ages ranged from 18 to 21 years, and

three of the five participants were employed. Only one participant had earned a GED, although they all said they wanted either to earn a GED or a high school diploma. See table three for a full description of these participants.

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Table 3

*Description of Participants who Dropped Out*

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Participant A	Male, 21	Unemployed	Seeks to earn a GED
Participant B	Male, 19	Employed	Earning a GED
Participant C	Female, 18	Employed	Earned a GED
Participant D	Woman, 18	Employed	Seeks to earn a GED
Participant E	Woman, 18	Unemployed	Seeks to graduate from high school

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The graduates included 4 men and 1 woman. Of the participants who graduated from high school, they ranged in age from 18 to 24 years, and four of the five participants were employed. All of these participants were enrolled or planning to enroll in either a university, college or technical school (See table four for a full description).

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Table 4

*Description of Graduates who Participated*

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Participant AA	Male, 24	Employed	Enrolled in state university
Participant BB	Male, 21	Employed	Enrolled in state university
Participant CC	Male, 18	Employed	Enrolled in technical college
Participant DD	Male, 18	Employed	Planned to enroll in technical college
Participant EE	Woman, 18	Unemployed	Enrolled in state university

---

### Data Collection Procedures

Interviews with participants served as the source of data for this case study. I called each potential participant during the week of June 8-12, 2015, using a script that described the study and inviting him or her to participate in this study. I asked each participant to sign a consent form at the face-to-face interview. During the months of June and July 2015, I conducted interviews with all participants. These interviews took place at private residences, restaurants, and the public library. Table 5 includes a description of the interview protocol for dropout participants, and Table 6 includes a description of the interview protocol for graduate participants. Interview Protocol for Dropout Participants

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Table 5

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*Interview Protocol for Dropout Participants*

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	Date	Time	Place	Length of Interview
Participant A	July 23, 2015	2:44 pm	Private Residence	13:05 Minutes
Participant B	July 2, 2015	12:30 pm	Public Library	16:43 Minutes
Participant C	July 6, 2015	5:59 pm	Private Residence	19:43 Minutes
Participant D	July 21, 2015	5:21 pm	Local Restaurant	12:27 Minutes
Participant E	July 15, 2015	8:52 am	Private Residence	12:35 Minutes

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Table 6

*Interview Protocol for Graduate Participants*

	Date	Time	Place	Length of Interview
Participant AA	July 2, 2015	6:36 pm	Private Residence	20:16 Minutes
Participant BB	July 17, 2015	11:42 am	Private Residence	16:27 Minutes
Participant CC	June 29, 2015	10:54 am	Public Library	16:57 Minutes
Participant DD	June 29, 2015	2:15 pm	Public Library	19:43 Minutes
Participant EE	June 19, 2015	11:48 am	Public Library	17:50 Minutes

I audio recorded all interviews, using the application, Easy Voice Recorder, and I transcribed each of these interviews verbatim. My tablet was password protected and stored in my locked office. I kept the consent forms in a folder in a locked file cabinet. I stored all transcriptions on a password-protected computer. I also focused on the words each participant spoke. It was important that I truly listen to the participants and not allow any personal emotions to surface. Using the prewritten questions helped me focus on the content of their responses and not on how I felt about the topic. In addition, I asked follow up questions immediately as warranted.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Using an inductive approach for the data analysis, I entered the raw interview data into the Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software. I did an initial coding of the data by assigning key

words or phrases to similar data. Using this initial coding, I reread the text to determine that the initial codes were accurate. Then I used axial coding to review the initial codes for relationships between concepts and any related categories that emerged. Using axial coding, I reviewed the data again to confirm key factors that influenced participants in their decision to stay in school or to drop out.

Initial and axial coding revealed three key factors that influenced participants' decisions to stay in school or drop out. These factors included being Hispanic, being easily distracted, and finding academic learning difficult. Participants who graduated from high school also reported three factors they considered when they thought about dropping out of school. The first factor was lack of support from the family. The second factor was lack of support from the school. Initially I coded both of these factors as lack of support and difficult academic learning. Upon rereading the text, however, I discovered that academic learning could be challenging but with support from school personnel, students could be successful. Finally, in using axial coding, I also found that financial support or lack of it both at home and at school was a final theme that emerged from the data analysis for both groups of participants.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In Chapter 3, I discussed issues of trustworthiness for qualitative research in relation to the constructs of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. In this section, I describe how I used specific strategies to improve the trustworthiness of this study in relation to those constructs.

**Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the consistency of the findings with reality (Merriam, 2009). To ensure credibility I used the strategy of triangulation, which involved comparing and contrasting the data from participants in different situations and with different perspectives. For example, I interviewed participants in various locations, including their homes, the library, and a restaurant. I also interviewed participants at different times of the day, including the morning, the afternoon, and the evening. Participants also represented different ages and lived in different parts of the city. In addition, I interviewed both male and female participants. I also used the strategy of peer examination by asking several of my colleagues with doctoral degrees to review the tentative findings for their credibility.

**Dependability**

Dependability ensures that the research findings are consistent and could be repeated. Strategies that qualitative research could use to ensure dependability of a study include triangulation, peer examination, clarification of the researcher's position, and an audit trail (Merriam, 2009). For this study, I used the strategy of triangulation as I have previously explained. I also used the strategy of peer examination by asking an educational colleague with an advanced degree in education to review this study and to determine if the results were supported by the data.

**Transferability**

Transferability in qualitative research, according to Merriam, means the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied to other situations. This idea is supported by the strategies of rich, thick description and either maximum variation or typicality of the sample (Merriam,

2009). For this study, I used the strategy of rich, thick description by describing the setting, the participants, and the findings in detail so that readers are able to understand the extent to which the findings of this study are transferable to other situations. Another strategy that I used was typicality of the sample. Merriam defined typicality as how “typical” an individual is compared to others in the same group. This typicality of sample allows the readers to make comparisons with their own situations. For this study, I carefully selected and described typical first-generation Mexican American students in two different groups. I selected students who were successful in Grade 8, but chose to drop out in their first year of high school. I also selected students who graduated successfully from high school.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the objectivity of qualitative research. One strategy that researchers often use to improve the objectivity of qualitative research is reflexivity. Merriam (2009) defined reflexivity as a way to discuss and clarify the assumptions, experiences, and theoretical understandings of the researcher to what they are studying. I used the strategy of reflexivity by explaining my position about the current study and how I selected the participants. In addition, I explained my assumptions and how it might affect the data I collected and how I put into place safeguards against these assumptions such as selecting the first participants to sign up. I took the time to reflect on myself as the researcher and how this might affect this study.

### **Results**

The central research question asked, “*What factors influence the decisions of first-generation Mexican American middle school students to transition to high school or drop out of school after Grade 8?*”

To answer this question, I have presented the results in two sections. The first section includes an analysis of the findings for this question in relation to the five participants who dropped out of school. The second section includes an analysis of the findings for this question in relation to the five participants who graduated from high school. I conclude the results section with a discussion of the factors that influenced the decision participants made to stay in school or drop out after Grade 8.

### **Participants Who Dropped Out of School**

I interviewed three men and two women ranging in age from 18 to 21 who dropped out of school after completing Grade 8. I first asked participants to describe their experiences in Grade 8. Three of the five participants reported that Grade 8 was easy for them academically and socially, but two participants reported that school was hard for them. They struggled with academics. One participant noted that he had trouble in Grade 8, but eventually completed it.

Eighth grade was a little bit hard for me, because when I was in seventh grade I didn't get the majority of it, because I was easily distracted. So I tried to attend seventh grade online, but we are low income and didn't have reliable internet, so I flunked out. So the second time around at a regular school I got better at math and was tutored. I eventually was successful in eighth grade.

Another participant complained that Grade 8 was hard academically, but she was not comfortable asking others for help. She added, "I didn't really like eighth grade, not at all. Mostly academically, it was challenging, and I didn't ask for help." This response was different from the other participants who believed Grade 8 was easy, and they believed they were fully supported by school personnel. One participant also believed that the main reason why he

dropped out of school was that he did not have the support of high school teachers as he had in Grade 8.

In explaining why they dropped out of school, each participant told his or her own story and reasons for leaving school. These reasons are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Reasons for Dropping out of School

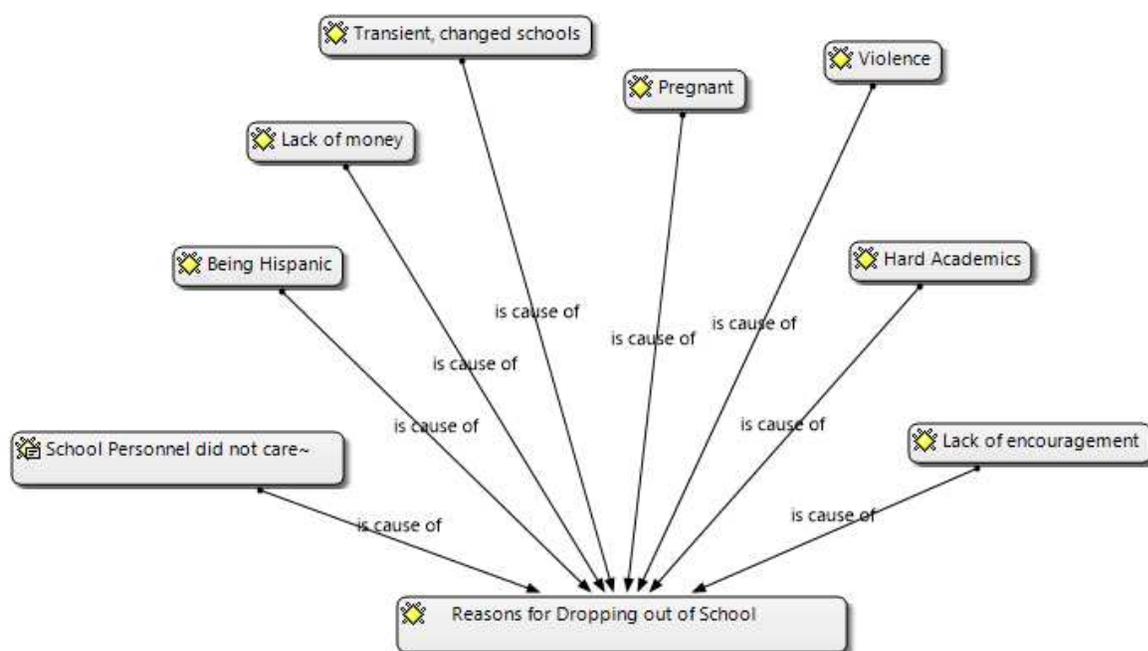


Figure 1 indicates that the major reasons participants gave for dropping out of school included the following: (a) school personnel did not care about them, (b) being Hispanic, (c) lack of money, (d) changing schools frequently, (e) pregnancy, (f) victims or perpetrators of violence at school, (g) difficult academic learning, and (h) lack of encouragement from family.

Some of the participants gave more than one reason for dropping out of school, but all of them listed lack of encouragement as one of the major reasons that led them to drop out of school. Table 1 describes how participants ranked these reasons.

Table 7

*Ranking of Reasons for Dropping Out of School*

Reasons	Number of Participants	Percentages
Lack of encouragement	5	100%
Hard academics	4	80%
School personnel did not care	4	80%
Lack of Money	3	60%
Being Hispanic	1	20%
Easily distracted	1	20%
Transient, changed schools	1	20%
*Trouble	1	20%
Violence at school	1	20%
Pregnant	1	20%

\*Trouble meant lack of attendance and problems with other students and staff.

Table 1 indicates that participants agreed that lack of encouragement in the first year of high school was a factor in dropping out of school. Each participant believed that if someone at school or home had supported them in their endeavors to go to school, they would have stayed in school. Four of the five participants agreed that academic learning was difficult and that educators at their schools often did not seem to care about them. One participant commented that he wanted more individual tutoring but teachers would not work with him. Another participant noted that she had a baby, which she believed was her responsibility and no one, supported her at

school. Thus, participants who believed they had support from home and school were the ones who graduated, but all of the dropout participants believed that they did not have support at home and/or at school. Without an adult who could give them encouragement and help, they believed they did not have a reason to continue in school.

More than once, dropout participants reported a lack of money as a reason for leaving school. Lack of money had a different meaning for each of the participants. Some participants believed that they did not have money for school supplies, lab fees, and clothes. This need for additional money created tension at home, and therefore, they believed it was better to work. Others believed that they had to support their families by getting a job and contributing to the family's needs. Participants believed that if they had not worried about money, they probably would have stayed in school. One participant stated, "I dropped out of school when I decided I'd rather work than go to school. I was worried about money instead of school." Another participant noted that the family did not have any money, and he needed to work to help his mother. Another participant stated that she needed money to take care of her child.

I also asked participants how much impact financial responsibilities had on their decision to leave school. Three of the five participants reported that financial responsibilities were the main reason for dropping out of school. In analyzing the data, I found a clear correlation between lack of money and lack of support, whether the support was at home or at school. The key factor was that someone needed to encourage them to go to school and support this goal. It is evident that participants who lacked support also lacked financial support as well. In one case, the participant had a baby at 14, and her parents expected her to take care of the child financially. In the end, she dropped out of school to get a job so she could take care of the baby. She had neither

financial nor emotional support to ensure she stayed in school and graduated. In each of these situations, participants stated that if money had been available, they would have continued in school.

Another finding was that a majority of participants reported that they made a decision to drop out of school without consulting anyone. Only one participant consulted his mother before deciding to drop out of school. Another participant stated that it was his choice alone to drop out of school, believing that he could finish school later. One participant reported that his parents did not know that he stopped going to school.

When I asked participants how their families felt about their decision to drop out of school, the result was similar in that all but one family was disappointed. Only one participant reported that his parents believed his decision was the correct one. However, one participant noted, “they were mad, my mom cried, they were upset.” This comment suggests that families need to be more involved with their children’s education to ensure that they stay in school. Thus, family support for staying in school was critical. One of the participants who graduated from high school stated that although he believed he did not have support at school to graduate, he was supported at home and his mother was the reason he graduated. Emotional support from the family was the same as encouragement.

One participant stated, “If I had had more support at home from my family. If someone had motivated me to go to school, but no one in my family supported me.”

The participant understood that graduation was important but felt a need to have someone to turn to when for encouragement and support.

During the follow-up interviews, I also asked participants about their current educational and employment status and about their plans for the future. I also asked them to describe the advice they would give to students who were considering dropping out of school. Their answers were unanimous. Participants reported that they would tell these students to stay in school because dropping out of school ruins their lives in many ways. Participants were clear they felt dropping out of school made life more difficult.

Financial was the whole reason I dropped out, and now I am working on my GED, and becoming a pharmacist technician. If I'd just had financial and family support, I would have stayed in school because dropping out makes it really difficult in life.

I ended up getting in trouble, but I think I've got a chance. I finished ½ credit while I was in jail and earned my food handler's license. I want to sign up for school in August and try to finish school. I have until I'm 22 to do it, so I hope to finish. If I had one thing to tell someone thinking of dropping out, I'd tell them don't do it. Because it's too hard to get back into school and finish once you leave. Just stay in school and finish; it will make your life easier.

I really want to get my GED or at least finish high school while I still have a chance. My advice is not to do it, because once you do it, you won't go back and finish.

I need my diploma to get all kinds of jobs; I want to get my GED too, because I want to become a mechanic. I'd tell them not to drop out because it would be hard without a high school diploma.

In addition to these financial concerns, several participants also reported that high school academics were harder than middle school academics. These two participants believed a lack of academic support to help them achieve success was key to dropping out of school. This reason was also related to a lack of encouragement, which participants cited as a reason for dropping out of school. The leap from middle school to high school is difficult. Students leave the familiar surroundings of middle school where they are at the top of the grade levels and start over at the bottom of the grade levels. These dropouts suggested that someone needed to support them in maintaining their motivation to stay in school and to help them with their academic skills and social skills. These participants agreed that if they had finished school, life now for them would be easier. Four of them described their goal of still finishing high school or getting a GED. They all believed that if they had stayed in school, the high school diploma would have led to a better future.

### **Participants Who Graduated from High School**

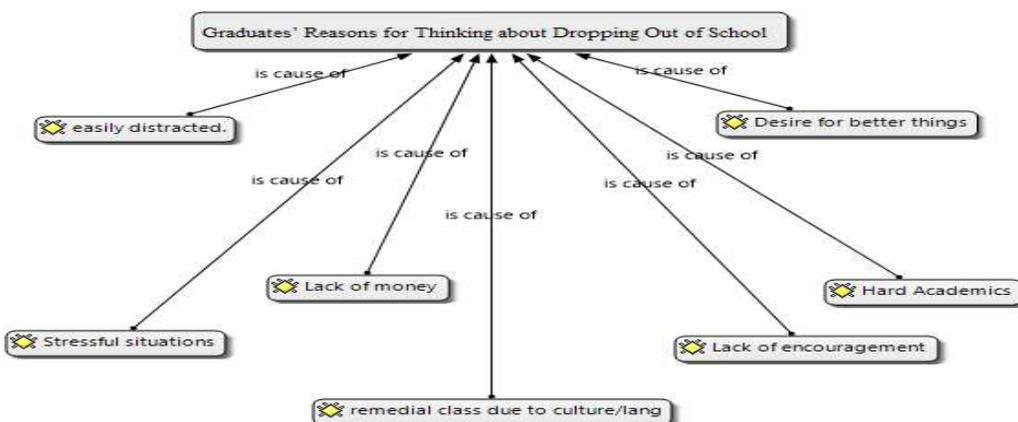
To present a clear picture of why students drop out of school, I also interviewed five first-generation Mexican Americans who had graduated from high school. Three participants were recent graduates, and two participants had graduated two years ago. I interviewed four men and one woman. I wanted to understand their beliefs about dropping out of school and if they had ever considered dropping out and, if so, why.

I first asked participants about their experiences in Grade 8. All the men reported that they enjoyed Grade 8, and they believed they were very successful both academically and socially in Grade 8. However, the female participant reported that she struggled socially and academically in Grade 8.

I also asked participants if they had ever considered dropping out of school. All four male participants reported that they had considered dropping out of school; however, only the female participant had never considered dropping out.

I also asked participants when they considered dropping out, and they all reported that they considered dropping out of school during their first year of high school. I asked them why they considered dropping out. Their answers varied. Figure 2 indicates the reasons these graduates gave for why they considered dropping out of school.

Figure 2: Graduates' Reasons for Thinking about Dropping Out of School



The reasons that these graduates gave for thinking about dropping out of school included: (a) easily distracted, (b) faced stressful situations, such as evictions, and death in the family, (c) lack of money, (d) remedial classes were required due to lack of English language skills, (e) lack of encouragement at home, and/or school (f) struggles with academic learning and (g) a desire to

have things that other students had. The graduates and dropouts gave similar reasons regarding their decision to drop out or stay in school, which included getting into trouble, changing schools, struggling with academics, and lack of money. The difference between the groups was that the graduates believed they had support from home and or school to stay in school, and the dropouts believed they did not have this support.

Table 7 presents a ranking of the reasons that graduates gave when they considered dropping out of school.

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Table 7

*Ranking of Graduates' Reasons for Thinking about Dropping Out of School*

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Reasons	Number of Participants	Percentages
Lack of money	3	60%
Desire for better things	3	60%
Lack of encouragement at school	2	40%
Hard academics	2	40%
Remedial class due to language barrier	1	20%
Stressful situations	1	20%
Easily distracted	1	20%

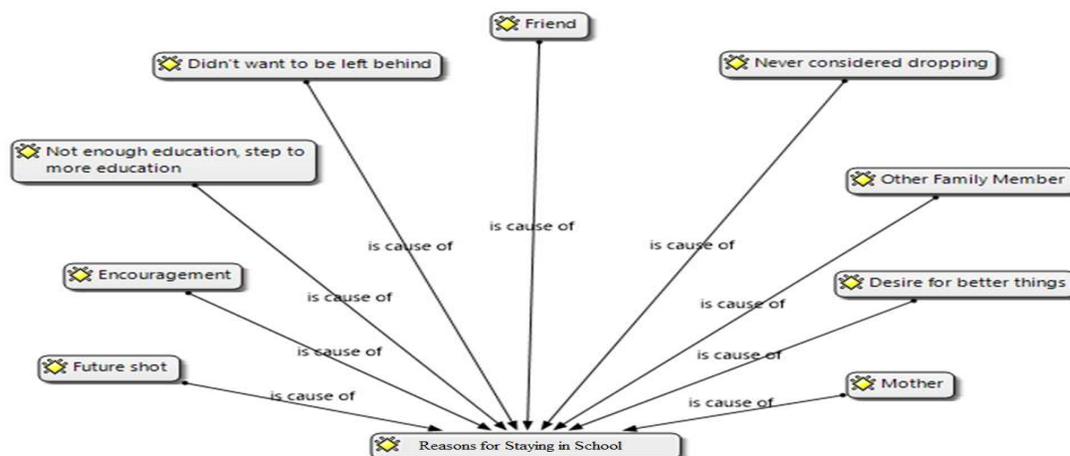
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Table eight indicates that lack of money and a desire for better things was the top reasons that graduates gave for thinking about dropping out of school. For graduates, they believed that they needed money for school supplies, fees, and keeping up with their friends. Only one out of the five graduates mentioned needing money to help support their families. Graduates also

considered dropping out of school because of a lack of encouragement at school and because academic learning was difficult.

Graduates were also asked why they decided to stay in school, and they all agreed that the main reason they did not drop out of school was the support they received from their families, specifically the mother. One participant noted, “My grandparents are a big part of why I want to study more and get a better life. Their expectations are high.” Another participant noted that his family “wanted me to go to school, [and] they would try hard to get me to wake up to go to school. Still another participant added, “My family took me to school, and my mom would give me change and food because my school didn’t have lunch available.” Another participant commented, “The number one reason was my Mom, [because] they came here for us, [when] I was sick, and we came here to get better health care. But I don’t like to hear her [get] angry, and she would be very angry.” Another participant remarked, “I’d say my parents were the primary influence in that they told me if I wanted to be successful, I would have to work hard for it.” These graduates offered other reasons for staying in school, such as support and encouragement. All of these reasons are represented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Graduates’ Reasons for Staying in School



*\*future shot: graduating from high school leads to college, career, a better future.*

Table 8 also ranks these graduates' reasons for staying in school in order of agreement among them.

Table 8

*Ranking of Graduates' Reasons for Staying in School*

Reasons	# of Participants	Percentages
Mother/Grandmother (female caregiver support)	5	100%
Future shot	4	80%
Encouragement at school	3	60%
Not enough education	3	60%
Friends	3	60%
Desire for better things	3	60%
Other family members' support	3	60%
Did not want to be left behind by friends	2	40%
Never considered dropping out	1	20%

Table 8 indicates that all graduates believed either their mother or a female caregiver, such as a grandmother or an aunt, supported them at home. In fact, for the one participant who never considered dropping out, she said her grandmother was the reason she did well in school. These graduates did not want to disappoint their families. The other reason that stood out was that 4 out of 5 graduates believed they stayed in school for a future shot. One graduate noted, “Basically, how am I going to make money as an adult? You don’t want to take unnecessary risks, [so you] go to school.” Another graduate added, “I really felt that staying in school would lead me to be able to give my grandma one day a whole lot of money. I want to succeed in my future. You might as well get your studies higher and higher, so it means something.” Three out of five graduates also believed that they stayed in school because of encouragement at school; they needed more education, friends, a desire for better things, and support from other family members.

In relation to support from other family members, three of the five participants noted that family members such as cousins or siblings encouraged them to stay in school. They also reported that friends supported them by talking to them about how graduating from high school could lead them to college and a better future. Alternatively, their friends would be examples of what to avoid so they could be successful. One graduate told a story about a friend who had no support to complete high school and had to drop out as a senior and the impact that decision had on his attitude about finishing school and graduating. Each of the graduates reported that they planned to continue their education by attending college.

Graduates also gave revealing and instructive responses to a question about the difference that graduating from high school had made in their lives. All five graduates agreed that

graduating makes the difference between a successful future or a future filled with hard work and little money. One graduate stated, “Yes, I’m filled with hope and plan on attending school for gaming.” Another graduate added,

It’s really worth it. If you don’t have at least a high school diploma, you’ll work at McDonalds or harder jobs and look 60 when you are 40. You won’t have money to survive. My future is to be a police officer. I really have been thinking about it.

By having a vision of the future, these graduates were filled with a sense of accomplishment.

One graduate brought his school records to the interview, describing how he had struggled in his first year of high school, but then he transferred to a charter school and was successful. He added, “Yes, you need a certain amount of credits to graduate, and I graduated with 2 extra credits. I’m thinking of going to school for gaming.” Another graduate noted, “It’s helped me think about my future and led me to college so I can help my brother be successful in school.”

Perhaps the best response was from the graduate who stated,

Yes, to my parents, it’s a big sense of accomplishment, coming from my parents who[se] biggest education was the second grade, if that. You know simply getting past high school is a great achievement, and now I’m attending the university. The whole course of my high school career, led to how successful I will be in my post education.

These graduates discovered that finishing high school made a difference in their ability to achieve their goals as adults, which included higher paying jobs, attending universities, helping the family pay bills, and becoming productive members of society. They all advised students to stay in school because it was worth it.

### **Factors that Influenced Decision to Stay in School or Drop Out**

For first-generation Mexican American students, life is not always easy. Poverty, teen pregnancy, lack of academic skills, violence in schools, drugs, and lack of support often face these students. These factors often lead some students to consider dropping out of school and getting a job to support family with much needed money. For this study, data analysis revealed three major factors that influenced the decision of students to stay in school or to drop out.

**Home support.** The first factor that influenced first-generation Mexican American students to stay in school or drop out of school was support or lack of support from home. Data analysis indicated a correlation between dropping out of school and the amount of encouragement participants received from family members at home. The type of support was as simple as asking students about their grades and ensuring they attended school each day. Sometimes the support was more essential. One participant reported that the school did not provide lunch so every day his mother made sure he had enough money to buy lunch. Still, support from home was an essential factor that ensured graduation for these participants. Four out of five dropouts reported a lack of encouragement from family. All of the graduates reported that encouragement at home prevented them from dropping out of school. The only graduate who did not consider dropping out of school noted that she never considered this decision because of her grandmother's encouragement. She knew how hard her grandmother worked to provide food, shelter, and clothing for her siblings, and she did not want to disappoint her. Her grandmother was always telling her to stay in school because her life would be better. Yet lack of encouragement at home was the reason why four of the participants decided to drop out of school. One dropout noted, "If I'd just had family support, I would have stayed in school

because dropping out makes it really difficult in life.” Another participant stated that if someone had cared, she would have stayed in school. She talked about her decision to drop out of school with her mother, and even though her mother was not happy with her decision, “she didn’t really mind.” Because her mother never made her go to school and did not check on her progress, she decided to drop out. Thus, support at home was a contributing factor in the decision to stay in school or to drop out.

**School support.** The second factor that influenced first-generation Mexican American students to stay in school or drop out was a support or lack of support from school staff. These dropouts clearly stated that the difference between middle school and high school was that academic learning became harder, and they believed that no one helped them be successful. One dropout noted that many middle school teachers made sure his homework was done and that he understood key concepts related to the assignments. However, when he entered high school where the work was even harder, no one seemed to care if he was present in the classroom. He would often skip classes, and teachers never once talked to him about his lack of attendance. Graduates also agreed that the academic work in high school was more challenging than it was in middle school. However, if these graduates struggled in school, they found a teacher, a peer, a sibling, another staff member such as a coach or administrator or even a neighbor to help them to complete their schoolwork. These graduates believed this support was critical to their academic success in high school.

The support at school was not always about the teacher, but about someone caring and checking on the student. Four of the five participants who dropped out of school stated that no one noticed if they did not attend school. One dropout stated, “I would just not want to get up to

go, so I'd stay home. I just didn't feel cared about at school enough to attend, [so] it was easier to just stay home." They also believed that no one was there to help them with their school work, which was harder than the schoolwork in middle school. One participant added, "If I could have attended a school with more one on one tutoring time, [that would have been helpful]. The school wouldn't work with me." Another participant added, "Having someone at school motivated me to attend' In eighth grade, there were teachers and friends that wanted me at school but in high school no one even noticed when I didn't go."

The first year in high school was especially challenging and frustrating for many participants, particularly if they believed they did not have support from their families and school staff. Those participants who dropped out believed that the high school staff did not care about their success. However, even though graduates believed that they did not often have support at school, they believed they had support from their families, which dropouts reported they did not have. Graduates also reported asking for help from an adult at school or in the community, which dropouts did not report. This support gave these graduates hope, and as one graduate noted, "I was drained of hope, but I found the right high school and that school filled me with hope and this led me to graduate." Thus, the second factor that influenced the decision of these participants to stay in school or drop out was the support or lack of support that they believed they received from school staff.

The third factor that influenced the decision of first-generation Mexican American students to stay in school or drop out was financial support or lack of it. A lack of financial support meant that participants believed they did not have funds for school supplies, lab fees, clothes, or any other materials students are required to purchase. School supplies were not only paper and

pencils, but access to the Internet. Often schools required computers or scientific calculators, which were not inexpensive. In addition, there were costs for college prep classes. One student noted that the counselor at an orientation session told students they would have to pay to take the SAT if they planned to attend college. Furthermore, two dropouts mentioned the expense of gas or bus fare. All these expenses added up to more than these families could sometimes afford. One participant noted, "I was worried about money instead of school."

Participants also reported that they needed money to help support their families. Two dropouts stated that they had to help with family expenses such as rent, food, electricity. Only one dropout did not mention lack of finances as a factor for dropping out of school. Two participants cited lack of financial support as a reason they dropped out of school. One participant added, "It's about being low income, not having a ride, having to step forward to help with finances, and the school doesn't help with scheduling which makes it difficult to hold down a job and go to school." Without the proper financial support for these first-generation Mexican Americans who were growing up in poverty, the choice of going to school or getting a job often became a non-option; they simply choose money over school because their families need financial support. Graduates also cited financial support as a reason they considered in dropping out of school, but because school was considered a priority in their families, they continued to go to school and also got jobs. One graduate stated that he went to school, worked, then went home to sleep, and returned to school.

Thus, the major factors that influenced the decision of these first-generation Mexican American students to stay in school or drop out included the amount of support they received from their families, the amount of support they received from the school staff, and the financial

needs that they faced. Families that supported and encouraged their children to stay in school helped them to graduate. Even when these students were not supported at school, if they are supported at home, they often stayed in school and graduated.

### **Summary**

This chapter included the results of this case study. In this chapter, I described the setting of this study and the participant demographics as well as the data collection process and the data analysis process. In addition, I described strategies that I used to establish credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. I presented an analysis of the results in relation to the central research question for this study. The major factors that influenced the decision of first-generation Mexican American students to stay in school or drop out included support at home, support at school, and financial support, both for expenses incurred at school as well as financial responsibilities at home.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors that influenced first-generation Mexican American middle school students to transition to high school or drop out after Grade 8. This qualitative study used a phenomenological case study research design to determine these factors because both case study and phenomenology encourage an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon, which for this study was the process that participants experienced in making a decision to stay in school or drop out after Grade 8. This study was needed because the focus was on students who successfully completed Grade 8 and made a decision to stay in school or drop out. Another reason why this research was needed was that the focus was on first-generation Mexican American students. Other researchers who have explored the Mexican

American dropout rate often emphasize second-generation Mexican American students. This case study explored factors that influenced the decision making process of these first-generation Mexican American students to either stay in school or drop out during their first year of high school.

The findings that emerged from the data analysis for this study are related to the factors that influenced first-generation Mexican American students to transition to high school or drop out after Grade 8. The first factor that influenced these students to drop out of school was the support or lack of support that they receive from family members at home. The second factor was the support or lack of support that these students received from school staff. The third factor that influenced the decision of these students to stay in school or drop out was financial support or lack of it.

This final chapter is presented in three parts. The first section includes an interpretation of the findings in relation to the literature review and the conceptual framework. The second section includes a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research. The last section includes a discussion of implications for social change.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In this section, I discuss the factors that influenced first-generation Mexican American students to transition to high school or to drop out after Grade 8. The following factors are discussed in relation to the literature review and the conceptual framework: support or lack of support from family members at home; support or lack of support from school staff; and financial support or lack of it.

### **Support or Lack of Support from Home**

All five participants who dropped out of school believed that they needed encouragement from their families to stay in school. Four of these five participants believed that they were not supported at home. Participants who graduated from high school believed that family support helped them make a decision to stay in school.

Research also supports this finding. Roosa et al. (2012) examined family and individual factors in the academic success of Mexican American adolescents and found that positive family role models are essential for Latino adolescents. Roosa et al. concluded that strong family relationships often diminish “externalizing behaviors” and lead to better academic performance for students. Langenkamp (2010) examined academic vulnerability and resilience during the transition to high school and found that the family plays a strong role in how well students do at school. Students who have support from the family demonstrate higher achievement and graduate from high school. Davidson, Updegraff and McHale (2011) explored parent-peer relationship patterns among Mexican adolescents and found that these students rely on their families for support and that the need for strong family bonds is important to school success. In addition, for Mexican American youth, the relationship with mothers is more powerful than relationships with friends. For this study, family support was the number one reason all five graduates gave for deciding to complete school. Four out of five participants who dropped out of school also indicated that they left school because they believed they had little support from their families to stay in school.

### **Support or Lack of Support from School**

All participants believed that a lack of support at school often contributed to their decision to drop out of school. Often first-generation Mexican American students face a more difficult situation at school than their second-generation peers do because they must learn English and a new culture. All participants in this study also agreed that academic learning in high school was more challenging. In middle school, these participants believed that support was in place to help them improve their English speaking skills and meet the new academic challenge of multiple classes. Participants believed that middle school teachers also gave them moral support. Research supports this finding. Langekamp (2010) examined the transition to high school, which often involves the loss of support from teachers and peers. Langekamp discovered that changes in students' social relationships during this transition to high school are more difficult due to changes in the school context. Several participants in this study believed that no one at their high school cared if they attended classes or not. In addition, they believed that school personnel did not inform their parents when they did not attend school. One dropout reported that his parents did not know he was not attending school until his grades were mailed home at the end of the first semester, indicating his attendance. Thus, participants believed that support at school was critical in making a decision to stay in school.

Research also supports the importance of positive school relationships during and after the transition from middle school to high school. Lys (2009) examined high school graduation aspirations among Latino middle school students and found that the more students feel connected to their school, the less likely they are to drop out. Lys recommended that high school educators need to strengthen the home-school connection for all Latino students. Lys also recommended

that Latino students need specific support when they transition from middle school to high school, including mentors who are current high school students and teachers. Increasing support for these incoming first year Latino students helps them develop strong relationships that will ensure they are successful in school. Wang and Eccles (2012) examined longitudinal effects of social support on school engagement from middle to high school and found that in high school, if students have fewer opportunities to build strong, positive relationships with teachers, a student's view of their place in school changes. No longer do students feel that they need to attend school, and therefore, school completion declines.

Students need to have strong relationships with teachers and staff as they enter high school in order to meet the demands of more challenging curriculum. One participant remarked that he was embarrassed because he did not read well so he quit attending school. In addition, he did not know who to ask for help, so he stopped trying. Another participant reported that he struggled academically, and he believed that he needed tutoring to help him pass some of the courses. He explained that the level of academic rigor challenges incoming freshmen, and without help, those students who struggle do not stand a chance. One of the participants who graduated from high school also reported that academics were challenging, and at first he considered dropping out of school, but he asked a neighbor, a cousin, and a school counselor to help him. In a study about factors and services that prevent Hispanic youth from dropping out of school, Behnke, Gonzalez, and Cox (2010) suggested that first-generation Hispanic youth commonly struggle to complete homework and school assignments. Nonetheless, with the right support these students can be successful. Behnke, Gonzalez, and Cox concluded that academically disadvantaged students can

still succeed; however, they require time, effort, and caring adults who help them develop academic skills, pride in their work, and efficacy for education achievement.

### **Financial Support or Lack of Financial Support**

Participants who dropped out of school cited lack of financial support as one of the reasons they decided not to stay in school after Grade 8. Graduates also reported that they considered dropping out of school due to a lack of money for supplies as well as support for their families. Research supports this finding. Ramos et al. (2008) examined the educational aspirations of Mexican American high school students and found that the parents' socio-economic status plays a role in the educational successes of their children in high school. For students, the lower the family's socio-economic status, the lower the students' reading and mathematics scores are, and the lower the chance of graduating from high school. Perry and McConney (2010) examined the impact that socio-economic status (SES) has on high school achievement, and the results indicated a strong and positive relationship. The higher a student's SES, the stronger his or her educational outcomes tend to be. In fact, higher SES students have higher scores on standardized achievement tests and are more likely to complete high school and college than their peers from lower SES backgrounds. Lacour and Tissington (2011) explored the effects of poverty on academic achievement, and they ascertained that poverty significantly affects the resources available to students that allow for success in school. Moreover, due to a lack of resources, many students struggle to reach the same academic achievement levels of students who have these resources. Lacour and Tissington also found that how much income a student has and the source of that income has a significant impact on their achievement in school. Hernandez (2011) examined how third grade reading skills and poverty influence high

school graduation and found that 22 % of children who have lived in poverty did not graduate from high school. Students whose families live in poverty often lack resources for decent housing, food, clothing, and books. Hernandez concluded that poverty and limited resources in the home weakens children's capacity and opportunities to learn. The longer children spend in poverty, the higher the risk of not completing high school. These findings are in keeping with the beliefs that participants reported about the influence of financial resources on their decision to drop out or stay in school.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The findings of this study are supported by research that the conceptual framework reflected. Pytel (2008) and Roosa et al. (2012) found that students must have support from home and school to be successful in high school. These researchers also found that several factors lead students to decide to drop out, including lack of home and school support, lack of money for essential needs, challenging academic learning, and school apathy. This study adds to this current research by recommending that first-generation Mexican American students need to be supported academically, socially, emotionally, and financially.

In a discussion about predicting dropouts from middle school data, Pytel (2008) noted that nearly half of student dropouts are identified before leaving middle school, and therefore, support systems should be put into place before these students enter high school. Roosa et al. (2012) also noted that if these family and school support systems are not in place, high school educators need to create them so that these connections are strong. In this study, participants believed that without family and school support, the likelihood that they would drop out of school became very real. For some of the participants, financial support was essential, but for

others, emotional and academic support was more important. Creating a strong network that includes close family members, extended family members, and school personnel is essential to assist first-generation Mexican American students in completing high school.

In a study of the academic success of Mexican American students, Roosa et al. (2011) recommended that support systems include family members who have been successful in school as mentors. Two of the graduates in this study talked about extended family that had set examples for them to follow; one graduate spoke about being an example for his younger brother to follow. In a study about progress and challenges related to ending the high school dropout problem, Balfanz et al. (2012) proposed that supports be put into place for struggling students in Grades 8-10 in all schools that have low graduation rates, as well as their feeder middle and elementary schools. Unfortunately, as Balfanz et al. discovered, putting these supports in place is not easy, adding, “Systems of support for students vary by region of the country, locale (city, suburbs, towns and rural areas), size of school district and grade level, and they are far from pervasive (p. 9).” Balfanz et al. also recommended that educators provide all students, including those students who have dropped out, with clear pathways from high school to college and career training. However, the reality is that most educators do not provide any support to students who drop out of school, and once they leave the system, it is difficult for them to return. Balfanz also noted,

An estimated one in six, or 6.7 million, of the 38.9 million youth ages 16-24, are disconnected from the two institutions that give them hope for the future—school and work. These youth face severe challenges—many grew up in poverty and were raised by a single parent, and very few grew up in households with a parent who graduated from

college. They cost taxpayers \$1.6 trillion and society \$4.7 trillion over their lifetimes, and represent significant untapped potential for the nation.” (p. 10)

In support of this research presented in the conceptual framework, the results of this study indicated that all participants, whether or not they had dropped out or graduated from high school, believed that they needed support from home and school to be successful in school. Therefore, researchers need to investigate the dropout rate further for first-generation Mexican American students to help keep these students in school so they can graduate and be more successful in their lives.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of a study are based on the design of the study. For this phenomenological case study, several limitations emerged in relation to that design. The first limitation was related to the sample size. Because the purpose of this study was to examine factors that influenced the decision of first-generation Mexican Americans to stay in school or to drop out, I needed to seek participants who represented both groups. Ideally, a sample size of 10 to 12 participants for each group would have provided richer data. The second limitation was related to the participants included in the sample. No first-generation Mexican American students enrolled in Grade 9 were included in this study. Some Grade 9 students could have been included in this study in order to discover the factors that influenced their decision to stay in school or the factors that might influence them to consider dropping out. A third limitation is related to the location of this study. Although the Southwest region of the United States has a large population of first-generation Mexican American students, the decision making process may be different for these students living in another region of the country.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research regarding this specific population of first-generation Mexican American students in relation to their decision to stay in school or to drop out is still deficient. More research is needed that explores the factors that lead this large student population to drop out of American schools at an increasing rate. Most research focuses on second or third-generation Mexican Americans, or the group as a whole, which is not sufficient. The needs of first-generation Mexican American students differ from the needs of third-generation Mexican American students. For example, first-generation students often learn English, which is different from second and third-generation students who enter school speaking English. Another example would be that first-generation Mexican American students still identify with Mexico as their nationality. Second and third-generation students do not, because they identify as Mexican Americans. In addition, first-generation Mexican American students are different culturally from other subsets in the Hispanic culture, such as Puerto Rican or Cuban Americans.

More research should be conducted about first-generation Mexican American students concerning the support or lack of support that these students receive at home and/or at school. Future research can focus on the academic challenges that face incoming Grade 9 students during their first year in high school. Research should also explore the financial support that families and their children need in an era of escalating costs to complete high school. This research should focus specifically on first-generation Mexican American students and not on Latinos or Hispanics, a term that encompasses many cultures.

### **Implications for Social Change**

This study has several implications for positive social change. One implication is that the findings and recommendations will provide educators with a deeper understanding about how to prevent first-generation Mexican American students from dropping out of school. By helping these students to graduate from high school, educators will be assisting these students in developing educational and employment goals that will confidently lead them to lives that are more productive.

This study will also provide society with an opportunity to reflect on why a significant number of first-generation Mexican American students drop out of school in the United States. Strategies to improve graduation rates would help students achieve more success as they progress through high school to higher education, giving them more opportunities and a better outlook for their futures. In turn, these graduates are examples for other students to follow, particular concerning family members and friends. In addition, communities benefit from having a more educated populace.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore the factors that compel Mexican American students to drop out of school or complete high school. Yet the need to differentiate between first-generation and second-generation Mexican American students is essential because statistics show that the majority of second-generation Mexican American students graduate from high school in the same numbers as Caucasian Americans. This specific group of students was selected for this study because the factors that influence their decision to

stay in school or drop out are not described in other research. The findings of this study indicated that lack of support and encouragement at home and/or at school often leads these first-generation Mexican American students to drop out of school in their first year of high school. In addition, a lack of money in the home plays a significant role in this decision making process to stay in school or drop out. The transition to high school is challenging, both academically and emotionally. For first-generation Mexican American students, making a smooth transition to high school must include academic and emotional support.

Creating support systems in middle school for first-generation Mexican American students will ensure smooth transitions to high school and increase their graduation rates. Assigning adult staff members and older students as mentors for these incoming freshmen will provide academic and social support and improve their graduation rate. High school staff should build and maintain a strong home and school connection through bilingual newsletters, phone calls, and home visits so that these students and their families know that school staff cares about them. Providing tutoring for improving English skills and other academic skills that are offered at various times so students who work can still have access would definitely send a message from the school to the student that school staff cares. Finding ways to meet the financial needs of these students who live at the poverty level would help as well. High school educators should create community partnerships with businesses and universities and colleges to help meet the financial needs of students who do not have the money for their postsecondary educational needs. In the end, it is about communities getting involved with the transition from middle school to high school for first-generation Mexican American students to reduce the number of these students who drop out of school and who become statistics instead of productive members of society.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### **Participants Who Dropped Out of School**

1. How did you feel about Grade 8?
2. Why did you decide to drop out after you made the transition to high school?
3. What led you to make the decision to drop out of school? If due to family responsibilities, was it due to parents? Siblings? Or other?
4. What made you decide to dropout or stay in school?
5. With whom did you discuss your decision to drop out before you made the final choice, if anyone, and why?
6. If you talked it over with peers, have others in your peer group dropped out and when? How much did whether they dropped out or not impact your decision?
7. What were your first thoughts that led you to decide to drop out of school?
8. What would have prevented your decision from dropping out of school? If you needed more information about the high schools, did you understand that the high schools were free?
9. How did your parents feel about you dropping out? Friends? Members of your school community in the decision making process? If yes, who did you feel pressure from and why?
10. What could members of your school community have done to influence your decision-making process?
11. What are your family members', friends', school mates' attitudes about dropping out?

12. How much impact did your financial goals, personal goals, professional goals have to do with your decision?

**Participants Who Stayed in School**

1. How much, if at all, did you ever consider dropping out of school, and why?
2. How did you decide to stay in school? If you had support, what groups supported you?
3. What are your family members', friends', schoolmates' attitudes about staying in school?
4. How much impact did your financial goals, personal goals, professional goals have to do with your decision?
5. What led you to make the decision to stay in school and not drop out?
6. How right do you feel the decision to stay in school was? If no, elaborate